

Title: Poetry and Prophecy  
Text: Jeremiah 4: 19 - 27  
Date: January 20, 2018

Just so you know where I am heading this morning, I am going to start with a high view of prophecy, and then end (lest you be anxious) with some reflections related to Martin Luther King, Jr. And I must give a major tip o' the hat to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann for my prophetic ruminations. Even though I don't recall reading him in seminary, he has had a wonderful influence on me in more recent years.

He describes the prophets as essentially uncredentialed people, without pedigree, who don't arise from within established institutions. These are people who speak from the outside, looking in, with life-giving disruptive force. They use a poetic language. Brueggemann says that, **"they are moved the way every good poet is moved to have to describe the world differently according to the gifts of their insight. And, of course, in their own time, and every time since, the people that control the power structure do not know what to make of them, so they characteristically try to silence them. What power people always discover is that you cannot finally silence poets. They just keep coming at you in threatening and transformative ways."** Salman Rushdie says, **"A poet's work is to name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from falling asleep."**

Brueggemann contends that we have a track record of misusing the prophets. People from a conservative tradition tend to look at prophetic texts as foretelling the coming of Jesus. People from a liberal tradition often use the prophets to back up an issues-based agenda. However, Brueggemann helps us understand that these texts are robbed of their transformative power when they are simply reduced to ideology versus ideology. We need to grow beyond seeing the prophets as moral teachers, and grow in our appreciation for their aesthetic and cosmic insights. This is what enables us to truly think outside the box. He stresses that without this broader view, **"even liberal passion for justice just becomes another ideology, and it does not have transformative power. That's what's extraordinary about the poetry, that it's so elusive that it refuses to be reduced to a formula. I think that's a great temptation among liberals who care about justice — is to reduce it to a formula."**

He was once asked if he could choose any favorite passages that were emblematic of the best of the prophetic tradition, and he picked parts of Isaiah 43 (which we read and discussed last week) and Jeremiah 4, which we read this morning.

Jeremiah 4 is a judgement passage. Though possibly written against the backdrop of a threat by invading Babylonians, you wouldn't know it from the text. This poignant poetry is largely lacking explicit historical allusion, and thus has a timeless sense about it that makes it enduring.

It almost reads like the Creation story in reverse. In the Creation story we start with darkness and chaos, and life comes forth. Here we start with life, and end up with chaos.

<sup>20</sup>Disaster overtakes disaster,  
the whole land is laid waste.

<sup>21</sup>I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;  
and to the heavens, and they had no light.

<sup>24</sup>I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,  
and all the hills moved to and fro.

<sup>25</sup>I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,  
and all the birds of the air had fled.

<sup>26</sup>I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,  
and all its cities were laid in ruins  
before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

This terror is timeless, and could be read into many historic contexts. It sounds contemporary. It could describe the experience of Syrian refugees. It could describe the experience of populations succumbing to climate change. It is a language that speaks to the fear that surfaces when all things seem to be unraveling – when the ordered world is being taken away from us.

With all this backdrop, let's bring our attention to the era in which we live, so that we might reframe and re-experience the social realities that are right in front of us. With this in mind, Brueggemann sees Martin Luther King, Jr. as a contemporary example of a biblical poet. If you think of his "I Have a Dream" speech, it just seems to soar away. It was entirely different from a speech listing three reasons why the Civil Rights Bill should pass. It was language that lifted us all beyond the little quarrels we get caught up in. He doesn't talk about liberalism or socialism or welfare or radicalism. He lifts our sight higher to issues of justice, and poverty, and despair. He reframes the social issues that are right in front of us from a different angle. Alas, it seems to be a truism that we tend not to recognize a prophet in our midst until they are gone.

The life and words of Martin Luther King, Jr. always lifted me to a higher plane. Though white and privileged, when I was just a young child my parents gave me a copy of a comic book that told the story of the Montgomery bus boycott. It is hard to say just exactly what clicked within me, but I read that comic book over and over and over again. I was deeply moved by the story of the struggle, and terribly impressed with the sacrificial, prophetic leadership of Martin Luther King. I wanted to be like him.

Interestingly enough, about 18 years ago I was in **The African American Museum** in Philadelphia where I saw an exact copy of the comic book I had in a display case. Apparently it was a significant educational tool at the time, and has since been translated into other languages in order to teach non-violent social change. The moral of the story? Teach your children values when they are young. It can have a lasting impact.

I was 16 when Martin Luther King was shot. I remember feeling both deeply sad and angry. It was disturbing to realize that this almost felt inevitable. I remember feeling a bond with my English teacher – Mr. Peace – who wept when he shared the news with our class. As a high school student I read "**Stride Towards Freedom,**" and "**Letter from A Birmingham Jail**" which – interestingly enough - was addressing the judgement of *fellow pastors* who criticized him for endorsing civil disobedience as a tool.

The seed planted as a child continued to grow when I went to college. I was accepted into a semester-long seminar on **Non-Violent Social Change** that was limited to a dozen students. This seminar was led by Harry H. Wachtel – a corporate attorney who had become the confidant and legal counsel to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. This relationship began when Mr. Wachtel offered his help to Dr. King after meeting him in early 1962 at a New York fund-raising luncheon. In the following years, Mr. Wachtel often met with Dr. King, traveled with him, and helped arrange meetings for him with American leaders and officials, including President Lyndon Johnson. These were extraordinarily rich and challenging times for me as many personal stories came forth during the weeks we had together. Together we studied the life and writings of Mahatma Gandhi who was a model and inspiration for Martin Luther King. At one point he brought in Coretta Scott King to spend a couple of hours with us. All this was of tremendous value to remind me that these people – whom we often imagine in mythic proportions – were just people like you and me.

It is the language of the prophet that keeps our vision on a higher plane, and creates the shift necessary within us to live differently in this world. Jacques Ellul reminds us, **“Christians were never meant to be normal. We’ve always been holy troublemakers, we’ve always been creators of uncertainty, agents of a dimension that’s incompatible with the status quo; we do not accept the world as it is, but we insist on the world becoming the way that God wants it to be. And the Kingdom of God is different from the patterns of this world.”**

As changed individuals we can partner with one another in this experiment called church. Walter Brueggemann writes that, **“The prophetic tasks of the church are to speak the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair.”**

Martin Luther King gives us images to help us perceive reality from a different perspective. He writes, **“We may have all come on different ships, but we are in the same boat now.”** Let these images play with our heart and imagination. Some images dredge up deep, unprocessed pain. Some turns of phrase delight us and remind us of the unrestrained joy that is often ours as human beings dwelling upon this good earth. Let poetry do its thing. Trust the spirit.

Martin Luther King calls us to view things from a higher level. He writes, **“Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.”**

In this era when we are discovering our white fragility, sometimes our eyes glaze over, or our defenses rise. Perhaps we need the language of the poet to creep behind our defenses, and whisper new truths in our ears. Perhaps we need the language of the poet to give us a vision of a new way of being in the world.

In Numbers 11:29 Moses states, **“I wish that all the Lord’s people were prophets.”** I guess we don’t have to worry about that happening any time soon, but what a vision that is. In this age which is far from being post-racial, wouldn’t it be nice if just more of the Lord’s people were prophets. We don’t need more people skilled at verbal assaults, but more people gifted at inserting life-affirming disruption – more people passionate about shaping the world, and keeping it from falling asleep.

Amen

#### **Jeremiah 4: 19 – 27** Sorrow for a Doomed Nation

<sup>19</sup>My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain!

Oh, the walls of my heart!

My heart is beating wildly;

I cannot keep silent;

for I hear the sound of the trumpet,

the alarm of war.

<sup>20</sup>Disaster overtakes disaster,

the whole land is laid waste.

Suddenly my tents are destroyed,

my curtains in a moment.

<sup>21</sup>How long must I see the standard,

and hear the sound of the trumpet?

<sup>22</sup>“For my people are foolish,

they do not know me;

they are stupid children,

they have no understanding.  
They are skilled in doing evil,  
but do not know how to do good.”

<sup>23</sup>I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;  
and to the heavens, and they had no light.

<sup>24</sup>I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,  
and all the hills moved to and fro.

<sup>25</sup>I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,  
and all the birds of the air had fled.

<sup>26</sup>I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,  
and all its cities were laid in ruins  
before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

<sup>27</sup>For thus says the LORD: The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end.