A PROPHET FOR PEACE

July 2, 2017

Jeremiah 28:5-9

The prophet Jeremiah is a fascinating character because he is one of those persons who speaks his mind regardless of his reputation or concern for his own life. I became very familiar with the Book of Jeremiah while authoring my book on Eve and Adam and grew to appreciate the intensity with which he critiqued the kings of his day, challenged the prophets and priests of the royal court, and warned the people from the least to the greatest about the danger of supporting the monarchy as it currently was operating throughout Judah. As with any true prophet, Jeremiah spoke a word of warning about the impending dangers if the people continued their current way of living, as well as a word of hope about what could be if the people would turn back from their evil ways and put their complete trust in God Yahweh.

Our first lesson for today comes at a time in the life of Jeremiah when King Zedekiah of Judah is trying to decide whether or not to rebel against King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. The Babylonians already had invaded and occupied Judah and had deported many of the officials, warriors, artisans, wealthy elite, and priests of Judah to Babylon where they were resettled and allowed to set up their own community and religious practices. Zedekiah was appointed by Nebuchadnezzar to serve as the ruler of what was left of Judah in order to maintain order among the people of Judah who still lived throughout the land. In the ninth year of his reign, Zedekiah seriously was considering an armed rebellion against Babylon. Whereas Hananiah, one of the royal prophets, was advocating for such a rebellion with the argument that with God on their side, Judah surely would win, Jeremiah saw the futility of fighting against the Babylonians and tried to persuade Zedekiah to abandon his plans and actually serve the king of Babylon.

When Jeremiah recognized that Zedekiah was moving in the direction of an armed rebellion, Jeremiah took his case to the people of Judah and appealed to them to not to listen to the words of the other prophets who were lying to them and filling them with a false hope about the imminent return of all of those who already had been deported to Babylon. Jeremiah told Hananiah that he wished that Hananiah’s prophecy was true, but if Hananiah chose to fulfill his prophecy by having Judah go to war against Babylon, Jerusalem and all of Judah could count on being destroyed. The only hope for Judah would be for the people to serve the king of Babylon and live. As far as Jeremiah was concerned, his advice was the way of peace that would save Judah from being utterly decimated by the Babylonians.

As we know from the Hebrew Scriptures, Zedekiah followed through on his plans to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar who, in retaliation, utterly destroyed Jerusalem, killed many of the citizens of the city, burnt the temple to the ground, and hauled another entourage of people to Babylon so that there would not be enough people left in Judah to rebel against Babylon in the foreseeable future. In spite of this defeat, Jeremiah was not done with his prophetic ministry. He sent word to his people who were living in Babylon and advised them to build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce, get married and have children, and seek the welfare of the city where God had sent them for they would benefit themselves as they sought the welfare of Babylon. His words of encouragement would not be without warning as he reminded the people to not let the prophets and the diviners who were among them deceive them with dreams that they dream and lies that they tell all for the sake of persuading the people to live with animosity and hostility toward the people of Babylon.

By all accounts, Jeremiah was a minority voice among his people. In today’s language, he would not be considered much of a patriot because of his willingness to serve their enemy rather than fight against them. Even before he was faced with having to deal with this threat from the Babylonians, Jeremiah was an outspoken critic of all of the kings who were doing what was evil in the sight of God. At one point in his prophetic ministry, there even was a plot to bring charges of treason against Jeremiah and put him to death. He had become a laughing stock of all the people on account of his foolish warnings about the demise of Jerusalem. Even his closest friends were watching out for the time when Jeremiah would stumble and give the authorities a reason to arrest him and put him to death—thankfully, a threat that never materialized.

On this Sunday when we are about to celebrate our national day of independence, this reminder from the prophet Jeremiah leaves us pondering about all of the different messages that we are hearing today and discerning which messages are filled with truth and which messages are filled with deception and lies. We know that none of us has a market on the truth. However, if we draw upon the testimony and witness of Jesus as our guide, this revelation of the Son of Humanity is one of the best places for us to start in discerning what is good, righteous, and just in God’s sight. As part of this discernment, we are invited by Jesus to open ourselves up to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, because as Jesus instructed his disciples, his Spirit would guide them into all the truth by reminding them of everything that Jesus had taught them and revealed to them.

So where do we go from here on this holy day when we are about to celebrate one of the most important holidays in our country, knowing full well that the independence that we will be celebrating came at the expense of a revolutionary war, the slaughter of the indigenous people of this land, the enslavement of millions of African people, and a civil war that still infects the unity of our country to this very day? What can we learn from Jeremiah’s witness to the people of Judah that would address some of the dynamics that we are facing in our own country today? How can we appropriate the testimony and witness of Jesus and the freedom that we have in Christ so that we might be able to refrain from doing what is evil in God's sight and choose a way of justice and peace that could contribute to the salvation of the world—a world that Jesus also chose to save through non-violent means?

During my year at PLTS back in 1984, I spent a good deal of time investigating what is known as American Civil Religion—a form of religion that views this land of ours as the place where God has established the new creation as described in the Book of Isaiah and where the cross of Christ and the flag are seen as co-equals in terms of our loyalty and devotion. Within this religion, democracy and the free enterprise of capitalism are viewed as sacred because they have been ordained by God as the way that Christians are to order and conduct their lives. Based upon this religion, our government has been instituted by God to wield the sword for good—whether to protect our people from violence within our borders or to protect our freedoms from enemies outside our borders. Given this perspective, to question and challenge our government is to question and challenge the authority of God. As long as the President ends every speech with the words, "God bless America," everything in that speech must be viewed as the will of God.

We may or may not agree with this religion or think this way, but I can assure you that this is the religion that is woven into the very fabric of this country—like it or not. Ever since the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, this land has been viewed as the place where the kingdom of God would be established and where Christ would reign supreme. Throughout the Revolutionary War, King George was touted as the anti-Christ who must be defeated in order for God to be able to establish new heavens and a new earth in this land. By placing the words, "In God We Trust," on all of our currency, we delude ourselves into thinking that our primary trust is in God and not in the almighty dollar. By including the words, "under God," in our pledge, we legitimate whatever form of government we choose to determine how this liberty and justice for all will be defined and carried out.

If Jeremiah was present today, I wonder what he would have to say about this religion that claims that God is on our side and commands us to do whatever is necessary to protect and preserve our national security and freedom. If Jesus was present today, I wonder what he would have to say about this religion that justifies investing 50% of our budget on waging war—past, present, and future—while divesting in the health and human services that are meant to protect and preserve the very least among us. Whose message will we heed when it comes to the care of this earth—those who claim that global warming is a hoax or those who warn us about the imminent destruction of this planet if we do not reduce our dependency on fossil fuels?

Much of what Jeremiah had to say to his people would fit into the category of "doom and gloom"—a message that most people do not want to hear until it is too late. On the flip side, Jeremiah also offered a vision of what could be if the people would repent and return to putting their trust in God rather than in the kings who were bound to do what was evil in God's sight. Jesus was a bit more positive in his message as he spent much of his ministry talking about and advocating for the reign of God in which God's love would be the power that would unite all things in heaven and on earth, God's justice would be the determining resolve for all broken relationships, God's peace would be the way by which everyone would relate with one another, and God's freedom would be the result of everyone being viewed and treated equally in the sight of God. This vision of Jeremiah and of Jesus is the one that I celebrate this day and is the mission to which I invite all of us to devote our lives for the sake of Jesus, our Christ. Amen.