



The Challenge and Possibility of Prophetic Witness

Jeremiah 38:1-13

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The *Judean Times* evening edition: “Jeremiah, Prophet of God:

Neglecting the Welfare of the People in Favor of His Own Agenda”

Jeremiah of Anathoth, prophet to the Southern Kingdom of Judah since the late 5th century, was arrested yesterday morning for the third time by order of King Zedekiah on charges of espionage and colluding with foreign rulers. A confidential informant close to the king told us that Jeremiah’s insistence that King Zedekiah surrender to Babylon’s King Nebuchadnezzar has intensified in recent months, a position that Jeremiah has supported throughout the reign of 5 Judean kings. When asked to stop this talk about surrendering to the Babylonians, especially in light of the assistance that we received from the Egyptians when Babylon attacked Jerusalem a few months ago, Jeremiah doubled-down on his warning that Judah would be destroyed *by the sword, by famine and by pestilence* unless we surrender to Babylon. And as usual, Jeremiah preceded his declaration with the tag line, “Thus says the Lord.”

Judean forces have worked hard to maintain relations with the Egyptians, and the generals and officials are concerned that Jeremiah’s rhetoric will threaten that relationship and put us at risk again for attack by military forces from the North—the Babylonians, Arameans, Moabites, & Ammonites. But Jeremiah has remained uncooperative, refusing to back down from

his warning that the Babylonian’s will conquer the Southern Kingdom or from his contention that Judah’s wellbeing is dependent upon our willingness to surrender to the Babylonians. “Jeremiah is not concerned about the welfare of the people,” said one official, “but only about his own agenda and the will of God.”

This is not Jeremiah’s first skirmish with one of Judah’s kings or with the officials. Three years ago, Jeremiah dictated a prophetic scroll with the same warning and insisted that his scribe, Baruch, read it to the people and then deliver it to the king.ⁱ When then King Jehoiakim burned the scroll, Jeremiah dictated a second scroll with the same instruction, “read it in the Temple and in the Palace and then deliver it to the king.” These calls for surrender angered King Jehoiakim, who attempted a rebellion against Babylon later that year. Though the campaign was not successful, the generals and officials still believe that Judah can prevail. As general Shephatiah reminded us, a successful campaign in the future is imperative, in light of our current political entanglements. Judah is now a vassal to Babylon, and though we still have our own government and worship practices, Babylon rules the entire region.

The prophet Jeremiah continues to insist that peaceful surrender to Babylon is the best alternative, but other prophets and priests offer a different prophetic outlook. They have spoken optimistically about Judah's future for years and that optimism carries over into the present moment. Unfortunately, the destruction of the Northern Kingdom more than 100 years ago is still seared upon our memory, giving many people reason for pause about confronting Babylon.ⁱⁱ Nonetheless, the generals and King Zedekiah assure us that this will not be the fate of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, and they are moving forward with plans to strengthen our alliance with Egypt and other allied members of the Egyptian Empire.

People in the villages are unsure about the priests and prophets who so readily support the government. Their prophetic oracles serve those who are in power well—the kings, princes, officials, and military leaders—but they do little for everyday folk who are already experiencing the effect of our diminishing food supply. People throughout the land are poor and hungry and their laments echo in the streets. And although they wonder about Jeremiah's suggestion that Judah surrender to the Babylonians, they do believe that Jeremiah is a prophet of the Lord. He has advocated for and stood in solidarity with them and, to be fair, he has attempted on multiple occasions to call the community back to relationship with God, with the promise that God will secure our welfare, even in the hands of the Babylonians.

This is the article that King Zedekiah, Ebed-melech, and others among the king's officials might have received on the evening following Jeremiah's arrest earlier in the day. It is an account that could have circulated throughout the region to be read by public orators as word spread that Jeremiah was in prison yet again. And while it occupies no definitive place in

People who know Jeremiah will recall that he began his prophetic career during the reign of King Josiah and has served as prophet to the nations for more than 60 years. Accepting the call to prophetic ministry during his adolescent years, Jeremiah approached the task reluctantly, but the Lord filled his heart with courage and emboldened him to speak.ⁱⁱⁱ We know him as the weeping prophet—the one who cried and prayed and interceded for the nation so intensely that the Lord admonished him to stop praying for Judah, forbade him to intercede for us, for the Lord would no longer hear him.^{iv} But Jeremiah kept on praying, weeping, and interceding and he does so until this day. Despite all of this, the civil and religious leaders know this young, weeping, interceding prophet as the prophet of doom and gloom, death and destruction.

Jeremiah remains in jail at this hour, his second arrest under King Zedekiah, and has been confined to the cistern house. Rumor has it that the officials are holding him in the cistern without food. During the dry season of the year, the water levels are low, so there is little concern that Jeremiah could drown in the mud and slime lining that bottom of the building. Still it is sad to see a prophet with so much promise and integrity end his prophetic career in the bottom of a cistern.

By: Hannah the Scribe

history except for our reflections today, this modern day editorial about Jeremiah's prophetic struggles evokes important questions about our own ability to live prophetically, as individual people of faith and as the Church of the Living God.

To live prophetically or to engage in prophetic ministry is to be so alive with the love of God that we weep and mourn over the brokenness in our world, so troubled in our souls that our intercessory prayers lead us to concrete action, so relentlessly courageous in speaking God's truth that it disrupts the way that things are and have always been for the possibility of a more loving, more just, more God-infused existence for all who dwell upon the earth. This is why the prophets of old, like Jeremiah, could not stop meddling in current affairs... it is why they kept speaking to kings and nations... it is why they kept lifting the concerns of the poor and oppressed to public consciousness... it is why they could punctuate their prophetic messages with "*thus says the Lord*," because they knew that the Lord desired the welfare of all people and not just those who occupied the seats of power.

And so I ask, what might it mean for the Church of the Living God to live prophetically in our world today? What if rather than silence we chose to speak, "*thus says the Lord*," in a world that is deeply longing and sorely needing a word of hope in the midst of the chaos?

I think Jeremiah 38 can help us; though, I must confess that I have been a little ambivalent about where the church might situate herself in the Jeremiah narrative.

I feel fairly sure that choosing king Zedekiah as representative of the church would be a mistake because, as much as I believe that he really wanted to do what was right in the sight of the Lord, king Zedekiah became so distracted by the two factions in his administration—the pro-Egyptian and pro-Babylonian contingencies—that he could scarcely make a decision for himself. Even the decision to imprison Jeremiah in the cistern did not originate from the king. He "*agreed*" to do it because he did not feel that he could prevail against his officials and military leaders.

The King's officials and military leaders are also out. Not only did they conspire to have Jeremiah executed, they supported the dishonest priests and prophets in receiving bribes and special privileges for their ministerial endeavors.

This leaves two possibilities, Jeremiah the prophet and Ebed-melech the Ethiopian.

The obvious choice was Jeremiah. He is the prophet that we aspire to become, the one who stands strong and persistently proclaims *thus says the Lord* no matter the obstacles or challenges before him. He is strong and courageous^v and a keen social analyst, but he does not depend upon his ability to analyze situations alone. No, Jeremiah always defers to the will of God, even when God's way defies expert opinion and pragmatic solutions. He is *God's Orator*... the one who speaks words of the Divine for the wellbeing of the nation and the wellbeing of creation.

As Jeremiah, the church is not determined by popular opinion and will not acquiesce to policies and practices that fall outside of God's just intent for our lives, because we are radically committed to the will of God, no matter the cost.

As Jeremiah, the church believes that the first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, all of our soul, all of our mind and all of our strength. And, as Jesus taught and reiterated, the second is like unto it, that we must love our neighbor as ourselves.^{vi} And while we acknowledge that the neighborhood has expanded and the maladies in our world are many, we remain faithfully committed to the welfare of all with whom we share the planet, beginning at home and extending to the far reaches of the world...

We also embody Jeremiah's heart for people who are among the broken, torn, poor, struggling outcasts of the land—the people who live daily with their backs against the wall because of the social, physical, and psychic pain that they endure. *And* we embody his persistence in speaking in the centers of power and influence, where kings and queens and rulers reside. And while some would caution us to stop right there... to confine our compassionate care to the domain of mission and outreach, Jeremiah counsels us to extend our reach to include the one who lives daily within the tension of his or her own deep commitment to the way of God and the lure to gain more by any means necessary, no matter the impact upon others... *and* the one who desires to live faithfully but whose professional commitments lean them in another direction ... *and* the ones who are weary and worn—wary of hearing sermons like this, wary of being asked to do more, wary of always considering the needs of others, wary of doing the thankless job of Jeremiah the prophet of God.

The church knows these people... We are these people! She/he is the woman or man in middle American who for the first times in their lives hear their own voices among the global cry of lament for jobs, food, clothing, and a warm place to lay their heads. He/she is the child in DC and North Carolina whose one nourishing meal each day is from the school lunch program. She is and he is the small business owner struggling to keep the doors open but not at all sure that they can. They are the suburban mom and dad who could not have imagined that their child would be a victim of the methamphetamine epidemic that has been sweeping across the nation. They are the poor urban mom and dad committed to helping their sons and daughters find a way out... out of the violence that they encounter on the streets... out of the suspicious gaze of people who think they do not belong... out of a world that refuses to see the mark of the divine upon them.

As Jeremiah, our hearts are drawn to those who suffer in many and myriad ways, weeping and praying for them to the God of Creation *and* interceding on their behalf to the earthly powers that rule the land. Because, you see, the challenge of choosing Jeremiah is that he refuses to remain in a religious silo. He initiates dialogue with the centers of power, urging kings, princes, president and nations to embrace God's just intent for our lives. And despite imprisonment, despite being characterized as malevolent prophets that speak lies and do not care about the welfare of the nation, despite attempts to deem us irrelevant and almost dead,

the church as Jeremiah cannot be consoled, cajoled, bullied or lobbied into choosing a path that is inconsistent with the way of the Divine.

Jeremiah is what some might call hardcore. He believes in God and God's way for the world, and while I know that this is asking a lot, I wonder if Jeremiah's life might be emblematic of God's call upon the church today.

Another possibility for characterizing the church is Ebed-melech. Ebed-melech was a trusted official in the king's house, though we do not hear his voice until verse 7.^{vii} He has been in the shadows of this story throughout Zedekiah's reign and has been privy to the conversations that frame the inner workings of the Judean government. Ebed-melech is an Ethiopian citizen who serves Judah at the behest of the king; a trusted confidant and keeper of the people and things that the king holds near and dear. He has earned the king's respect over these many years, so that when he approaches King Zedekiah at the Benjamin Gate, the king knows that Ebed-melech will only speak words of truth. *And he does.*

Actually, Ebed-melech does something that no one else could do, not even Jeremiah the prophet. He peers into the king's heart, past his youthful physicality and his status as ruler of the land, past his fears and misgivings, and into the space that makes Zedekiah most deeply human.^{viii} He knows that Zedekiah, in his heart of hearts, does not desire Judah's destruction, nor does he want Jeremiah's blood on his hands. So Ebed-melech looks into the king's heart and speaks his deepest desires back to him... awakens him, if only for a moment, to the leader that he can become ... creates an opening in the midst of the chaos so that Zedekiah can sense the testimony of his own conscience... hear his own thoughts... experience his own emotions... and discern for himself the steps that he must take. Ebed-melech stands with the king and, in doing so, he stands in the gap for Jeremiah, interceding for the intercessor, so that the weeping prophet might have food to eat, a safe place to reside, and continue his ministry as prophet to the nation.

The church as Ebed-melech stands in the gap! We use the privileged spaces that we occupy in order to break the yoke of suffering and oppression for those who have no currency in our local, state, and national centers of power. As Ebed-melech, we acknowledge our own power and privilege as individuals and as community, so that we can discern a faithful response to the numerous challenges that meet us in this present moment. This is the church that defines itself as the Body of Christ, the earthly manifestation of the loving and compassionate Savior who is Jesus the Christ. And we, like Ebed-melech, are not afraid to meet the king at the Benjamin gate, not in hostility or damnation, but with a strong conviction that God desires the wellbeing of all people. And we do this, even when the kings and queens of our world have forgotten that we are all created in the image of God.

As Ebed-melech, we listen attentively for people's deepest desires, not distract by their rhetoric or records or past or present failures to spiritually thrive. No, we listen attentively so that we can create spaces for people to sense the testimony of their own conscience... to tap into their own deep desire to know and be known by God, with hope that when we link our

hearts with the heart of God, permitting our hearts to pick up the divine pulse that has been beating throughout creation and has never stopped beating, not even for a moment, we will, likewise, permit God's desire for creation to guide our decisions and the quality of our relationship with the many others with whom we share our lives.

As Ebed-melech, we are courage and grace personified; for Ebed-melech gained nothing for himself by taking this risk of faith. Instead, he helped a fearful king remember his own capacity for living courageously, and that courage created a pathway for Jeremiah's release.

At the conclusion of our reading, Ebed-melech leaves king Zedekiah at the Benjamin gate so that the king can take a sober assessment of his life. And as the king embarks upon his own journey of reflection, Ebed-melech gathers a group of like-minded risk taking folk—some translations say 3 and others indicate 30, but whatever the number, Ebed-melech found others who were willing to take the same risk of faith in order to pull Jeremiah out of the cistern and secure his release.

And maybe this is what we need to remember, that we are not alone, church. There are other like-minded people who are willing to take a risk of faith in order to secure the welfare of another. And that, my brothers and sisters, is good news indeed!

Jeremiah the Prophet and Ebed-melech the Ethiopian eunuch—two potential representations of the church. I would like to tell you that I chose one over the other, but in the end, I came to the conclusion that the church and individual people of faith would do well to identify with either Jeremiah or Ebed-melech or both... because, you see, despite their varying social locations and ministry gifts, both are *Strong in faith, Discerning in proclamation, Courageous in witness, and Persistent in good deeds.*^{ix}

In fact, they so remind us of the mission of the church, that I cannot help but recall that we, as the church of Jesus Christ, stand with the One who, like Jeremiah, called us to repentance and announced God's reign in the earth—he called it the *kingdom of God*. Many insist that Jesus was only concerned about our heavenly home, but Jesus made clear through his life and ministry that the kingdom of God is less a destination to which we travel and more an expression of the reign of God taking shape right in the midst of human existence. And because Jesus believed so strongly that God's reign included everyone—that everyone could be citizens of God's kingdom—he repeatedly transgressed the social and religious boundaries of his time... and that did not sit well with the civil and religious leaders of his time.

But Jesus persisted, as did Jeremiah, and for this they called him a transgressor of the law, a blasphemer, and a threat to the welfare of the nation... For this they sentenced him to death. And on the cross he died for the redemption of the world, buried in a borrowed tomb for you and for me. But the grave could not contain Jesus or kill his ministerial vision. And each day we live in the grace of his resurrection, called to discern how we might represent him well in the earth.

During the Season of Lent, we reflect upon the Jesus' ministerial journey, his life, death and resurrection, giving sober attention to the quality of our relationship with the God and with our sisters and brothers.

May we be found as Jeremiah, faithful and relentless in proclaiming God's way for our lives.

And may we be like Ebed-melech, taking a risk of faith and courageously standing in the gap for those who cannot stand for themselves.

May the grace of the Lord be with you!

ⁱ See Jeremiah 36

ⁱⁱ The Northern Kingdom fell in 721 BCE, 134 years before the final fall of the Southern Kingdom in 586/7 BCE. See 2 Kings 14-20.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Jeremiah 1

^{iv} Jeremiah 7:16.

^v See Jeremiah 1

^{vi} Mark 12:28-31

^{vii} Ebed-melech is only mentioned in Jeremiah 38 & 39.

^{viii} Zedekiah began his reign at 21 years old. He was probably in his late 20's or early 30's at the time of this narrative.

^{ix} *Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans*, ed. James Washington, p. 96.