



Are We (USA) God's Global Prophet?

Jeremiah 1:4-10

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In this first month following my summer renewal leave, I'm asking some questions that popped up while playing golf with random people over the past few months. I'm cheating a little today, as today's question doesn't really stem from conversations I had on the golf course. While I did talk about this on the golf course with a few folks, the question itself stems from the claim made by a few politicians over the summer months that the GOP should re-identify itself as the party of Christian Nationalism.

You didn't honestly think Christian Nationalism could be a topic of such public conversation and I would leave it alone, did you?

First, let me state clearly, this is not a Republican issue – nor is it a Democrat issue. This is an issue for the Church. I do not think that such claims of one party or the other becoming “Christian Nationalists” is representative of everyone in the party. So hear me when I say, my thoughts on this are not anti-GOP; while I would certainly recommend the Republican Party vehemently oppose such a recommendation, I am not here to speak about the GOP. However, as I'll make abundantly clear, from a Christian perspective, I am very much anti-Christian Nationalist.

And to be sure, my thoughts on this are not simply motivated by personal political convictions. As I will offer from our lectionary text today, I think the whole of the Biblical witness is anti-Christian Nationalist ... in fact, I think the whole of the Biblical witness is anti-nationalist, regardless of the religious persuasion.

First, let me offer why I think it is important for us to address this topic at all.

As I named last week, we have a lot of work to do to correct the ways we've fallen short of God's will as a people called “the Church.” It does not benefit us, or the witness of God's love in the world, to remain silent when we find the Church's name misused, abused, or misaligned. If we remain silent while the Church perpetuates harm, we are complicit with that harm. And, while I understand that it should be as easy as saying, “*that* witness doesn't define *my* witness,” when the public sees the term “Christian” in front of “Nationalist,” it's going to implicate everyone who associates with Christianity. We cannot be silent.

And no, I'm suggesting it's worth your time to argue with those politicians proposing their party claim a Christian Nationalist identity, but it's certainly worth your time to have such a conversation with friends, family, neighbors, and co-workers who may share those sentiments – people who fall within your sphere of influence. If we are to reclaim a more faithful witness as God's people, it will only be

because God's people speak up – in loving, but resolute ways – as to how God's Word offers instruction and guidance on such matters.

Second, before we look at how the Biblical text speaks against Christian Nationalism, it would serve us well to define what we mean by this term.

Frustratingly, there is no cohesive definition of Christian Nationalism. There are some who define Christian Nationalism as the idea that the United States was established as an explicitly Christian Nation.ⁱ Others define it as a “cultural framework that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life.”ⁱⁱ The Director of Mission Theology for the UMC's General Board of Global Ministries, Dr. David Scott, says that “Christian Nationalism identifies the nation with God's will and action in the world; conflates national and Christian identity; and identifies the service of the nation with service of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Given the wide array of how Christian Nationalism is defined, let me specify. At least for the purposes of this sermon today, I am speaking of Christian Nationalism as having two primary characteristics: one, the belief that the United States as a Nation is, was, and should be a nation where Christianity and the US Government are inextricably linked; and two, that, as a nation where Christianity and the US Government are inextricably linked, that we are – as a nation – those whom God has chosen to ensure God's will is accomplished throughout the world. We are, as a nation, according to this Christian Nationalist ideal, God's “city on a hill,” God's “light for the world,” and God's “beacon of hope” to restore Godly order across the globe.

So, what does the Biblical text offer us about such a perspective?

Our text today comes from the first chapter of Jeremiah, who is one of the major prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. In verses 1-3 of this first chapter, we're given the timeline of Jeremiah's prophetic tenure, which began during the reign of King Jehoiakim and lasted until the Fall of Judah with the captivity of Jerusalem around 580 BCE.

In our text, beginning in verse 4, Jeremiah's call to the role of prophet is confirmed. The Lord has spoken to Jeremiah, offering, “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Note, Jeremiah is not being called a prophet simply for God's covenanted people – Jeremiah is being called a prophet to “the nations.” His role will be greater than to mediate simply between God and Israel. This calling is further confirmed in verse 10, as God offers, “Today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” As Dr. Richard Davis notes, and Psalm 22 confirms, God can call Jeremiah to offer guidance to all the nations, because God is sovereign of all nations.^{iv}

Yet, for Jeremiah, this call is daunting. The prophet responds with hesitancy, “Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”

There is no concrete evidence to suggest just how old Jeremiah was at this time, but knowing what we do about community life and life expectancies in the 6th Century BCE, it's suggested that Jeremiah was a late-teen, or perhaps in his early 20s.

Can you imagine a 20-year-old having the authority of God to speak divine guidance over all the nations?? I mean, I'm almost 40, and there are still people who question if I'm old enough to be the pastor of a *local church*, much less offer God's direct guidance over whole nations – *all* nations.

Jeremiah wasn't wrong to feel inadequate in this role. In truth, "it goes with the office to feel unworthy or inadequate."^v Jeremiah is just one example of those called to serve God who questioned their capability to fulfill such a significant role. In Exodus 3:11, Moses questions God's call on his life, saying, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?" In Judges 6, Gideon responds to God's invitation by offering, "Lord, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am least in my family." In the New Testament, Paul reiterates in his letters many times that he is unqualified for the role of apostle.

This posture towards the role of prophetic voice is one reason why I find Christian Nationalism so bankrupt. No one willingly seeks to serve in this capacity. None of the prophets went to God asking to serve as a prophet, and very few accepted the invitation without putting up a fight. I mean, consider that Jonah *ran away* from God to *avoid* serving in this capacity, and only relented to God's call after he was swallowed up by a large fish.

If someone is seeking to gain personal power by being the voice of God in the world, they are, at least according to the Biblical witness, unlikely to be serving in a capacity called by God. The prophets, though revered and respected by us today – nearly three millennia after the fact – they were not beloved by the people they led. As we see in 2 Chronicles 24, God led Zechariah to prophesy, asking the people why they broke God's commandments; and in response, King Joash had Zechariah stoned to death. According to the Biblical witness, one doesn't willingly claim to be God's prophetic voice for the world.

A second challenge that I have with the idea of Christian Nationalism is the idea that the United States, as one of the most powerful nations in the world, is who God would choose if a nation were to be utilized for such a prophetic voice. If – and this is a big if – if God were going to utilize a singular nation to serve in this global prophetic role, would God really choose the most powerful of the nations?

If you scan the Biblical text, if you look at all those God employs to be first and foremost – priest and prophet – God's preference is always on those who are deemed weakest and most unlikely to succeed. There would be no senior superlatives for God's chosen leaders. When God relented to allow for Israel to have a king, God's choice was David – the youngest of the sons of Jesse. David was left in the fields to tend the flock by his family when Israel went to battle. He was thought to be a nobody. But it is he whom God called as king.

As we've already named, Jeremiah thought himself too young and Gideon thought himself unworthy, coming from the weakest family in Manasseh. And then we have the whole of the New Testament,

wherein God uses Mary – an unwed girl from a low-income community to be the mother of Jesus, who gave birth in a barn because there was no room in the family house. We have Jesus, time and again, giving preference to the poor and unwelcome, including the raising up of disciples from laborers around the Sea of Galilee. We have Paul, who says quite plainly in 1 Corinthians 1, “God chose the lowly things – that which is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose the weak in the world to shame the strong.”

If, and again this is a big if, if God were to choose a nation to be a global prophetic voice, the Biblical witness does not suggest it would be the United States, who unashamedly declares its power and wealth – nor would it be one of our two major parties, who for some 400 years have held a stranglehold on upstart parties trying to change the status quo.

Finally, there’s also the issue of God choosing a singular nation to fulfill such a global role. In our text today, Jeremiah is given authority by God over all the nations. Somehow, those advocating for Christian Nationalism in the US, have read this text as if God is speaking directly to us – our nation. As if, in Jeremiah’s shoes, we are the ones to whom God is saying, “you are appointed over nations and kingdoms, to pluck up and down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”

My friends, we are not the world’s Jeremiah. The United States is not the subject of this text. In fact, the Biblical witness is quite clear that God is very much against the Church being associated with any individual or specific nation-state.

For starters, in the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament, it is made quite clear that God cares very little for individual nations. In Isaiah’s prophetic tenure, we hear in Isaiah 40, “The nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as dust on the scales. ... All the nations are as nothing before [God].” God is not the God of any one nation, God is sovereign of them all.

This vision of a connected global humanity is reiterated time and again throughout the Biblical witness. It is seen in the expansive vision of God’s covenanted people, which, though the covenant began with Israel, was offered to all of God’s created humanity. We hear this invitation made by Jesus at every turn of his ministry as he insists on the worth and inclusion of those who the covenanted people of Israel had often excluded in the ancient near-east: Samaritans, women, the poor, Canaanites, lepers, the lame, the deaf, the young ... Jesus, as our witness to the true love and will of God, gives his life as a witness to God’s hope of a unified global body.

In reflection on Christ’s witness, Paul reiterates in his letters Christ’s work of breaking down the barriers that divide us. You have heard it said, Paul writes, “In Christ there is no east or west, no male or female, no gentile or Jew.”

A nation cannot be a Christian nation, much less God’s chosen nation, when their witness as a people is focused on creating barriers, maintaining ancient gender roles, refusing to name the sins of their past, and strengthening a capitalistic society that benefits the wealthy at the expense of the poor.

Jeremiah's call is not a call upon the US, nor any of our political parties. The call to Jeremiah is at best a call to the Church to acknowledge that we are not to be isolated into any one national identity, but that as God's people, we are called to connect and serve globally. Like the witness of the Spirit at Pentecost, which led the disciples to speak in the native tongue of all who gathered in their midst, the Church is called to do more than any individual nation will ever seek to provide. So may we not limit God's calling in our lives, or in the life of the global Church, to think that God needs any one nation to step into the role, for the role is already cast – we are the Church, God's witness to love in the world. May God lead us in our witness to make God's love known. Amen.

ⁱ John Chadwick. "Christian Nationalism Explained: An Interview with Rutgers Professor Joseph Williams." <https://sas.rutgers.edu/news-events/news/newsroom/faculty/3406-religious-nationalism>

ⁱⁱ Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry. *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ryan Dunn. "What is Christian Nationalism?" <https://www.umc.org/en/content/what-is-christian-nationalism>

^{iv} Richard Davis. "Politics and the Sovereignty of God – Jeremiah 4:1-10." January 28, 2019. politicaltheology.com. Retrieved August 16, 2022.

^v Gene Tucker. *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.