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Jeremiah 23:1-8

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Washington Street UMC
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Good morning! It is a joy to be gathered with you on this special day. No, it is not Thanksgiving Sunday, it is not yet the Holiday Season – even if Starbucks has already broken out the red cups, and Home Depot is already sold out of icicle lighting – today is a special day in and of itself. Today is Christ the King Sunday. It is the New Year's Eve of the Christian Calendar as we will soon be entering into Advent, which begins a new year for the Christian Church.

As I was preparing for this morning's sermon, I was reading up on this passage from Jeremiah 23:1-8. In his commentary on this text, Pastor and Theologian Andrew Wyler offers, "If you believe that preaching isn't or shouldn't be political, you might want to look elsewhere in the lectionary readings this week."ⁱ

Politics in the pulpit is of my love languages. ... Well, let me clarify, preaching that acknowledges that discipleship and faithfulness are inherently political is one of my love language. Preaching for the sake of pushing a specific political candidate or party is for the birds.

This morning's text in Jeremiah – like much of the Old Testament – is inherently political. To deny such a political connection is to ignore the framework and storyline of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Jeremiah was a prophet who served for about 40 years as God's prophetic voice to the people of Israel in the region of Judah during the reigns of Kings Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jeconiah, and Zedekiah. During this time, there were multiple deportations of the people of Israel to other lands due their capture by surrounding nations.

As we look at this morning's text, we will find that Jeremiah is offering a strong critique of these kingly leaders on behalf of God.

Before we dive too deep into the text, let's set the larger framework for the critique that is to be offered. The people of Israel had been led out of the Egypt by Moses, and had been led by God-given Judges in the promised land prior to the instatement of any kings. But the people of Israel, seeing that surrounding (seemingly more powerful) nations were led by kings, begged God to give them a king. God refused at first, but eventually relented, and King Saul was installed as the first King of Israel.

Following the reign of King Solomon, the third King of Israel, the people of Israel were divided into a Northern and Southern Kingdom, each of which was governed by a separate king. These kings were both leaders of the nation and of the faith. They were religious and empirical leaders. As such, both the physical and spiritual health of the people fell under the king's purview.

After almost 200 years, the Northern Kingdom of Israel had fallen to the Assyrians, leaving only the Kings of Judah – the Southern Kingdom – remaining. Jeremiah is serving as prophet during the reign of the last five kings of Judah, before Judah fell to the Babylonians. Zedekiah was the last of the kings to serve as both religious and empirical leader of the people Israel.

As we read the start of this morning’s text in Jeremiah 23, we hear these words, “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord.”

The word “shepherd” is a “general term in the ancient Near East denoting any high-ranking leader.”ⁱⁱ As such, “The “woe to the shepherds” passage ... is a cry of outrage against those who had abused God-given power.”ⁱⁱⁱ This text, coming near the end of Jeremiah’s reign, and the coming end of the Jewish kings over the people of Israel, is offering a lament and accusation against those who had been kings.

Let us keep reading to hear the words of lament.

“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord.”

The prophet, like many a prophet before him, is not offering high words of praise from God upon those who have served as king. Instead, Jeremiah is naming the failure of the kings that have caused the downfall of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The prophecy is offering that it is the fault of the kings that the people of Judah have been scattered – removed from the promised land into exile by surrounding nations. It is the fault of the kings that the nation of Israel is not still strong and cohesive.

But, we shouldn’t read this with our modern day proclivities in mind. The prophet is not simply saying that the kings had failed to organize a military strong enough to defend themselves. As we read from other prophets, the failure of kingly leadership in the Hebrew Scriptures is generally in regard to a moral and religious failure – how the kings failed to maintain God’s commands to care for one another. “Jeremiah makes clear that the demise of Israel is directly connected to the poor leadership of the kings, including evasion of their duties to uphold justice for the poor, widowed, and oppressed.”

As we keep reading, we find that it is this dereliction of duty to center justice and righteousness that are the primary concerns of God.

Beginning in verse 3, Jeremiah offers, “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiple. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them. ... The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

God is promising that all of those who have been scattered – a reflection back on the people of Israel and Judah who have been exiled into foreign lands – will be brought back together in one fold. And that, as God raises up new leaders to guide and govern, a new leader will come from the lineage of

David (who was hailed as the most faithful of kings, even given his promiscuous failures). The new king – the one to come from the line of David – would have a focus on justice and righteousness. These are the key tenants of kingly leadership God desires.

Now, before we jump to conclusions, we must frame this oracle of prophecy in a the Jewish mindset of the ancient Near East. As Andrew Wyler offers, “**Jesus is nowhere to be found in this passage.** Full stop. This is sacred Hebrew scripture, and we need to be careful to not appropriate it as Christian scripture or to preach it in a way that denigrates or excludes the Jewish faith or our Jewish siblings.”^{iv} To the Jews who were hearing this prophecy spoken, their expectation and hope was *not* for some physical presence of the divine in the Son of God to be the fulfillment of the one to come in the line of David.

They wanted and expected some son of Israel in the line of David to be born, to be raised, and to be crowned as a new king – just as Saul, Solomon, Amon, and Josiah had been before. They wanted, as history has proven most empires do, a king on a throne to wield earthly power in their rule and reign.

This yearning for earthly power has been the thirst and desire for most of human history. It was true of the people of Egypt who were led by Pharaohs, and the people of the Roman Empire who were led by Caesars, and the people of Russia who were led by Tzars, and the people of China who were led by Emperors, and the people of England who were led by Monarchs, and the tribal peoples who were led by Chiefs, and even today as many nations are led by Presidents and Prime Ministers.

In truth, it is this hope of having power that we all desire – in every generation, in every land, even if it appears in different ways. And it is not just a problem among a select few who have been elected or born into positions of power.

Consider this: do you recognize this remote control? (NES remote control.)

When I was growing up, I was never allowed to have a Nintendo game station. We had an old Commodore 64, on which we could play snake and donkey kong, but I never had any of newer game stations until I was in college. When I was 12, I moved into a new neighborhood and had friend who lived up the street who had just about every game station you could want. He had the Nintendo, the Super Nintendo, and the Nintendo 64. On Saturdays, I would spend a lot of time at his house playing football in the front yard with him and his brothers, and when we got tired, we’d all go in and play video games all afternoon.

Depending on the game we were playing, there was this special cheat code you could enter using the controller to give yourself, or to give everyone, extra lives in the game. The code is known as the Komani Code, and if you look it up, you’ll find it defined as, “a code to help non-expert players progress through a game.”

The code was easy to remember: Up Up Down Down Left Right Left Right B A ... and then you had to press *start* to return to the game, or, if you wanted to keep your friends, you could hit *select* before hitting *start*, and the cheat would give everyone playing these bonus lives.

The Komani code was the cheat you needed to be able to control the game, even when you weren't necessarily in control. It was the way to ensure you would be successful. You could enter the code as many times as you wanted, and in some cases have unlimited extra lives in a game you would (perhaps) never have beaten.

Now, you may be wondering, what on earth does this old video game hack have to do with Jeremiah, with the old Jewish kings, and with Christ the King Sunday.

I think the Komani code, as great as it was from a purely game-focused perspective, is indicative of a greater symptom of human brokenness.

We want power. We, as individuals, or as members of a collective whole, we want power. We want to have control over what happens. We want to have the ability to determine the future. We want the authority to do whatever we want whenever we want, and in general, we don't really care how that affects others.

They say the root of all evil is money – but that is not true. The root of all evil is the selfish yearning for power, but we have masked that truth by allowing money to buy power, thus making it seem as if money is the problem.

The problem that Jeremiah was trying to highlight, the problem that the Lord had Jeremiah speaking out on in this text, was that the kings (who had been granted control over the religious and governmental framework of Israel) had lost sight of where power truly resides, and they sought to usurp that power for themselves. When we think that we have a right to control power, to hold power in our courts, or to exert power as we see fit, then we have lost sight of where power really exists.

This is one of the greatest problems we have as a nation that still (from a pure numbers perspective) considers itself Christian – we think that the power of our nation exists in the presidency or in our military, or in our elected and appointed leaders. We think that the Department of Defense is our national Komani Code – if we just type it in enough – if we just pump enough money into it – if we just strengthen our government's oversight and presence around the globe – then we will have unlimited lives and control the game of global existence.

But Jeremiah is calling us out, just as much as he was calling out the leaders of Israel. If we want to be faithful to God, if we want our leaders to be faithful to God, then we must shift our focus from personal grasps at power to a focus on justice and righteousness, for this the way God will shepherd us.

And though this text was written to a Jewish population, and should be read as such, the text "announce[s] a future David king that the [Christian] church has confessed to be Jesus the Christ."^v

Should we have any questions about what power should look like from a leader, from a shepherding king, we need not look further than the witness of God in the incarnate one, who is Christ our Lord. "As we look to Christ as the model shepherd or king, what can we learn for living in and engaging the

world? As our world struggles with war, famine, and fuel shortages, how do we consider our call to lives as God's people? ... How do we get in on God's restorative justice?"^{vi} For this is the witness of Jesus Christ, to bring healing to the hurting, to bring life to the dying, to bring unity to the divided, and to usher in a new covenant that declares there is only one power that is great enough to bring life from death, and to have control even over the perceived finality of the tomb.

Christ the King Sunday declares not only that Christ is King, but that we are not. It not only invites us to acknowledge the power of God in Christ, but to admit we are powerless absent Christ. Any attempt at grasping power for our own control – whether as trivial as the Komani Code, or as absurd as partisan gerrymandered electoral districts – is futile, for there is a king, and we are not him. There is a Christ, and we will never be him. There is a God, and it is not us.

“The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’”

We come here on Sundays to give thanks to God for Christ who is our King. But our thanksgiving does not end when we leave this building. Our admission of where power resides does not change when we walk out the front doors. The truth of God's power in Christ is not only applicable when we are gathered as a community of faith. Christ is King in all, over all, and for all. So may we proclaim our allegiance to the King, the one who rules with justice and righteousness, that all of God's created may know life, life abundant, and life eternal. To God be all glory, forever and ever. Amen.

ⁱ Andrew Wyler. “Commentary on Jeremiah 23:1-8.” workingpreacher.org. Retrieved November 16, 2022.

ⁱⁱ Jack R. Lundbom. *Feasting on the Word, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C Volume 4*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Martha Sterne. *Feasting on the Word, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C Volume 4*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.

^{iv} Wyler.

^v Lundbom.

^{vi} Mary Eleanor Johns. *Feasting on the Word, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C Volume 4*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.