The Cruciform Life: Jeremiah

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Texts: Jeremiah 20:7-13; Mark 15:25-39

I wonder how many of us would find the following want-ad attractive? “Prophet wanted. Must be prepared for constant conflict, physical abuse and verbal harassment. Arrest and arbitrary detention a possibility. No pay. No benefits. No time for family life.” All of you who are interested please see me after the service. I’ll be glad to help you find a competent psychotherapist or counselor.

In popular terms, Jeremiah was a whistleblower. According to Wikipedia, “A whistleblower is a person who exposes any kind of information or activity that is deemed illegal, [unethical](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics), or not correct within an [organization](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organization) …”[[1]](#footnote-1) Well, prophets and whistleblower have a lot in common, and Jeremiah was both.

Now, Jeremiah lived more than 2,500 years ago in the ancient kingdom of Judah. At that time, Jerusalem was the capital city of Judah and the headquarters of the Church of his day. The political and religious authorities of Jerusalem were more or less the same people and they were convinced that God was on their side. But, Jeremiah, inspired as he was with the spirit of the living God, had the courage to tell them that they were wrong. He told them that if they didn’t change their ways God was going to tear the entire society down to the very ground and start all over again. No wonder Jeremiah was unpopular in the corridors of power. He blew the whistle on a corrupt government and a corrupt church. And he paid a terrible price for doing so!

The biblical passage we read this morning is a vindication of the ministry of Jeremiah.[[2]](#footnote-2) It’s opening words sound strange and even blasphemous to our ears. On what grounds could the prophet possibly justify to crying out, “O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed.”[[3]](#footnote-3) As if God tricked Jeremiah into a miserable life! However, the point of these words is that Jeremiah had no choice, even when his mission brought him “reproach and derision all day long.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

As much as this prayer was directed to God, it was also directed to Jeremiah’s support group. In fact, this prayer has in mind three different audiences. If we accept the possibility that these words stem from the prophet himself,[[5]](#footnote-5) then they were certainly addressed to God. But the prophet’s supporters needed to hear this prayer also, in order to be convinced of Jeremiah’s innocence and the validity of his mission. After all in the ancient world the normal conclusion that would be drawn, when people were in as much trouble as Jeremiah, was that they must have offended God and that their sufferings were deserved.

Another audience to whom these words were directed are the readers of the book and that includes us. Actually, this poem operates as its own indictment of the people of Jerusalem. When we read these words, we realize something must have been terribly wrong for God’s chosen change-agent in history to be treated so badly. This prayer reinforces the message of the first half of the book: Jerusalem was the symbol of a corrupt society that had to be destroyed so that God could create something better.

Nevertheless, despite his reluctance to be God’s prophet, despite the fact that his message was violently rejected by his fellow Jerusalemites, Jeremiah also possessed an extraordinary sense of confidence. We see that in the way the prayer ends, “Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers.” Jeremiah was sure that God would not let him down. And indeed, if we read the entire book of Jeremiah, we can see that it is not all gloom and doom.

While the first part of this lengthy biblical book contains oracles of doom that is not all there is in Jeremiah. The second half of the book deals with hope. It proclaims that even after God tears the society of his chosen people down to the foundations, something better will emerge. Famously, though we have not read it this morning, that hope finds expression in Jeremiah’s promise of a new covenant:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Throughout this series of sermons I have been talking about the cruciform or cross-shaped life. It is a major biblical paradigm manifested not only in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus but also in the lives of many Old Testament personalities. Jeremiah’s lament prayer and, in fact, the arc of Jeremiah’s prophecies illustrate the cross-shaped life: a transitional process that is marked by suffering and transformation. Certainly, Jeremiah’s life was filled with suffering because he violated social norms. No one wanted to hear that their sacred city-state was a deeply corrupt society that no longer served the purposes of God. But Jeremiah’s proclamations also brought the hope of transformation. On the far side of judgment lay hope; on the other side of cultural collapse there was the promise of a new society. After the old covenant has been abrogated, another covenant would take its place.

What that’s all well and good, but it also sounds pretty scary. I’m no Jeremiah nor do I want his life. I want my life to flourish; I want my church, my city, my country to flourish too. I want to feel successful and for them to be successful. In fact, just between you, me and the gate-post, I’d rather not live the cruciform life at all. Not only does it sound rather frightening, it also seems really risky and quite frankly I’m rather risk-adverse. Just ask my financial advisor. What on earth can Jeremiah’s life and mine possibly have in common? I can’t possibly do what he did.

But maybe that’s the key. Because Jeremiah didn’t do what he did all by himself either. He says as much in the poem we read this morning. God is the real agent in Jeremiah’s life. It is God’s word that can neither be suppressed or overcome. God succeeded even when it looked like Jeremiah failed.

Now, that observation can be taken in various directions. Today I would like to use it to consider the future of mainline Christianity in this country. That means, however, taking a critical look at the categories Jeremiah used in his analysis of the fate of Jerusalem. Clearly the prophet tends to work in black and white categories. Either everything is bad in Jerusalem or after God restores the Holy City everything is going to be perfect. Our lives, however, are usually more ambiguous than that.

I once organized a conference at Queen’s Theological College where we brought in a consultant to reflect on the nature of theological education.[[7]](#footnote-7) The consultant made an observation about the life of institutions that has stayed with me ever since. He told us that every institution ought to write two histories: a sin-history and a grace history. In other words, we can tell the story of any human organization from two points of view. On the one hand, we can emphasize the conflicts that created and compromised it and the bitter fights for power and privilege that brought it to its present situation. That’s the sin-history. But on the other hand there is also a grace-history: a story of vision, of sacrifice, of the search to make something better by faithful and committed people.

When we read the book of Jeremiah we confront a faith community that was able to acknowledge both its sin-history and its grace-history. For it was descendants of the same Jerusalem community that was destroyed who compiled and edited the book of Jeremiah that became part of our Bibles. A history of grace and sin are both written into the pages of Jeremiah.

We also live in a faith community that has a sin history and a grace history. And that faith community is the one we know as the Church. We delude ourselves if we simply concentrate on the grace and refuse to acknowledge not only the mistakes of the past, but the one’s we are making now. But, we also delude ourselves if we imagine that sin is stronger than grace.

You may remember that there was interview with me in the edition of “the Burning Bush” that was published earlier this year.[[8]](#footnote-8) One of the questions your editor put to me was, how do I see the future of the Christian Church?

Unfortunately, I left my crystal ball at home that morning. However, I suggest that the immediate future of the Christian Church will be much the same as its past. And that will be the same as its biblical past. The Church of the future will have a sin history and it will have a grace history. People will make bad and questionable decisions that will bring it to its knees. But on its knees the Church will discover the grace of God anew.

Jeremiah’s sufferings brought him to his knees. But on his knees he discovered a God whose gracious purpose would not leave him without hope. Jerusalem was also brought to its knees. According to Jeremiah, the first temple could have been saved; but, human pride and sin brought it to its knees. Nevertheless, on its knees Jerusalem would discover the renewing power of the word of God. Transformed through suffering, it was on its knees that Jerusalem gave us the book of Jeremiah.

And now we too, members of mainline Protestant Churches—Presbyterian, United, Anglican, Baptist (it doesn’t really matter which)—see our churches being brought to their knees. For this society is slowly but surely washing its hands of its Christian heritage, and we do not know what the future portends. But it is precisely on our knees that we will discover that God is not finished with the Church. Though the future be unclear, perhaps even unrecognizable from our perspective, the same transformative spirit that sustained Jeremiah and brought the Body of Christ into being will remain graciously and powerfully able to renew the people of God.

1. “Whistleblower,” *Wikipedia.* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whistleblower> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kathleen O’Connor, *The Confessions of Jeremiah: Their Interpretation and Role in Chapters 1–25* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), 157. A similar analysis can be made of the crucifixion narrative in Mark 15:25-39; see, e.g., Greg McKinzie,”The Symbolism of Divine Presence in Mark 15:33-39,” *Restoration Quarterly* 60.4 (2018):225-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jeremiah 20:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jeremiah 20:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Not all scholars accept this possibility, see the brief survey in Mark S. Smith, *The Laments of Jeremiah and Their Contexts* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 28-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jeremiah 31:31-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. He was the late Dr. George Schner, S.J., Professor of Philosophical Theology at Regis College, Toronto School of Theology. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ada Mallory, “The Journey of Reverend Bill Morrow,” *The Burning Bush, Winter 2019.* <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1laaDV3VehDPt_9CF7uWmZL46FYaBFRti/view> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)