

“For Times Such as These”
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Stouffville United Church
Sunday, September 22, 2019

Jeremiah 8 and Luke 16

The Prophet Jeremiah is sometimes called the ‘weeping prophet’ because he is so emotionally connected to the story of the people of Israel as they continue to turn away from God; and the threat of invasion from the North by the Babylonian empire is becoming more real every day. At the center of Jeremiah’s complaint is that the people have turned from God to worship idols: “Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?” They seem to be turning everywhere except to God.

As my commentary noted, “Jeremiah forces us to confront idolatry in our own lives. We can easily laugh at the Israelite worshipping wooden idols, but what really controls our life? Are we obsessed with the latest technology and consumer goods? We can see Israel’s unhealthy obsession with [idols] here, but what do we fail to see in our own lives? I was recently at a children’s soccer game with many parents on the sidelines, but then I noticed about half the people were looking at their smart phones instead of their children. Now maybe this was out of necessity, but maybe the smart phone is becoming an idol.”¹

The grief of verse 18, “my joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick” is now replaced in 9:1 by a “fountain of tears” and weeping “day and night.” Utter grief has replaced the despair of the beginning. Is there no balm in Gilead? Jeremiah weeps for the people. God weeps for the people.²

The Gospel is the parable of the dishonest manager, a parable that has confused readers for centuries. For Jesus distorts the ways we think the system should work. The manager should be above board, and not making deals with his boss’ money. And yet Jesus is suggesting that the manager be ‘street-smart’ and make a deal if he can because it is more efficient than going ‘by the book’. What are we to take from this?

As the Message translation writes, “Now here’s a surprise: the master praised the crooked manger! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wit. I want you to be smart in the same way – but for what is *right* – so you’ll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behaviour.”

So, I take from this that we should be on constant alert, looking for angles, to be smart for what is right. Jesus is calling us not to fall asleep at the wheel of Christianity, snoozing through moments and events that we should be noticing. Pop up, be ready to jump, be ready to be surprised. Be ready.

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2974

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2974

Trudeau wore blackface in pictures from 20 years ago. He has apologized this past week for the dumb, stupid thing he did. He is angry at himself. He wished he had never done it. There have been a myriad of responses from Canadian public figures, from Andrew Scheer and Jagmet Singh, to Calgary's mayor Naheed Nenshi, to our own racialized friends who we might have talked to in person, or over social media. I know that through my own work on my white privilege over these last 2 years, that I was discouraged by the initial response from the media, where it was all about Trudeau's 'unworthiness to serve as Prime Minister', when to my mind, the nation should have stopped and made time to listen and have a heart-to-heart about racism in Canada *now*.

Rev. Anthony Bailey, minister to Parkdale United in Ottawa, is a black minister who has had his church vandalized several times as an act of racist aggression. I have met Anthony several times at the Festival of Homiletics preaching event in the United States as he co-hosts the festival. He commented yesterday about Trudeau's blackface photos: "Fellow White People, can we please be quiet and listen to racialized people. Just listen. Just reflect. It's not up to us to decide what's racism and what isn't. We also need to quit hiding behind the racialized people we know or claim to know who 'aren't offended'. Can we please just let ourselves be challenged, instead of hiding behind ... our privilege."³

It's up to us, as white people, to do our own work on what the blackface pictures of Trudeau tell us about our white lives. It's not about the racism of the 20 year old costume photo of a politician. But it is about racism as it is found in our culture, in our society, in our institutions, *today*.

As my commentary reflected, "Every generation can hear the lament of Jeremiah with new ears, because demoralization and suffering span the centuries and cultures."⁴ Another writer added, "Drastic times call for drastic measures. Jesus offers us the example of someone who can at least hear and respond. Perhaps more than anything else, Jeremiah is trying to wake us up. He failed with Jerusalem, but this passage continues to resonate with any group open to change. The Dishonest Manager shows that change is not always pretty, but it is a necessity that Jeremiah's listeners failed to understand. Let us hope that Jeremiah can awaken us from our slumber."⁵

Sixteen year old climate activist, Greta Thunberg, in her address to the Senate in the United States last Thursday, said essentially the same thing – it's time to wake up from the dreams. The Climate Strike was a global event on Friday. Several million people from all around the world, in cities, in deserts, on the frozen land of Antarctica, stood with signs in solidarity to raise the world's attention to what will kill it one day – climate crisis. 4,500 strikes in 120 countries. Canada will strike this Friday.

Greta stoically and calmly intoned this prophecy: "I have a dream that the people in power, as well as the media, start treating this crisis like the existential emergency it is ... And yet, wherever I go I seem to be surrounded by fairy tales. Business leaders, elected officials all

³ Quoted in CBC News Sept 20, fb post of Mike Perrault, Sept 20.

⁴ Feasting on the Word, Theological Perspective, 74, Year C, Vol 4.

⁵ www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1771

across the political spectrum spending their time making up and telling bedtime stories that soothe us, that make us go back to sleep ... But the problem we are facing is not that we lack the ability to dream, or to imagine a better world. The problem now is that we need to wake up. It's time to face the reality, the facts, the science.⁶

Our Gospel reminds us, "Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles ... I want you be to smart in the same way – but for what is *right*." Put some words on a piece of paper or draw a picture that says something about what you think about the climate crisis in our world. And on Friday, take it to your lunch at Parkview, hold it up at your bus stop, stick it to your backpack, post it on the wall in your office, tape it to the rear window of your car. I'll be at the Richmond Hill climate strike with thousands of others.

Jeremiah desperately wanted his people to wake up. Jesus tells us to stay alert. Be ready to jump up for what is right in a world that is asking you to take a risk. Don't think a band-aid on racism and climate crisis will fix it.

Redraw the vision.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/greta-thunberg-congress-speech-climate-change-crisis-dream-a9112151.htm>