

Hard Words from the Prophets

Jeremiah 16:1-4, 9-13, Revelation 3:14-22, Matthew 23:29-39

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This morning, we heard three texts that are rarely used in sermons. None of these passages ever appear in the Revised Common Lectionary, so many pastors never have the opportunity to wrestle with them.

You may be glad that they don't show up in the 3-year cycle of lectionary readings, because they are texts of despair and judgment. They are a reminder to us that the Bible is not all happy talk. There are some very hard words there -- words that are faithful and prophetic. They are also words that can and should speak to us, today.

In today's readings, the words of doom and despair are delivered to people who don't understand why *they* should be the ones to hear such a thing. In each of the three cases, we hear explicitly that the people will be surprised and confused by the announcement that God is not pleased with them.

My core text for the day is the one from Jeremiah. He's the prophet in the Bible about whom we have the most personal information. We get a sense of his own struggles of faith and calling, because he really did not want to be a prophet, and he did not enjoy pronouncing bad news. The texts have him complaining and arguing with God frequently. But over and over again, the prophetic word was like a fire burning within him, and he could not hold it back.

Jeremiah was often taunted on the streets of Jerusalem by people who threw back at him his frequent words, "magor misabib" -- which translate as "terror and destruction on every side." They laughed at Old Mr. Doom & Gloom and did not believe him -- and they turned toward other people who claimed to be prophets, and who announced good news and great possibilities.

For decades, Jeremiah told the people of Jerusalem and Judah that they were not serving God and that they were not following God's laws, and he told them that destruction was coming. As we heard a piece of his preaching this morning, he didn't speak in abstraction and generalities. He was vivid.

For thus says the LORD concerning the sons and daughters who are born in this place, and concerning the mothers who bear them and the fathers who beget them in this land: They shall die of deadly diseases. They shall not be lamented, nor shall they be buried; they shall become like dung on the surface of the ground. They shall perish by the sword and by famine, and their dead bodies shall become food for the birds of the air and for the wild animals of the earth.

Magor misabib -- terror and destruction on every side. His words to Jerusalem were not cheerful or polite, and they were not well received. Jeremiah looked at his own people, and he analyzed the geo-political situation in the middle east, and he told them that they would be conquered, starved, murdered and deported.

The Bible includes the book of the prophet Jeremiah, all 52 chapters of it, because he was right. In 587 BC, the Babylonian army conquered the city, killed many of the citizens, destroyed the Temple, and took leaders of the city away into bondage. Finally -- after all that had happened -- the Jewish people came to appreciate that Jeremiah had spoken truth to them, a truth that they did not want to hear.

We hear similar things from many of the Old Testament prophets. And Jesus also has hard words to Jerusalem. "Woe to you hypocrites!" You are of the same ilk as those who killed the prophets. You are like those who did away with the prophets who brought an uncomfortable holy word that was too hard to hear.

In the book of Revelation there are seven letters to the churches. The first six letters bring words of affirmation and encouragement. But there is no good word for the church in Laodicea. They have conformed to the dominant society. They have been proud of their superficial wealth and power. But the angel of Christ says that wishy-washy and lukewarm isn't acceptable. I'll spit you out of my mouth.

The word of God can come crashing down on those who think they are in great shape. The Bible lets us know that the people of God bear responsibilities, and they face consequences when they turn away from the way of God.

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So how does that connect to us, here in Colorado, in this day and age? How can any of that apply to us, good Christian people, citizens of the United States?

Today -- with anxiety and with grief -- I dare to take on some of the mantle of Jeremiah. I dare to speak about the prophetic fire that burns in my heart, and that I wish I did not have to speak. I follow in the footsteps of Jeremiah, because I bring very specific bad news.

I am here to say that we have not followed God's rules, and there will be severe consequences.

Now there is a difference between what I have to say and what Jeremiah proclaimed. His words of judgment directed at the Jewish people were about their unique failure to follow the ritual laws and commandments. The punishment that he announced had a personal and specific edge for God's chosen people.

Our society has broken a different set of rules. We have violated the rules of nature that God has established for all of creation. We stand on the brink of horrible consequences -- not because God will act to punish us -- but because that's how the world works.

We -- the members of modern industrial society -- have broken the most basic rules.

- We have forgotten that we humans are creatures, part of creation, and that we live in relationship with all of the natural world.
- We have forgotten that the world is limited -- in its resources and its ability to process waste.
- We have forgotten that we are utterly dependant on this planet's fragile web of life, and on the delicately balanced natural systems which maintain life.

Those are generalities. I will give you a few specifics in a moment. But remember that when we break God's rules, there will be consequences -- indeed, there already are consequences. What I am going to talk about sounds like Jeremiah's description of the devastated city. I wish it did not. But I believe from the depth of my faith that these descriptions are true. The way we have broken God's rules has set us on a path to crisis.

A few years ago, James Gustave Speth -- a respected diplomat and scholar -- wrote an important book, "The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability." Right at the very start, on the second page of the preface, Speth puts forth a vivid assessment of where we stand:

"How serious is the threat to the environment? Here is one measure of the problem: all we have to do to destroy the planet's climate and biota and leave a ruined world to our children and grandchildren is to keep doing exactly what we are doing today, with no growth in the human population or the world economy. Just continue to release greenhouse gasses at current rates, just continue to impoverish ecosystems and release toxic chemicals at current rates, and the world in the latter part of this century won't be fit to live in. But, of course, human activities are not holding at current levels -- they are accelerating, dramatically. ... We are thus facing the possibility of an enormous increase in environmental deterioration, just when we need to move strongly in the opposite direction."

This spring, a group of about 500 scientists from around the world released a consensus statement, directed at global policy makers, about "Maintaining Humanity's Life Support Systems in the 21st Century." The "essential overview" that serves as the paper's preface gets more specific than the opening words of Speth's book. The scientists point to five interlocking crises. They say:

[Earth is rapidly approaching a tipping point. Human impacts are causing alarming levels of harm to our planet. As scientists who study the interaction of people with the rest of](#)

the biosphere using a wide range of approaches, we agree that the evidence that humans are damaging their ecological life-support systems is overwhelming.

We further agree that, based on the best scientific information available, human quality of life will suffer substantial degradation by the year 2050 if we continue on our current path.

Science unequivocally demonstrates the human impacts of key concern:

- Climate disruption—more, faster climate change than since humans first became a species.
- Extinctions—not since the dinosaurs went extinct have so many species and populations died out so fast, both on land and in the oceans.
- Wholesale loss of diverse ecosystems—we have plowed, paved, or otherwise transformed more than 40% of Earth’s ice-free land, and no place on land or in the sea is free of our direct or indirect influences.
- Pollution—environmental contaminants in the air, water and land are at record levels and increasing, seriously harming people and wildlife in unforeseen ways.
- Human population growth and consumption patterns—seven billion people alive today will likely grow to 9.5 billion by 2050, and the pressures of heavy material consumption among the middle class and wealthy may well intensify.

By the time today’s children reach middle age, it is extremely likely that Earth’s life-support systems, critical for human prosperity and existence, will be irretrievably damaged by the magnitude, global extent, and combination of these human-caused environmental stressors, unless we take concrete, immediate actions to ensure a sustainable, high-quality future.

As members of the scientific community actively involved in assessing the biological and societal impacts of global change, we are sounding this alarm to the world. For humanity’s continued health and prosperity, we all—individuals, businesses, political leaders, religious leaders, scientists, and people in every walk of life—must work hard to solve these five global problems, starting today.

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"Magor misabib." Terror and destruction on every side. And that message is not coming from a solitary prophet of questionable credentials. The words of warning are coming from the world's most respected scientists, economists, and ethicists.

Indeed, just this week, President Obama put forth what one commentator called "the broadest climate strategy put forward by any U.S. president, addressing the need to both cut carbon emissions and strengthen climate resilience." Speaking to students at

Georgetown University, he explained why these policies are essential: "I refuse to condemn your generation and future generations to a planet that's beyond fixing."

We are on the path -- well along the path -- to a planet that is beyond fixing. These things are true. They are happening right now.

This spring, for the first time in human history, the levels of carbon dioxide in Earth's atmosphere reached 400 ppm -- a level far above what climate scientists tell us is safe. Those levels of CO2 are causing climate disruption, and they are turning the oceans more acidic. The world's oceans are already overfished, and now they are becoming far less suitable for life.

The week, astronomical heat is spreading over the southwestern US, just as it did across Australia last year. Unprecedented floods have swept through Europe this spring.

In the past two years, Colorado has seen extreme and devastating wildfires, brought on, in large part, by drought and the spread of bark beetles. The beetles are rampant because we don't have bitter cold winters anymore.

As I've talked with church groups, I generally find that we're well informed people. We know the headlines about diverse crises. We are worried -- but most of us haven't really connected the dots. We haven't seen -- or we haven't admitted to ourselves -- where the trends are going. Magor misabib. Terror and destruction on every side.

These are hard things to hear, but they are true.

Our world is severely damaged, because we have not followed God's laws.

- We have taken more than is sustainable.
- We have polluted beyond Earth's capacity to heal.
- We have killed off valuable species without considering the role they play in supporting God's creation.
- We have convinced ourselves that we are separate from the natural world, and that we have the wisdom to control it and shape it to our own desires -- and that is a lie.

We have broken God's rules, and there will be consequences, just as dramatic as the consequences that Jeremiah foretold for Jerusalem. Magor misabib -- terror and destruction on every side.

Just like the people of Jerusalem did not want to hear what Jeremiah had to say, just as Jesus condemned the hypocrites of Jerusalem who reject God's hard prophetic message, just as the self-righteous people of Laodicia did not understand why they would be spit out of God's realm -- so too, we don't want to hear it. We don't want to recognize our sin and our worship of false gods.

We, in our affluent and privileged society, have looked at ourselves as the good guys. We've held up our way of life as the model for the rest of the world. We've been proud of all the things that we call "progress" -- even as those things that we love have been intimately tied to the devastation of creation. We have not responded to warnings and judgments, in part, because we can't imagine that they apply to us.

But it does not matter if we want to hear it. If we continue on our current path, if we keep on breaking God's natural laws, the dreadful consequences will come.

And so I voice the call that Jeremiah brought to his people, the same call that the angel spoke to the church in Laodicia: Repent. Give up the false gods of privilege, convenience, individualism and wealth.. Recognize that we all depend on the health and vitality of nature, of the web of life, of God's creation.

Those are hard words -- hard words that are spoken often in the Bible. But they are also good news. They are words that tie us directly to the Christian Gospel. The good news is that we have a choice. We can go on breaking God's laws and continue on the path to catastrophe -- or we can repent.

Repent. Turn around. Claim a different identity and a different way of life -- both personally and as a society. Go beyond changing light bulbs and using cloth shopping bags, and make real changes in your life. And fight for real change in our society -- because we may be able to avoid the very worst if we act dramatically and fast.

Bringing this message fills me with grief and anguish. I find no joy in announcing doom and gloom. But like Jeremiah, I know that these words must be spoken.

Prayerfully consider what I have said. Take an honest look at the condition of this world, and see the truth of this description. Wrestle with the changes that we must make if we are to avoid catastrophe, and see how those changes really can be good news as we turn toward God's purposes for our lives and the world.

St. Andrew's green team has organized a conversation time following the coffee hour this morning, where you can respond to what I've said today. Join us, and talk about what this means for you, and for this church, and for us all.

These words are true. Let us take them seriously.