

The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller
Year A, Third Sunday in Lent, Evensong
19 March 2017
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

The prophet Jeremiah, from whom we heard this evening, lived in Judea around the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. He shares certain interesting similarities with another prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, whose ministry also took him to Jerusalem about 450 years later. Both lived and worked at a time when their people were being oppressed by external forces that proved to be much more powerful than others believed them to be—for Jeremiah, it was the Babylonians, and for Jesus, it was the Romans. And—controversially to many around them—both preached *against* military or violent reaction to these oppressors: Jeremiah argued for surrender to the Babylonians and Jesus preached non-violent resistance to the Romans.

They preached this way because both believed—contrary to their leaders and most of the people around them—that just because the Temple of God, the intersection of heaven and earth, was located in Jerusalem did not mean that God would automatically save them from their enemies. Both viewed the Temple authorities as corrupt. Yet, both loved their people deeply, and both wept over them from the depth of that love. Nevertheless, both prophets also condemned them severely for their injustice to the poor and their failure to be faithful to God’s covenant. And, finally, both were rejected and suffered for their message—Jeremiah was thrown down an old cistern where he almost died, only to be pulled up just in time to survive and to move to Egypt, where later, it is traditionally believed, he was stoned to death. We know all too well what happened to Jesus for his preaching against the Temple.

Interestingly, however, both of these two prophets are remembered today only because they were largely vindicated, that is, proven to be correct in their assessment of the political environments of their day—had Jerusalem surrendered to the Babylonians, it and the first Temple likely would have survived, and if the Jews had refrained from armed rebellion against Rome, it is quite possible the second Temple might still be standing today.

What's the take away from these comparisons? One might be to pray that God never calls us to be prophets—it's a lonely and an extremely risky vocation. But another might be to reflect on our own reactions in times of great upheaval and uncertainty. These prophets ask us to be faithful in our obligations to the poor, the oppressed, and the strangers among us during such times, and they warn us about assuming God is always on our side. God is the God of all, and God is not at our beck and call to serve our narrow self-interest. Yes, God promises to be faithful to us, but God also expects our faithfulness in return, and one of the ways we show that is how we treat the most vulnerable among us. We are currently living through one of the greatest human migrations in human history, and millions—literally millions—of people are being displaced and relocated, mostly because of economic and religious conflict. We don't yet know how this part of the human story is going to end, but we do know what God expects of us as we live through it. This from yet another prophet, Micah (6:8):

...what does the LORD require of [us]
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with [our] God?

Amen.