

Sermon: C Proper 20 2016
St. Augustine's-in-the-Woods
18 September 2016
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Jeremiah 8:18-9:1
Luke 16:1-13
1 Timothy 2:1-7
Psalm 113

“For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead?” [That’s balm, something soothing, not bomb!] Jeremiah’s lament is strangely relevant today. He feared that the lack of faith and turn to idols by Israelites would bring about the destruction of Israel by God--a fair judgment in Jeremiah’s mind. Israel was in deep anxiety as the threat of being overtaken loomed.

We, too, are anxious. The political scene in our country has many on edge. Some days all we see is a sordid picture of self-interest, disregard of other human beings, and deep distrust of not only persons, but also of established political processes. To some, as in Jeremiah’s time, we are a nation that has lost its way. What will come of this? Where is God in all this?

Prophets in the Old and New Testaments speak God’s word to people who need to hear it. They are not predictors of the future; rather, they sound alarm bells to those who have gone off the track by God’s standards and don’t know it. God’s judgment awaits, the just consequences of sin that, hopefully, will wake us up enough to choose better ways.

In today’s reading from the first letter to Timothy, Paul suggests that we pray “for all who are in high positions so that we might lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.” That’s not a bad idea given the realities of the coming election! Paul then goes on to remind us of God’s truth--that there is one God in Christ Jesus who died to save all of us from being mired forever in the consequences of our sins. Forgiven, we are made free to choose those better ways Jeremiah and God hope for.

Can we, as a nation, choose ways consonant with God’s desire for the good for all people--the Common Good? In our country religion is not divorced from our national life, in fact, it has much to say about the values our nation has stood and often fought for. Separation of church and state is not about silencing voices that proclaim those values; it is about protecting them.

But what we are experiencing today is a strange silence in our land--the absence of voices calling us back to God and to the ways of God. Instead we are listening constantly to shrill voices that blame and accuse, attack and destroy, voices that promote fear and undermine our confidence as Americans and as people of God. We have gone astray. Something or someone needs to get us back on track. We sure could use a prophet like Jeremiah to remind us that we are God's children who are called to serve the Common Good and that we have God to answer to, not just ourselves.

So many idols to worship are out there--cults of personality instead of character, truth speaking to power not nearly often enough--this list could go on and on but it needn't, because we are people of faith and hope, not despair. God is with us in good times and in challenging. Our God is in this mess with us as God always is. Jeremiah knew God's judgment would be in Israel's outcome as it will be in ours which is why God raises up prophets, voices that speak God's truth.

Are there prophets speaking God's word in our land today? I believe there are and it is up to us to hear them and be encouraged by what they do and say.

The African American United Methodist pastor in Flint, Michigan, who invited a presidential candidate to commend her congregation on their ministry with people there so tragically affected by lead poisoning in their drinking water, was prophetic when she confronted that candidate for departing from the agreed upon script and attacking his opponent instead. Her voice got heard and her message was clear--this election needs to be about real issues that affect our people, not lies or attacks or betrayals or cover-ups. It took courage to interrupt a candidate and to speak the truth to power. There are other prophetic voices out there. We need to listen for them and heed what they have to say. If we are truly followers of Jesus we will know when God's will for the good of all is being spoken.

But there is another dimension to all of this. Some may remember the old Pogo cartoon where he looks upon garbage strewn in the primeval forest and says "We have met the enemy and he is us!" Pogo's words were prophetic as he saw the truth, spoke the truth, and pointed to human responsibility for it. Like Jeremiah and Pogo, you and I have a responsibility to step forward, to speak the truth in love and to help others understand what is really going on. It is our religious and civic responsibility.

We are not alone. The power of the Holy Spirit is upon us to give us the courage to say what needs to be said and do what needs to be done. To stay quiet in apathy or fear is as sinful as littering the forest. To speak God's truth is love is everyone's responsibility. The surprising thing is this: When we do venture out to speak God's truth something happens to us--we are better able to hear other prophetic voices and to share hope with them. And then another thing happens. We perceive that it is not all up to us--that Christ's saving power is working with us and for us and then we know that there truly is a balm in Gilead, soothing us and reviving our souls once again.