Pentecost 3

Jer. 20:7-13 Ps. 69:8-20 Matt. 10:24-39

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 6-21-20

"O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was

enticed;

you have overpowered me,

and you have prevailed.

I have become a laughing stock all day long;

everyone mocks me.

For whenever I speak, I must cry out,

I must shout, 'Violence and destruction!'

For the word of the Lord has become for me

a reproach and a derision all day long.

If I say, 'I will not mention him,

or speak any more in his name,'

Then within me there is something like a

burning fire

shut up in my bones;

I am weary with holding it in,

and I cannot."

These are the anguished words we heard just a bit ago in our first reading from the Hebrew Scriptures… Words spoken by the prophet Jeremiah just prior to the Babylonian overthrow and forced exile of the people of Israel in the sixth century BCE…

Jeremiah being called by God to speak **stinging** words of indictment against the people, the politicians, the priests and the prophets of Israel for living lives apart from the God who had **formed them**, **delivered them** from bondage in Egypt, and **led them** through the wilderness into the Promised Land…

The God whose intention it was to be known in **intimate relationship**, whose identifying markers were those of **steadfast love and mercy,** and whose **dream for the world God so loves was woven** into the story of this people chosen to bring the **blessings of justice and mercy and compassion and peace** to all the earth…

People who had forgotten their **call**, their **relationship** with Yahweh, the **blessing** they had been given for the sake of bearing that blessing to the world, **choosing instead** the idols of wealth, comfort, power and security, even as the worship of such idols waged devastation upon the widows, the orphans, the marginalized and the poor among them…

Jeremiah being called then, to speak the anguished cry of Yahweh in hopes that such a cry might turn the People of Israel back to the way of God… That reluctant and recalcitrant prophet being prevailed upon to proclaim warnings no one wanted to hear, and causing him no end of grief and sorrow at the hands of those in high places and derision even from his closest friends. (Which is not surprising, as his message day in and day out was so filled with outrage over the injustices, greed, lies and vile practices of God's people, most translations from the Hebrew refuse to use many of the words original to the text for fear they could be too offensive…)

No wonder the Church has so consistently pushed prophets like Jeremiah off to the margins, suggesting they were crazed old men speaking on behalf of the "angry God of the Old Testament"…. A God no longer center stage after the arrival of the "much nicer and loving" Jesus… (Much of that marginalization of the prophetic voice no doubt stemming from the discomfort it has caused the institutional Church, which has by and large, since the fourth century, opted for "aligning" rather than "maligning" when it comes to the powers that be in the political and religious fiefdoms of any given day).

No wonder the Church has not spent much time plumbing the depths of the prophetic texts of the Hebrew Scriptures… And how unfortunate… Because while we are not all called to be prophets in the way of Jeremiah, we are called as Christians to follow Jesus. And that vocation has some very deep roots in the prophetic tradition, as evidenced in our Gospel text for this morning, as Matthew's Jesus speaks to his disciples about "discipleship", and in that "teaching session" says things every bit as jarring as the words that came from Jeremiah's mouth…

Jesus' words about discipleship **stinging** with the discomforting suggestions that he came not to bring peace to Earth, but a sword, and that following him would set one family member against another and lead to a life with a cruciform shape…

The truth is, despite what we may have learned in Sunday School, our Holy Scriptures do not posit an angry, vengeful God in the Old Testament and a nice loving Jesus in the New… Rather our Holy Scriptures speak from Genesis through Revelation of a God whose passionate love for creation burns in God's heart and God's bones with such intensity, God will go to all measures, all extremes, to cut away (to burn away) anything that would seek to undermine the

vision we know to be “the kingdom of God”… that dream of God in which all of creation is gathered at the table and where justice rolls down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream…

(The God of **both** the Old and the New Testaments being rather like those tractors that cross the blueberry barrens of Maine in fall and spring, dragging behind them three columns of fire (Father, Son and Holy Spirit!), burning away the weeds for the sake of the blueberries yet to come…).

All of which begs the question for us this morning of what it means to live in intimate relationship with the God whose prodigal and passionate love for the world found voice in querulous old prophets like Jeremiah, and whose essence found incarnate presence in a Prince of Peace whose fierce and unrelenting love **cut** “like a sword” through the lesser loyalties of clan, comfort, and convenience for the sake of fullness of life for all…

All of our texts for this morning begging the question of what it might mean for us to be disciples of Jesus, rooted in the prophetic tradition… Especially as we find ourselves in this moment when the very maladies and systemic evils against which Jeremiah “**raged words**” and Jesus “**waged love**” loom before us in a thousand images…

Like the image of George Floyd struggling to say, from under the weight of a white police officer’s knee, “I can’t breathe”… Or the image captured by cell phone just this past Friday evening as the sun set over Deer Isle on that beautiful summer evening… the blue sky blending into the pink above the horizon… That beauty marred by the sight of a noose hanging from an electric wire… Right here, in the place where we live…

What do we do with that? As disciples of Jesus? Recognizing the systemic evils of racism and our own white privilege… while also recognizing that someone in this place where we live hung that noose on that wire, just as someone else in the community was overheard saying in reference to African Americans, “We should just put them all cages.”

How do we respond to all of these things as Christians, rooted as we are in a story of a God whose prodigal and passionate love for all of creation has laid claim on our lives through Christ Jesus?

I hope you won’t cash me in for a newer version of a “priest-in-charge” if I tell you that I’m still wrestling with this question… If I tell you that this question is burning within me these days, longing to find expression in a way that feels true to Jeremiah and to Jesus and to the God whose love burned deep in both their hearts…

And as I have wrestled with the question, the witness of one particular modern day prophet has come to my mind again and again… Her name is Sister Helen Prejean, and while she is known for her work among the poor of New Orleans, what she is most known for is the way she has spent much of her life **raging** against the “justice” system by **engaging** in political

action all the while **waging** love amongst both the perpetrators and the victims of violent crimes…

Sister Helen Prejean has walked with six men to their executions, all of them convicted of horrible and heinous crimes… She has counseled them, pastored them, and walked with them to the electric chair because as she said, "I couldn't let them die alone, and I wanted the last face they saw in this life to be the face of love."

And at the same time, she has founded and supported an organization called "Survive," which seeks to help families of victims of murder and other related crimes… Sister Helen Prejean saying she wants these families, going through untold devastations of loss and pain, to see the face of love in their midst…

Sister Helen Prejean **waging love** among perpetrators and victims alike, and in the process being criticized and accosted for not taking sides, for being the presence of accompanying love for people on both sides of a highly-charged issue…

Sister Helen Prejean **waging** unconditional prodigal, lavish **love** upon perpetrator and victim alike, all the while she **rages** like Jeremiah against the systemic injustices of the "justice system" by **engaging** with those in the halls of power… all of it she says, coming from the love that **burns** within her…

I hesitate to use someone like Sister Helen Prejean as an example of what it might mean to follow Jesus in these times, because her witness as both prophet and pastoral presence feels so far beyond any of our capabilities… But what I'm suggesting we take from her witness is this idea of **raging** against the system by **engaging** those in the halls of power, all the while **waging love** in all directions**… without condition, whether the person standing next to us has a "Black Lives Matter" sign in their hands or a "White Lives matter" sign in their hands…**

Whether they're wearing a mask or not… Whether they're in our "clan" or our family or our political party or not… What I'm suggesting is that while following Jesus calls us to **rage** against the system and to **engage** in political action, above everything else it calls us to **wage love** in all directions…

Perhaps this is what Bishop Michael Curry was saying yesterday as he spoke on behalf of the Poor People's Campaign when he said, "We lament because we love. We advocate because we love. We speak painful truths because we love. Because we love we march. Because we love we call on our leaders to help us make our country a shining light on the hill. Let love lead us. Let love guide us. Let love show us the way."

I think Bishop Michael Curry was talking about **waging love in all directions**. I think he was talking about love showing us the way, being at the heart of everything we do and say, even as we **rage** against the system and **engage** in the halls of power…

I'm sure I don't have to tell you that this is very hard to do… This waging love in all directions… And none of us can do it alone… We need one another for this work… We need one another because it's so easy to get caught up in the **raging** and the **engaging** and to forget about the **waging love** in all directions…

And I need you remind me… I need you to hold me accountable… I need you to support me… I need you to tell me again and again that at the heart of everything we do is love… That at the heart of it all there burns a love that moves among us and within us and around us… a love that cannot be long silenced or subverted or entombed, but rises even the darkness of these days in which we find ourselves…

As it did last night, love made manifest in a hundred little flames of fire at the visitor's center on Little Deer Isle as people gathered to bear witness to light and love in response to the noose that had been hung from the electric wire the night before…

The love that lives and moves and sings and rises and **burns** in the dark… the love that God wages in all directions, including mine… and yours… The love that is stronger than hatred and fear and scapegoating and racism and greed and death… The love that comes deep into the dark nights of all our souls in the person of Jesus so we might know the power of that love to lift our heads and give us hope and light the way and get our hearts to burning…So we too, like Jeremiah might say,

"within me there is something like a

burning fire

shut up in my bones;

I am weary with holding it in,

and I cannot."

The something called Love… The something we are called as disciples to **wage** in all directions, even as we **rage** against injustice and **engage** in the halls of power…

This is really hard work. So let us support one another, dear brothers and sisters in Christ… And let love lead us. Let love guide us. Let love show us the way."