

Hope, Now?

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

I am feeling impatient, my friends, as my world seems to spin out of control.

Political leaders at the 26th Climate Change Conference fall short of the resolve needed to right our wrongs. Economics and reality outweigh the pain suffered in many countries who have little or no power, but suffer most because of climate change. *Am I to have hope, now?*

I see our justice system, and institutions like the military, police, marred by systemic racism and sexism. Our federal government has appealed repeatedly a ruling by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal saying that Ottawa discriminated against First Nations families by underfunding child and family services, meaning thousands of children ended up apprehended from their homes because support was not available.

And, I look, out this window every Sunday seeing the symbols of inequity; people who deserve safety and warmth, living in tents in frigid temperatures. We can blame politicians, we can blame a culture of individualism. It's easy to blame. Much more difficult is reflecting, prayerfully, on our role within this system.

Let's take a look for a moment at our scripture passage today for a lens through which to look at our present. The world prophet Jeremiah is living in had spun out of control. The ancient global superpower, Babylon, had reduced Israel to rubble. Food shortages, the centre of Judah's spiritual life, the Temple, decimated. Jeremiah was in prison. It looked about as bleak as could be. Jeremiah's grim prophesy declared that God had allowed Israel to be conquered by Babylon, because the faithful had made bad choices.

Now I should say here that I don't take this passage literally. Does a theistic God intervene like this? I doubt it. But the idea that the desire for power, and that people are making self-centred, convenient, dumb decisions? I can imagine that, and it reflects how the spiritual compass has become corrupted.

Walter Brueggemann, was asked, "What is a prophet?" His summary was this:

In...the Old Testament ... I think a prophet is someone that tries to articulate the world as though God were really active in the world. [t]hat means on the one hand, to identify those parts of our world order that are contradictory to God, but on the other hand, it means to talk about the will and purpose that God has for the world that will indeed come to fruition even in circumstances that we can't imagine.¹

Prophets of the Bible, and Jesus, echoed their spirit powerfully; they are proclaimers of God's judgment, but also of hope. In the chapters prior to today's reading, Jeremiah speaks a word of the Lord to his people, Judah; your demise, God says (and I paraphrase here) that your demise that will come is not bad luck, it is a result of your bad choices.

¹ Interview on Sojourners 2018. <https://sojo.net/media/what-does-it-mean-be-prophetic-today>

I don't know about you, but I think we, especially our people in power, our people with financial power, our average folks – you and me too – need to listen to prophets.

Where are the prophetic voices in our problematic modern times? This is the question of Advent every year, as we view our lives, our attitudes, our faith, through the lens of Scripture; moments like the one Jeremiah finds himself in, where his people have ignored God's call to justice, to righteousness – that is being right with God and one another.

I'm guessing that Jeremiah would be a bit of a wet blanket at parties if he were here today. His vision of utter destruction lays ahead. But, wait a minute, he also proclaims a vision from God of a righteous branch. A sign of life. Hope, like a shoot growing out of the charred remains of a stump after a devastating fire.

So here I am, here you are, here we are, on an Advent journey. Can we courageously open ourselves to holy change? Jeremiah offered an interesting vision earlier, in chapter 18:

I went down to the potter's house, and I saw her working at the wheel. But the pot she was shaping from the clay was marred in her hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best...²

What an imaginative metaphor – the potter and clay.

So where are the modern prophets, calling us to be formed in righteous clay?

Cindy Blackstock who calls the federal government, and calls those of us who are not indigenous, to righteousness. It isn't just Prime Minister Trudeau called to right the wrongs, called to love neighbours whose spirituality was different, but whose culture, and languages, and wisdom are powerful.

As I walk down Medina Lane, I bump into a man who looks tired, cold, sick of this system. He asks for money. I carry little cash, but I give him something. He thanks me and tells me a story that sounds too familiar. I feel guilty, having to say good-bye. Was that a prophet – the *one* who was hungry, imprisoned, naked, thirsty?³

What is the right path for me, for you? May we listen to the voice of God through prophets. Amen.

² Jeremiah chapter 18, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jeremiah+18%3A+1-10&version=NIV>

³ Allusion to a Jesus parable in the Gospel of Matthew:

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+25%3A+31-40&version=NIV>