

# An End to Siren Songs

Jeremiah 31:31-34

John 12:20-33



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Today, in our first scripture lesson we encounter the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived and preached specifically at the time when Assyria was losing its century-long control over Israel and Israel was beginning to show signs of a strong national revival. Instead of flourishing as it had hoped, however, Israel came to be besieged and captured a second time, this time by the Babylonians. Having had its hopes shaped for centuries by images of king and temple, a royal ideology that began with King David, Israel did not have the imaginative tools it needed to come to terms with its new reality. As a prophet, Jeremiah had to challenge Israel to put to rest its old, established, worn out ways of thinking. He engaged in what biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman calls “a battle for the public imagination” (*Hopeful Imagination*, 26).

You can imagine how preoccupied Jeremiah and others were by the public events of their day. You can imagine that pressing on everyone’s mind was the question: What are we to make of the Babylonian threat? Some urged alliance with and reliance upon Egypt who could give security to Israel. Others urged people to have confidence in YHWH, because YHWH would save Israel from the Babylonians. And yet others believed that, since the Babylonian empire would surely triumph in the end, they should save themselves grief and quickly ally themselves with the Babylonians.

Jeremiah refused to accept any of these views. From Jeremiah’s perspective, the problem with all these views was that they, each in their own way, legitimated the world’s power politics and calculations. None of these worldviews made room for the fundamental conviction that God is free to accomplish what God wants to accomplish, and in God’s freedom, God uses the traffic of politics and public power as God wants. This conviction in God’s sovereignty is what enables Jeremiah to identify the perceived threat of Babylon as Israel’s hope. It is what enables Jeremiah to say that Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, who will destroy Jerusalem, burn the temple, terminate the Davidic dynasty, and deport the city’s leading citizens, is a servant of the Lord.

Imagine how unpopular Jeremiah was. In this battle for the public imagination, while protectionism, pragmatism, and tribalism were all siren songs vying to prevail, Jeremiah’s decisive political judgment was made solely on theological grounds. Jeremiah believed that public events were revelatory of God at work in the world. Whether those events were favorable or detrimental to Israel, they revealed God at work in the world.

Friends, it is important that we try to recognize the faithfulness of Jeremiah’s worldview. Jeremiah would not be someone who, having read the newspapers, felt the need to respond, out of faith, to a current event. That sounds more like us. His was not a condemnation of a wrong decision by a judge or an unjust policy by a king. He condemned all of Israel for the ways they legitimated their faithlessness in God. Israel had so lost its way from its covenantal relationship with God that in place of the covenant was unprincipled calculation.

So we find in the passage we read this morning that Jeremiah introduces the idea of a new covenant with God. Jeremiah tells the people, “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring out of the land of Egypt.” What was once inscribed on stone tablets will now be written on the peoples’ hearts. By writing the law on their hearts, God will put God’s law within them and no longer will they need to rely on someone else to teach the law to them and no longer will the destruction of the temple or deportation from Jerusalem put any distance between the individual and God’s law. Nothing should get in the way of the people’s intimate knowledge of God’s will. As bearers of God’s law, each person, from the least of them to the greatest, will have what it takes to discriminate among God’s will and the other competing narratives.

Jeremiah knows the importance of this kind of discriminating ability.

We are one week from Palm Sunday, when Jesus will enter the capital city of Jerusalem. There, he will sacrifice his life in a battle for the public imagination. Roman and Jewish authorities will plot and spin their respective narratives about the threat that Jesus is, because all are threatened by how he has captivated the public. And yet, the truth is that even the public is misguided. No matter how many times Jesus has tried to correct his followers' attempts to legitimate him, the crowd nevertheless welcomes him as a political messiah.

It seems like everyone wanted to legitimate Jesus according to the terms of their public imaginations. I suspect that we are guilty of this too. That is perhaps why it is so easy for each of us to imagine being someone in the drama of Jesus's passion. What are the ways we try to legitimate Jesus? This is the question that Palm Sunday and Holy Week raise for us.

And if we aren't used to asking this question and therefore aren't quite sure how to answer it, perhaps the next question to ask ourselves is this: What are the ways we seek to legitimate ourselves? For you see, I suspect that our attempts to legitimate Jesus are tied up in our attempts to legitimate ourselves - to find some security for ourselves, or to validate ourselves, or to claim rights for ourselves, or at least to claim that we are right.

In the midst of all the narratives being spun about him, Jesus engages none of them. He privileges none of them. Instead he hopes that we hear him when he says, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Furthermore, he says, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

In this Jesus who is willing to sacrifice his life for the sake of all, there is no neediness. There is no need to please, no need for self-defense, self-preservation, or self-validation. Instead, Jesus is completely focused on the will of his Father in heaven, and he knows that God's will to be reconciled with humanity can be brought about in only one way. Only when a person is willing to empty himself, sacrifice herself, yield himself, can all others be raised up.

We know that in his life and death, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. took seriously the example of Jesus. He understood the singular power of the crucifixion and death of Jesus. He understood that Jesus's crucifixion 2,000 years ago still exposes to the world the ways of domination, violence, and coercion. King knew that the reality of white racism would be graphically and publicly exposed for all to see. "Let them get their dogs and let them get the hose," he said, "and we will leave them standing before their God and the world spattered with the blood and reeking with the stench of their Negro brothers." It is necessary "to bring these issues to the surface, to bring them out into the open where everybody can see them" (cited by Charles Campbell, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, 145). What Martin Luther King, Jesus, and Jeremiah knew was that God is at work at all times and everywhere -- not just when things are harmonious, peaceful, and going in our favor, but also and especially when our consciences are exposed to the ugliness and cruelty of injustice toward anyone. And when Jesus allows himself to be handed over to his opponents and willingly suffers death on the cross, all of humanity is disarmed, disarmed of their narratives to legitimate Jesus and to legitimate themselves.

These days there is no dearth of narratives vying for our public imagination. You might feel like you are suiting up for an intense battle every day. Rather than arming ourselves, however, what would it be like if we, following Jesus's example and Jeremiah's preaching, voluntarily disarmed ourselves? In April I will be taking my first trip to Israel and Palestine. My travel companions will be Jewish rabbis and Christian clergy from across the United States. In preparation for this trip, local cohorts of rabbis and ministers have been meeting regularly. Together we have been discussing multiple narratives about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: narratives from the Israeli perspective and narratives from the Palestinian perspective. Recently, nearing the end of one of our conversations, a rabbi confessed to the group how challenging it is for him to hear any narrative other than a Zionist narrative, and yet how committed he is to opening himself to new narratives, because clearly the prevailing Israeli and Palestinian narratives are not making any headway to peace between the two peoples. Hearing him say this, I wondered if this is where the Jewish-Christian dialogue may be able to make a contribution. As conversation partners, we are already learning from one another how differently we interpret biblical prophets, like Jeremiah, and our Jewish partners have already heard the Christian clergy talk a lot about Jesus. What difference might these conversations make?

There is no way to know from the outset, but there are 40 rabbis and ministers from across the United States hoping that together we will learn not just to navigate the existing narratives, but what it might take to create a new narrative. Opening our hearts is the first step. And then the Spirit will take it from there.