

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY
Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost - September 12, 2004
Anne G. Cohen

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

For Our Reflection:

**The people of the earth having agreed
that the advancement of [hu]man[kind]
in spiritual excellence and physical welfare
is the common goal of [hu]mankind;
that universal peace is the prerequisite
for the pursuit of that goal;
that justice in turn is the prerequisite of peace,
and peace and justice stand or fall together;
that iniquity and war inseparably spring
from the competitive anarchy of the national states;
that therefore the age of nations must end,
and the era of humanity begin.**

-Preamble to the preliminary draft of the
World Constitution (1948)

A Prophet knows what time it is.

– Abraham Heschel, Jewish Scholar and Rabbi

A Prophet Knows What Time It Is

Before nuclear weapons and sanctions were invented, there were two ways to destroy a foreign nation. One was to occupy. The other – to take the upper and middle class away with you – into exile. Some of us may remember what happened to South Central Los Angeles following the Watts Riots of August 1965. Middle Class African Americans moved out of the area – and the people left behind without resources spiraled into one of the highest poverty rates and highest mortality rates for young Black men in the nation. The implosion and uprising of April 1992 - following the Rodney King beating verdict vindicating the police officers from the far off land of Simi Valley - was just waiting to happen.

But I am ahead of myself. 900-800 years before Jesus was born, the land we now refer to as Israel was a divided kingdom. The Northern half, Israel, included Galilee, Samaria and the Sea of Chinnereth aka the Sea of Galilee. The southern half, Judah, included Jerusalem, Bethlehem and the Salt Sea (now uncharitably called the Dead Sea).

By 700 years b.c.e., the Assyrian Empire had expanded and swallowed up the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The land was occupied as a vassal state, Assyrian religious practices were assimilated, and Judaism was not what it used to be.

Judah, on the other hand, had not been invaded or occupied by a foreign power since the time of King David and the building of God's permanent earthly residence – the Temple in Jerusalem. And in the year 640, along came the boy King Josiah. He, in the tradition of boy rulers, paraded out his misguided confidence and sense of invulnerability. He was youthful, enthusiastic and nationalistic.

In 621, a lost scroll of Jewish law was rediscovered in the Temple. So Josiah instituted national reforms based on that ancient book of Deuteronomy. He excited a Zionist movement, purged Judah of idols which had crept in with Assyrian worship practices, and reinstated “pure” Judaism.

The Assyrian Empire was waning at this point, pulling back into itself and embattled with other growing powers. So our young king decided to take advantage of the situation and reclaim parts of the northern kingdom, formerly Israel, for Judah. A number of vassal states were asserting their independence – so he was not alone. (We might be reminded of the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. and the continuing struggles with Chechens and others asserting their rights.)

Jeremiah, a member of the priestly class – privileged and well-versed in Jewish law and tradition – tried to warn his King against over-confidence in battle with a declining empire. Not only nature, but power abhors a vacuum. And in the wake of Assyria's receding territorial occupation, new empires were expanding to take its place.

To the west was Egypt. To the east was Babylonia. They both saw this rambunctious bid for autonomy, this saber-rattling Jewish king intent on purifying his religious state – and they took him out. In 609 the Egyptians assassinated Josiah. Then in two waves, 597 and 587, Babylonia stripped Judah bare. Unlike the Assyrians who occupied Israel, the Babylonians took possession of the upper and middle class citizens, their skills and wealth. The booty was taken to Babylon to live in exile and prosper their new owners.

Jeremiah, reluctant and filled with dire predictions, was hated and ignored as his predictions unfolded. He was considered an annoying, if not dangerous, windbag, a trouble maker with a big mouth who loved to talk about things nobody else was interested in. The rich planned ways to keep getting richer. The religious hierarchy was making it harder and harder for people without resources to achieve the religious purity necessary to approach God. The Zionists were intent on claiming land for the Lord. (This was before the discovery of petroleum and the knowledge that they'd do a lot better in the long run with the land just north of the Persian Gulf rather than the Galilean territories.)

The poor were unskilled and marginalized – with no voice or recourse. And Jeremiah knew what time it was. As he politely and not so politely screamed his way from the end of one century to the beginning of the next, he made sure to communicate in words that God had other less palatable ways of delivering the same message – beyond words and beyond undoing.

And we all know what happens to people who deliver unpopular messages. Jeremiah was spat upon, mocked, persecuted and dismissed. We know it was bad because Jeremiah himself accuses God of enticing, raping and overwhelming him – to force him into the role of God’s vocal chords. (20:7) But the man knew the times – and he could not NOT do what needed to be done – to the best of his ability.

Jeremiah warned the leaders of his nation using as many metaphors as possible – hoping to stave off what he saw as inevitable and Divine retribution. And then it came. And there he stood – in the ruins of the Jerusalem Temple, in the smoking ash of Judah’s invincible city – left behind with the surviving human debris that the Empire had rejected. And he bore no resemblance, whatsoever, to Arnold Schwarzenegger as the “Terminator.”

However, it is POSSIBLE that Jeremiah’s warnings COULD be useful to us in our own time. But do we know what time it is? Do we know whose empires are waxing or waning in the 21st century? Have we seen what kind of misguided confidence is driving boy kings, boy warlords, boy Taliban members, boy presidents – to threaten, terrorize, occupy, exile or slaughter other nations? Have we seen the faces of the dead in Darfor, Sudan –massacred daily? Have we counted our dead soldiers in recent battles in occupied lands? Have we counted the bodies of children - dead at the hands of all of us? Do we know about any prisoners on this globe who have no recourse to the law? Have we heard warnings from a variety of perspectives about what dire fate awaits us if we vote one way or another in November?

What temples and schools and embassies and towers lie in smoking ruins today - because the rich, the privileged and the powerful have:

- lacked vision
- been unable or unwilling to plan for long-term consequences
- had no faith in the power of goodness and integrity to gain the respect of other nations
- neglected those in desperate need under their feet and across the borders of land and sea
- refused to heed the millions of prophetic voices screaming in most languages of the world.

I actually heard a gentleman interviewed on NPR this week state that, compared to the Vietnam War years, there is no real anti-war movement regarding US actions in Iraq. I was dumbfounded and nearly had to pull the car over to keep from self-igniting.

Are we not trapped between our nation's occupation of other people's nations – and our exile within a society where the voices of reason and peace are mocked, ridiculed, damned and ignored?

Are we destined in this new time – this still very new millennium – this post-9/11 America – are we destined to find ourselves ultimately occupied – or in exile – or, now that we are capable of it - finally, inexorably and permanently incinerated under a cloud of radioactive dust?

My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain!
Oh, the walls of my heart!
My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent;
For I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war.
Disaster overtakes disaster, the whole land is laid waste...
How long must I see the standard,
and hear the sound of the trumpet?
“For my people are foolish, they do not know me;
They are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good.” (Jer. 4:19-22 NRSV)

Perhaps it is time that we realized what time it is.
Perhaps it is time – 2600 years late – to heed the warnings of Jeremiah and put our own house and nation in order.
Perhaps it's time...

I leave you with Notes from Millennium Beach – these words from Paul O'Brien of Whittier, California, written in 1999:

Humankind has invented time and its divisions for itself in an effort to regulate the universe for its own needs. Centuries and millennia are aspects of that attempt and special attributes are attached to each... [Time] is a framework of our own creation which... gives us a reference point for living – and traps us – at the same time...

[The writing of these notes] is intended to give you, our children, grandchildren, and the few unrelated strangers... a sense of why we are bothering. It is to satisfy a ritual of humanity's need to find meaning. Nothing will change in the turning of the universe because of our entering the 21st Century – no new dawn for humanity will have opened. The world's problems will remain and perhaps increase.

The changes that matter are so slow that it takes thousands of years for them to become part of the fiber of our thinking, to become second nature and a matter of reaction when events challenge them...

If you look back at all to the time before your own, know that some of us were fairly good, and some were very evil, but most were a mixture of virtue and

vice whether we wore silk or rags. Taking us all-in-all we failed in some degree – but none was without some virtue, and all were equal in that we lived in time...
(pp.24-25, adapted)

“Oh, the walls of my heart!

My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent...”

It is time. It is time...

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Communion Sunday

September 12, 2004

10:00 a.m.

The cross marks (+) in the order of service are an invitation for those in the congregation who are able to stand to do so.

The New Century Hymnal or “Hymnal” has a black cover; prayers are in the back.

The Chapel Songbook or “CSB” is a blue, looseleaf notebook.

When the bell rings you are invited to engage in reflection and quiet listening.

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WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION

Music for Reflection – A Time for Centering

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

Please give the minister your announcements in writing before the service.

Musical Call to Worship

+ **Call to Worship** (unison)

Now, O God, calm me into a quietness that heals and listens,
and molds my longings and passions, my wounds and wonderings
into a more holy and human shape.

+ **Opening Hymn**

God of the Ages

Hymnal # 592

+ **Opening Prayer** (unison)

O persistent God, deliver me from assuming your mercy is gentle.
Pressure me that I may grow more human,
not through the lessening of my struggles,
but through an expansion of them
that will undamn me and unbury my gifts.
Deepen my hurt until I learn to share it and myself openly,
and my needs honestly.
Sharpen my fears until I name them

and release the power I have locked in them and they in me.
Accentuate my confusion until I shed those grandiose expectations
that divert me from the small, glad gifts
of the now and the here and the me.
Expose my shame where it shivers,
crouched behind the curtains of propriety,
until I can laugh at last through my common frailties and failures,
laugh my way toward becoming whole.
Deliver me from just going through the motions
and wasting everything I have which is today,
a chance, a choice, my creativity, your call.
O persistent God, let how much it all matters
pry me off dead center so if I am moved inside
to tears or sighs or screams or smiles or dreams,
they will be real and I will be in touch with who I am
and who you are, and who my sisters and brothers are.

+ **Our Common Prayer** (unison)
Creator God who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,
on Earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts
As we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the kingdom and the power
And the glory forever. Amen.

Time for Silent Reflection (you may be seated)

One: My soul waits in silence.

All: God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at peace.

Silent Reflection

The Assurance of Good News (unison)

God's Mercy is not Gentle, God's Justice is not Unkind.

God's Love is Persistent and Ever Present.

Sung Response "Hallelujah... God be praised!" (CSB #5 Refrain)

We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer

Consider an extra gift toward flowers for Dedication Day.

Commemoration slips available near the prayer candles.

Offertory

Prayer of Dedication (unison)

Holy God of All Time: Take our gifts. Take this millennium, and all ages past, and strip them of their lovelessness. May only love remain. Forgive the horror, exalt the glory, redeem the past, release the future, wipe away all tears, deliver us to joy, correct our thinking and heal our hearts. Take our gifts, Holy God of All Time. Amen.

WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM

Conversation with Our Children

"Can You Tell the Future?"

Reading from the Hebrew Prophets Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22 -28

Sermon A Prophet Knows What Time It Is

WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION

Celebration of Holy Communion

+ Communion Hymn *I Come With Joy* Hymnal #349 (vv.1,3,5)

Invitation

Sharing the Bread and the Cup

Communion will be served to you as you remain seated. Please wait until all have been served before eating the bread – and again before drinking the cup – to signify our unity with one another and with all who eat and drink at God's table this day.

Prayer of Thanksgiving (unison)

We give thanks that through the sharing of this bread and cup we find ourselves at table with those of every age who feel the Universe filled with the Spirit of God, who love and serve justice, who have been touched by God's loving and compassionate hands. Sustain us with these gifts that our hearts and spirits may be strengthened by Your presence. Amen.

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements

Our Joys and Concerns

Call to Prayer *Be still and know that I am God* Hymnal # 743

Time for Silence

Sung Response *In Solitude* Hymnal #521 vv. 1 & 2

+ **Sending Hymn** *We Are Not Our Own* Hymnal # 564

+ **Commissioning (unison)**

**May God's face shine upon you and be gracious unto you.
May God give you grace never to sell yourself short;
grace to risk something big for something good;
grace to remember that it is politically expedient for this nation to be
generous to its poor at home
and the poor around the world;
grace to remember that the world now is too dangerous
for anything but truth,
and too small for anything but love.
So, may God take our minds and think through them;
may God take our lips and speak through them;
may God take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.**

+ **Sung Response (You are welcome to form a circle)** Hymnal # 236

**Halle, halle, halle – lu – ja, Halle, halle, halle – lu – ja,
Halle, halle, halle – lu – ja, Halleluja, halleluja.**

+ **Postlude**

WORSHIP NOTES

Call to Worship is by Ted Loder, Guerillas of Grace, p.21

Opening Prayer Ibid. pp.96-97

Prayer of Dedication is by Marianne Williamson from Prayers for a Thousand Years, pp.20-21 adapted

Commissioning is from The Rev. William Sloan Coffin, Riverside UCC Emeritus

From Sermon 9/16/01 – Tuesday’s Children

Americans, humans - have never been safe from the consequences of human behavior or the outcomes of recent or ancient history. The world has always been the host and victim of violence, inhumanity, injustice, terror and terrorism. Cities have never been immune to destruction and life has always been fragile - so very, very fragile.

My world has been an illusion that has been self-serving and dangerous. And now, along with all of Tuesday’s children, I am “filled with woe” - grieving the death of my world - as reality comes home and we are all forced to wake up, grow up, and face the truth about ourselves.

As always, this is not my world - or our world - it is God’s world. God’s breath swept over the waters, God’s word struck a light in the darkness, God’s hands and imagination made ALL things possible... including human beings.

And we have confused ourselves with our Maker, made idols of nations and claimed God for ourselves - when - in reality - God is not ours - but we are God’s. Every breath is a gift from God. Every act of terrorism and murder is a knife to God’s heart. Every particle of this planet belongs to God. Every boundary drawn and kingdom or nation established is a dismembering of the Divine....

Tuesday’s children are in a whole world of pain and want to strike back. But we only injure ourselves by joining the forces of darkness. We must allow ourselves to be rocked in the arms of God - who grieves with us - and continues to hold the world in gentle hands, waiting for us to become wise and kind and aware of how fragile - how very fragile - Life is.