

Actions Matter
Jeremiah 1:4-10; 7:1-11
November 25, 2018
Rev. Michael D. Kirby
Northminster Presbyterian Church

It's one of those texts where we are tempted to add a question mark to our traditional conclusion to the text: This is the world of the Lord?

Oh, well, maybe it's all just a part of God's plan. I imagine that almost all of us have said that at least once. We say it with the best of intentions. It's meant to be a source of comfort in the middle of a tragic situation that we may not see how this event will work for the good of the coming commonwealth of God, but surely there has to be a way this fits into "the plan." The call story of Jeremiah, the first part of today's text, is certainly plan oriented. God chooses; God anoints; God sends.

The biggest problem with that idea, as well intentioned as it may be, is that when applied in every-day life, it leaves us without any agency in our own lives — our choices don't matter, what is going to happen is what God wants to happen, regardless of what we decide to do. And then a baby dies, or millions of Jews, or Polish dissidents, or homosexuals and Roma are slaughtered in concentration camps, or a member of the clergy abuses a teenager. And suddenly, that theology falls like a house of cards. Any God who would want that to happen is to quote the West Wing, "a Feckless Thug."

Similarly, Jeremiah's theology makes us very uncomfortable. By his way of thinking, Babylon, as a mere instrument of Yahweh, is rising to chastise Judah. So, a theology of the actions of superpowers being the mechanism for the exercise of Divine Will or Divine Justice is born. But it very quickly gets very dicey if we look too deep. Did God will the Holocaust, Ebola, AIDS, the death of Tanuel Major, the homeless woman who was beaten to death this week in an alcove outside of First Methodist Church in downtown Evanston? We not only won't go there, we simply can't. Evil has triumphed too often; virtue has been left dead and rotting in too many battlefields. And God isn't a thug, slaughtering millions just to make a point to us years later.

But is the concept of the ugly God the only reason why providence and the supremacy of sovereign power doesn't work for us anymore to explain global events? Perhaps because we aren't Judah. In the last days of the 7th Century, B.C.E., the world is falling apart. The Assyrian Empire in the north collapses into dust and is replaced almost immediately by the Babylonian Empire to the east. Judah's final days as the tattered remnant of the Davidic Empire were as a buffer between the Babylonians in the north and west and Egypt in the south and east. In the prophet Jeremiah's tenure as the thorn in Judah's side calling it back to faithfulness, King Jehoiakim will play the two powers against one another one too many times, leading to the first Babylonian invasion in 598 and Jehoiakim's death. His eldest son, Jehoiachin, will be taken into Babylonian custody that year, and his uncle, Jehoiakim's brother, Zedekiah, will assert a right to the throne in Jehoiachin's absence. These competing claims will continue for over a decade until Babylon "dissolves" Judah in 587, leading to the exile and the destruction of the temple. Walter Brueggemann calls this "the dominant and shaping event of the entire Old Testament." If one is considering the

agency and power the people of Judah have to control their own destiny during Jeremiah's time, the most appropriate image is of an hourglass rapidly losing sand with the people seemingly powerless to stop what is coming.

The Temple in the middle of Jerusalem is not just a building. It is a symbol of Yahweh's covenant with Israel, thought to be everlasting and unconditional. Jeremiah commits treason, asserting that Yahweh is going to withdraw from Judah and that temple because they are hypocritical and unfaithful, essentially voiding the covenant. Today's text announces both Yahweh's sovereignty and what we Presbyterians might call Jeremiah's frightening new "Authoritative Interpretation of the Covenant" in the face of Judah's disobedience.

As the Temple Sermon reveals, Jeremiah does not see these events through the lens of shifting geo-politics but asserts boldly that "Judah's destiny will [not] be shaped by power as the world judges power, but by the realities of Yahweh's sovereignty and power."

And while we might immediately say, no, it's just the rise of a new foreign power, not an act of God, when given the option of being "punished" by a righteous God or being storm-tossed on the chaotic winds of death-breathing superpowers, Jeremiah (and Judah) choose God, even a deal-breaking/deal-changing God, for Yahweh can (hopefully) be counted on to be gracious — eventually. The powers of the world inspire no such hope.

As Walter puts it again, "The known world is not ending in spite of Yahweh's governance, as though Yahweh were weak. Rather, it is ending precisely because of Yahweh's governance. What may appear to be weakness and failure on the part of Yahweh is, in fact, Yahweh's policy." So God's condemning eye looms over the unfaithful hypocrites, willing the temple's destruction and the nation's fall — a precursor to Yahweh's withdrawal from the people if they don't make things right (which we, who have the gift of hindsight, know they don't).

This idea of God's hand being wielded so obviously is not what we're used to, at least those of us who haven't faced a terminal disease or who haven't seen our entire worlds crumble. Let's be honest, when we 21st century Christians cling to the power of God's will, too often it is to justify our exceptionalism, or our use of power, or our oppression of another. We aren't trying to rescue ourselves psychologically and theologically from powerlessness and oblivion.

But let's not forget Jeremiah's point, He was speaking before the temple fell and before Jerusalem was destroyed. And while he was providing divine back up if things did ultimately go as badly as they did, in the Temple Sermon itself, he was granting the people something they desperately needed, even if ultimately, they didn't take advantage of it. He was granting them agency in their relationship with God and with the world. What they did or didn't do actually would make a difference.

"Keep Torah," he told them, "and the center will hold. Life can continue, maybe not the same, but Yahweh will dwell with us. But continue to disrespect Yahweh (and those who are your moral responsibility) by mocking the Torah and you will drive Yahweh out of this house. And, if that happens, then where will you be?"

It's not that the people could see to their own salvation, but it was the case that what they did mattered. It mattered in their relationship with God, in their relationships with one another, in their relationships even with the powers and principalities. Sometimes when we are powerless, just a little agency is essential to preserve our hope and our humanity.

You've heard me say it before: I'm a stress baker and when the world goes wrong, I bake. Why? Because nine times out of ten, the flour, butter, sugar, milk and baking powder do what they are supposed to do. They don't blithely violate the constitution of flour. They don't ignore the facts of water plus flour plus manipulation creates gluten. When I take the time, scones are just flakey delicious bits of agency for me.

Many of our modern mission models are all about agency. The Heifer Project doesn't hand out food; they give you a goat and teach you how to take care of it and require you give back at least one offspring. Clients' actions, decisions, and work actually make a difference. I don't make the scones rise, but I have to put in the right ingredients. The Heifer clients don't create their goats, but they have to feed them and milk them or the project fails. Choice or agency is the opportunity to decide and to act.

We all want agency. We want what we do to matter and that brings us to the quote on the cover of today's bulletin: "What remains to be done must be done by you; since in order not to deprive us of our free will and such share of glory as belongs to us, God will not do everything himself." It's one of the most famous lines from one of the most famous books of the last half of the last millennium. Those words were written by Nicolo Machiavelli in his landmark opus, *The Prince*. Machiavelli's philosophical treatise is all about agency, but it's also one of the most dangerous texts in Western Civilization, or one of the most honest, depending on who you are. Machiavelli acknowledges that God gives us agency and then goes on to suggest that our goals, whatever they might be, should be the end, and any means necessary that achieves that end is right.

Machiavelli gets it right that we are given agency by God, but then he forgets what this day proclaims; he forgets what Jeremiah sought to remind the people of. Yes, we have agency, we can make a difference, but our goal should not be to make the difference that best serves our goals and our desires because, as Jeremiah tried to remind them, Yahweh is Lord. As we Christians proclaim, Christ is Lord and what that means is that we surrender our agency to God's will, to Christ's Gospel. It means we don't just respond to the federal report on climate change this week with philosophical disgust. And we don't just allow sadness to overcome us when we see the devastation and death in the California fires. But instead we surrender those self-satisfying reactions for Christ's compassion for the billions who are and who will be adversely affected by the climbing impact of climate change if we do nothing. And then we change how we live, lessening our personal impact, and we look at ways this building can be modified to reduce our collective negative impact on God's creation. And we do that as an act of faith, and an act of surrendering our desire for convenience for what we together discern is God's will for our ministries in the world.

It means we don't just get angry when we hear the comparison between refugees fleeing oppression, violence and lawlessness in Central America and Afghan extremists who harbored and trained the terrorists who committed the 9/11 atrocities. No, we join with

people of all faiths to see to the feeding and interim care for these economic refugees while we simultaneously join the conversation and actions of faith-based groups lobbying for reasonable changes in our hopelessly broken immigration policies. And here is perhaps where we can find harmonization between Jeremiah's view and ours. He saw the rise of Babylon and the risk of the fall of Judah as God's action to wake up the Hebrew people from their unjust worship, from saying one thing and doing another.

Jesus shifted our vision away from those troubling superpowers questions about God's will to much more simple issues. When we see injustice, how do we offer our agency to end it? When we see suffering, how do we use our power to ease it? This is a congregation that has almost always sought to have its walk match its talk. Every week there are examples of how compassion and love inspire the actions for others that have become almost habitual. Now — on this day when we acknowledge that the whole year of worship is about offering ourselves to the God who spins the whirling planets and still loves every human being as a beloved child, in this age when our families, our communities, our state, our church face ever-greater challenges — can we take the time together to discern not just who God is calling us to be but what God is calling us to do and why, including how God is calling us to use our agency, our power and resources, to best achieve those goals?

What if each family, each committee, each ministry team took the time to have that conversation? What might we learn about one another, about our passions, about our gifts, about how we can make our actions matter, not just to God, but to those God is sending us to.

Jeremiah so sought to preserve any kind of relationship between the people and God that he called them to see God at work even in the nation that was conquering them. Can we conquer our cultural narcissism and surrender the privileges and power we have so that they serve not simply ourselves and our families but actually become instruments of Christ's power in the world to make a way where there has been none, to bring healing, justice, peace and grace to all we encounter?

Sounds like a plan, maybe even God's.