

Pentecost 4, 6.28.2020

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Jeremiah 28:5–9; Psalm 89 1-4, 15-18; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

“Prophets of Peace”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Good morning. Thank you for joining us online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church. Today, both Jeremiah and Jesus speak about prophets who announce God’s peace –“prophets of peace.” This is timely because the world is always in need of prophetic and visionary leadership. Jeremiah and Jesus both want to help us see that visionary leadership means pointing, in the midst of the world, to God’s vision of compassion and peace. Both Jeremiah and Jesus remind us God’s vision is always looking ahead through suffering and death, toward resurrection, wholeness, and new life.

Most of us probably think that a prophet is someone with a “crystal ball” who can tell the future. However, neither Jeremiah nor Jesus are concerned with simply predicting the future; rather, they are concerned with announcing God’s kingdom in the present for the transformation of the future. A prophet is one who points to God’s presence already alive, yet hidden, in our midst. The prophet reveals and points to where and how God is already with us.

Jeremiah tells us that from ancient times, there were so-called prophets who prophesied war, famine and pestilence. In other words, they forecast adverse conditions, which is not very difficult to do. Wherever human beings are present we know that there will always be war, famine and pestilence. To update these words a bit, there will always be conflict and war, scarcity and want, pandemic and illness. We don’t need prophets to tell us that human life will be challenging; we need prophets who will reveal to us where and how God is already with us in the present moment. A prophet points to God’s presence, for it is only God who brings peace in the midst of conflict and war, and wholeness in the midst of want and pandemic.

When Jeremiah speaks of prophets of “peace,” he uses the Hebrew word “shalom” which means wholeness or wellness with God and with one’s neighbor. To be a prophet is to point to the wholeness that only God can give. True peace is not simply the absence of war; it is the presence of God in the midst of conflict and war, want and pandemic. The Greek word for shalom is “eirene” (εἰρήνη) which means to bring unity to what is divided. Prophets give visionary leadership that unites people in a world that is always divided by conflict and disunity. Prophets reassure an anxious world with God’s presence when we see nothing in our future but division and conflict.

This is why Jeremiah and Jesus remind us that prophetic vision always looks past conflict and death, toward resurrection, wholeness, and new life. The prophet of the Lord points to God's peace, the only source of true unity and hope.

My wife's father is an accomplished carpenter; he built two homes, one in Tokyo and one in the Nagano mountains. I remember many summer vacations at the house in the Nagano mountains. On rainy days, we made puzzles and played word games in Japanese. There were also books, conversation, and laughter. One of the books we had endless enjoyment with was from a series titled "The Magic Eye." Perhaps you remember this series of books. These books contain pictures that each have another picture – a 3D picture - hidden within them. On the surface, these pictures look like colorful wallpaper, and the "magic," as it were, is to see the image hidden within by allowing your eyes to focus differently. Suddenly another picture comes into view hidden within the original picture. We would say, "Don't you see it? Look a little more closely, and focus differently." The genius of "The Magic Eye" books is that one has to continually refocus and look anew to see something hidden from view.

I tell this story because what Jeremiah and Jesus are trying to help us see is that the kingdom of God is already among us. We just have to look for it. Human reality always appears to have conflict, war, scarcity, want and pandemic, and yet the kingdom of God is always present among us. We need people who will point to it, helping us to see God's presence already among us.

In today's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, and us, what the life of a prophet looks like. Prophets are to point to the kingdom; they are to be "righteous," concerned with justice and doing what is right; they are to be compassionate and merciful, sharing needed resources with those in need, "even a cup of cold water to the little ones" that Jesus speaks of. Prophets are point to and reveal God's kingdom already hidden among us. Our world needs visionary prophets of peace, not prophets of war and division.

Many of you know I taught church history for many years. The truth about history is that it is constantly under review. Any trip to a large bookstore will tell you this; the history section is filled with newly published books with fresh perspectives on old stories. New documents come to light; people publish memoirs that change our view of history and people; and with time, our understanding of events comes into clearer focus once again. Even our own personal histories and identities are constantly "rewritten" as we learn more about our own families, their backgrounds, and the social conditions that have helped us grow into the people we are continuing to grow into.

Yet we often go through life with a historical narrative that we learned many years ago in school, never bothering to really update or challenge it. Jeremiah and Jesus challenge us to be prophets of peace that point to the presence of God creating unity and wholeness out of strife and conflict, and that also help us create a new historical narrative, one that points to God's presence of healing and unity.

In today's reading from Romans, Paul uses difficult words, words that have continued to cause division and strife in our world: the words "slave" and "slavery." These words are as difficult now as they were in Paul's day. In Paul's day slavery was a living institution, and by using the words "slave" and "slavery" Paul was saying something both shocking and true about our humanity: human beings are slaves to sin. We are enslaved to sin in our very nature. Paul's prophetic vision allows us to see the problem of why unity is so hard: we are captive to the evil of sin and until we are freed to live with justice we will never see the kingdom of God in our midst, and we will continue to enslave others to systems of power that exploit them.

The language of slavery and enslavement is not simply a theological figure of speech; it is also part of our history of empire, colonization and the enslavement of people of color. Enslavement is also about people with power who are also enslaved to institutions and structures of power that continue to oppress others. This is what Paul is getting at. Paul used language of power that everyone in his world understood, because everyone in Paul's world participated in the institution of slavery.

The problem with power is that we do not always see the power we possess over others. It is often hidden from view, like a picture within a picture. That we do not always see this reality about power points to our own enslavement to sin which is always in need of God's liberating grace. As human beings, we often stare at reality, confounded and unable to see that our own hidden enslavement to sin also enslaves others. We need prophets of peace who can point to God's shalom, God's creative peace and wholeness that will bring us to a new place of human unity.

Like you, I too, am enslaved to the sin of institutional power. Like you perhaps, I also say, "Yes, but empire, colonization and slavery was a long time ago, long before I was born." Yes, this is true, but the institutions we have inherited, even the church, have a history born out of empire and colonization. There is not enough time to unpack the 500 year history of empire and enslavement of peoples in a Sunday sermon, but everyday if we look around we see the continuing legacy of empire

in our world. Our world is in need of prophets and leaders who are able to express a vision of peace – God’s peace – that will bring us to a new place of unity, oneness, and shared humanity. We need a vision for unity where there has been only a vision for division, peace where there has been only conflict, and liberation where there has been only enslavement to sin.

God’s peace and liberation begin with being set free from sin in our hearts. There is no way to rid the world of injustice without letting the justice of God reign first in our hearts. As prophets of peace, we are to pray for our enemies and those who persecute us. We are to pray for forgiveness from those whom our use of power has oppressed. As prophets of peace we are to do justice and mercy wherever we can. As prophets of peace, we are to be compassionate, giving water even unto “the little ones.” As prophets of peace, we are to point to the nearness of the kingdom of heaven that judges and transforms every system and structure of power in the world, if we daily allow God’s transforming grace into our hearts.

As prophets of peace, live as if peace depended upon you, and believe as if everything depended upon God. Live as if the message of God’s shalom – wholeness and healing – depended upon you, because it does. Prophetic peace begins with God’s peace in our hearts. We are to live it, point to it, and give voice to it. Be prophets of peace in this world, pointing to God’s peace, which has the power to liberate and transform human hearts and our world’s systems into places of grace and wholeness. Be prophets of peace. Amen.