

In the Face of Opposition
Jeremiah 26:1-24

Now, I suppose all preachers have their critics. A sermon against abortion or gambling or divorce, for example, is bound to prompt some heated responses. But the worst that a preacher usually has to endure is to hear a cutting comment or to have a member march down the street and join another church. Death threats haven't generally been part of a pastor's experience, at least here in the American Bible Belt.

So, what in the world did Jeremiah say that got the priests of his countrymen mad enough to want him dead? Well, verse 6 summarizes what he said about the Temple back in chapter 7, the passage we studied last week. Because God's people were offering prayers and sacrifices to the Canaanite god Baal at the same time that they were coming into the Temple to worship the Lord, because they were placing their faith in their religious rituals instead of pursuing a closer relationship with the Lord, God said the same thing would happen to the Temple in Jerusalem that had happened to the Tabernacle that had been at Shiloh: it would cease to be a place of worship. So, if Jeremiah really was speaking the Word of the Lord, the priests would soon be out of a job. No wonder they were upset enough to want to "cancel" him.

But Jeremiah didn't stop there. For back in chapter 23, he said that it wasn't just the priests who had become polluted, but also the prophets (23:11). By their own bad behavior, these unfaithful prophets were encouraging God's people to go on living in all kinds of sinful ways. Some of them even claimed to give the people messages from Baal, as well as messages from the Lord (23:13-14). Yes, these false prophets were telling the people what they wanted to hear: that the Lord would continue to bless them with peace, and that no harm would come to them in spite of their sins (23:16-17). In short, if the false prophets were to admit that Jeremiah's message of impending doom was right, they would have to admit that the Lord hadn't spoken by them at all. Again, it's no wonder that they tried to "cancel" Jeremiah. It's easy to understand their anger.

And the people of Jerusalem had just as much reason to reject Jeremiah's gloomy predictions. After all, in verse 6, he said that God wouldn't just destroy the Temple, but that He would curse the whole city of Jerusalem as well. And Jeremiah left no doubt that it was because of all their sins that God's people would experience the devastating power of the Babylonian onslaught. This is what he said in chapter 25:

"Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Because you have not obeyed My words, behold, I will send and take all the families of the north,' declares the LORD, 'and *I will send* to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, My servant, and will bring them against this land, and against its inhabitants, and against all these nations round about; and I will utterly destroy them, and make them a horror, and a hissing, and an everlasting desolation. Moreover, I will take from them the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp. And this whole land shall be a desolation and a horror, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years" (25:8-11).

That's some stiff stuff. So, if Jeremiah really was speaking with the voice of God, all the people of God stood to lose not just their political independence, but everything they had: their livelihoods, their families, and, for many of them, their very lives. And they would have no one to blame but

themselves. So, is it any wonder that they were just as mad with Jeremiah as the priests and prophets were? Is it any wonder that all of them dragged Jeremiah to the city gates so that the princes of the people could sit in judgment on him? Is it any wonder they tried to cancel him?

And they thought they had a pretty good case against Jeremiah. For hadn't he said that Jerusalem would be conquered? Didn't that mean he was taking the side of the Babylonians? And didn't such a traitor deserve to die?

Oh, and the priests and the prophets and the people had one more reason to have confidence that the princes of Jerusalem would put Jeremiah to death: he had administered a stiff dose of the same kind of condemnation to those very same princes. Back in chapter 22, he accused the king of only being interested in dishonest gain. And he went so far as to say that king Jehoiakim would eventually receive a "donkey's burial," with his body being thrown outside the gates of Jerusalem. So, if the princes were to declare him to be innocent, wouldn't they have to admit that they hadn't been doing their job? Wouldn't they have to agree that they themselves deserved to be swept away along with the rest of God's people?

Yes, Jeremiah was in a tight spot, surrounded by his enemies, completely at odds with the culture around him. So, what could he do in the face of such opposition? And what about us? How are we modern American Christians called to respond to a culture that is increasingly hostile to Biblical teachings, especially concerning marriage and family issues? What do we do when being faithful to the Word of God gets us in hot water? What do we do when unbelievers try to "cancel" us?

Well, if we focus on how the princes of the people ended up protecting Jeremiah, we might draw the wrong conclusion from this passage. Yes, the officials did point to the example of Micah, author of the Biblical book that bears his name, who had prophesied during the reign of Hezekiah about 100 years earlier. Since Micah had also prophesied that Jerusalem would be destroyed, and since Hezekiah had not executed him as a traitor, the princes of Jeremiah's time thought they should follow that precedent, thus protecting Jeremiah from the mob that he had so enraged.

And it is certainly the case that, from time to time, rulers and governments do in fact choose to protect the Church, allowing Christians to carry out our God-given mission to show and share the love of Jesus Christ. For example, Martin Luther sought protection from Frederick III, Elector of Saxony, and the Lutheran Church was eventually supported by many of the German princely states. In America, John Winthrop served several terms as the Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. And as he and his shipmates set sail for the new world in 1630, he expressed his fondest hopes that:

"The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as his own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways. So that we shall see much more of his wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when he shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, "The Lord make it like that of New England." For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us." You couldn't ask for a better sort of ruler than that.

In more modern times, we Mississippians have been blessed with state leaders that refused to shutter our houses of worship during the COVID crisis, instead considering church employees to be "essential workers." And of course, it was our own Attorney General who brought the case to the

United States Supreme Court that has allowed our state, along with many others, to protect not just the rights of expecting mothers, but the right of their unborn children to live.

But for every example of good and godly governments, many bad ones can be cited. For even though Hitler's German government continued to support the Lutheran Church financially, it subverted its teachings with its antisemitic racism. And what eventually happened to John Winthrop's Massachusetts, his very orthodox, very Reformed "city on a hill?" Many of its Congregational ministers had lapsed into Unitarianism by the early 1800's, denying the divinity of Christ. And by 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage.

Just so, verses 20 through 23 point out that during Jeremiah's own lifetime, another prophet named Uriah made a similar prophecy against Jerusalem and the land of Judah. But the same officials who had protected Jeremiah condemned Uriah to death. Even when Uriah fled to Egypt, they went after him and dragged him before King Jehoiakim, who personally slew him with a sword.

No, we must not draw the lesson from this passage that Christians should depend on the state to protect us from unbelievers who try to "cancel" us. In contrast, we see Jeremiah unequivocally submitting himself to the lawfully chosen princes of his people in verse 14: "I am in your hands; do with me as is good and right in your sight."

In doing so, he of course was foreshadowing the attitude of the One he told us about in our responsive reading from chapter 23, the One Jeremiah called the "Branch of David." For even while Jesus didn't mince any words when addressing the religious leaders of His people, condemning their hypocrisy even more vigorously than Jeremiah did, Jesus did not try to strongarm them into following Him. He didn't try to overawe Pontius Pilate with His miraculous power. He didn't try to raise an army of followers to cast the Roman legions out of Judea. No, He meekly stood before the chief priests and Pilate, refusing to answer all the false charges they made against Him. Like Jeremiah, he trusted not in human rulers to release Him, but in the Lord to vindicate Him from the injustice of His enemies.

And the good news is that we can trust the same Lord. For as Jeremiah reminds us, the Branch of David is so much superior to even the godliest and wisest of merely human rulers. For now that Jesus has risen from the dead and ascended into Heaven, He reigns as the wisest king of all. He executes perfect justice and righteousness not just over a small area in the Middle East, but over all the Earth through all the ages. It is because Jesus lives and reigns that all His people will be saved and dwell securely.

And why? Because as Jeremiah told us in chapter 23 verse 6, "The Lord is our righteousness." Because Jesus allowed Himself to suffer the greatest of injustices, because He took upon Himself the penalty that all our sins deserve, He is able to credit all who trust in Him with His own righteousness. Because our Lord and Savior has risen from the dead and ascended into Heaven, when the Father looks at all who are called by His name, He sees only the perfect, spotless, holiness of Jesus.

So, let us continue to show and share the love of Christ with everyone around us. Even if they try to "cancel" us, even if they scorn our Christ and assail His ways, let us hold up to a lost and dying world the holy and righteous standards of God's Word as well as His gracious promises of welcome and pardon for all who would come to Him in repentance and faith. No matter whether governments support us or oppose us, let us seek God's grace to follow Jesus more faithfully, calling one another to greater holiness, to more consistent discipleship. And no matter what may happen to us in the process, may He receive all the glory.