

Second Sunday after Pentecost

JEREMIAH: GOD'S WHISTLEBLOWER

Jeremiah 20:7-13

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Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

*7 O Lord, you have enticed me,
and I was enticed;
you have overpowered me,
and you have prevailed.
I have become a laughing-stock all day long;
everyone mocks me.*

*8 For whenever I speak, I must cry out,
I must shout, 'Violence and destruction!'
For the word of the Lord has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.*

*9 If I say, 'I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name',
then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up
in my bones;
I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.*

*10 For I hear many whispering:
'Terror is all around!
Denounce him! Let us denounce him!'
All my close friends
are watching for me to stumble.
'Perhaps he can be enticed,
and we can prevail against him,
and take our revenge on him.'*

11 But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior;

*therefore my persecutors will stumble,
and they will not prevail.
They will be greatly shamed,
for they will not succeed.
Their eternal dishonour
will never be forgotten.
12 O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous,
you see the heart and the mind;
let me see your retribution upon them,
for to you I have committed my cause.
13 Sing to the Lord;
praise the Lord
For he has delivered the life of the needy
from the hands of evildoers.*

For an excellent summary of the larger historical background of Jeremiah's career see the *Introduction* in John Bright's *Jeremiah* in *The Anchor Bible* commentary series (Doubleday: New York, 1965). For an insightful theological discussion of the text see Terence E. Freitheim, "Caught in the Middle: Jeremiah's Vocational Crisis" (*Word & World*, vol. 22, No. 4, Fall 2002), 351-360. Finally, I found on my book shelf an old commentary on *Jeremiah* by Theodore Laetsch. He was helpful because of the way he made explicit the use of the Law-Gospel hermeneutic in his reading of Jeremiah. The book dates back to 1952 and was published by Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO. As helpful as these sources were, I take full responsibility for the overall law-promise interpretative approach to this text.

DIAGNOSIS: A Whistleblower's Lament

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *A Laughing Stock*

on Account of the Word

The text before us presents Jeremiah in the middle of a “vocational crisis” (see Freitheim). He is caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place: between an “insistent God” (who wants his Word proclaimed at all costs) and a “resistant people” (who will do all they can to silence that Word). Jeremiah has just announced God’s anger on Judah and God’s determination to abandon her to the destruction of the emerging powerhouse, Babylon. Judah (through Pashhur, chief of the Temple police) argues that under King Josiah she has made real meaningful reform in her worship practices. Indeed, the Jerusalem temple has become the exclusive center of worship, insuring that only the worship of Yahweh will reside in the land of Judah. The idolatrous worship of the gods of the Assyrians that took place under King Ahaz is vanquished. Even so, says Jeremiah, the reform is void of any real and meaningful repentance. The reform is nothing but a thin veneer of Yahwism over the rot of Ahaz’s idolatry. The poor and the marginalized are as exploited under the reform as they were under Assyria. The wealthy and the powerful have simply turned Yahwism into a fifth-century BCE “prosperity gospel” that, in truth, mimics the fertility cult of their former Assyrian overlord. Because Jeremiah was a whistleblower and spoke the Word of the Lord, he was beaten, put into the stockades, and became the “laughing stock” (v. 7) of Judah. This “prophet’s reward” is the immediate context of Jeremiah’s lament.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *The Word Has Become a Reproach for Me*

The lament itself reveals a deeper problem for Jeremiah: The word of the Lord has become for me a reproach (v. 8). He is having second thoughts not only about his “vocation,” but the character of the God who has called him. “O Lord, you have enticed me... you have over powered me ... you have prevailed [in

tricking me]" (v. 7). In the opening words of the lament Jeremiah is entertaining in his heart and mind the same kind of reproach for the Word of God as the Judeans who are punishing him for it. What the people of Judah are doing to Jeremiah, on account of the Word of the Lord he spoke, Jeremiah is now doing to God on account of the same Word the Lord gave him to speak. Like many of today's whistleblowers, Jeremiah feels caught between a rock and hard place. He cannot help but speak what he has been given by divine insight and, yet, he can't help but loathe the One who has given him this insight on account of the trouble it brings him.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Whispering: Terror [of God] is all Around*

But no matter how much Judah and Jeremiah loathe the word of the Lord (though they loathe it for very different reasons), that word of God is unstoppable. The whispering that Jeremiah hears, "Terror is all around" (v 10), is true. Though no one else will speak it out loud as Jeremiah did, for fear of the fate of the whistleblower, nevertheless, there is an odor in the air that something terribly true is being said in his prophecy. And that Terror, ultimately, is not Pashhur, even though Jeremiah named him "Terror all Around" (20:3) because his attempt to silence the word of the prophet will bring terror on Judah. Nor is it the Babylonians, even though they will conquer and subjugate Judah in the near future. No, the real Terror is the Lord God himself! For neither Pashhur nor the Babylonians are a match for this God. They are at best pawns in his inscrutable governance of the universe.

PROGNOSIS: God's Promise to Whistleblowers

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Jeremiah Remembers the Promise*

Just when the whistleblower, Jeremiah, seems to be lost in his

despair he remembers the promise: "But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior" (v. 11). What sparked his memory is anyone's guess. We are told of no outward agents who ministered to him. Perhaps he remembered the day of his divine calling and how, on that day, the word of judgment, which is meant "to destroy and overthrow" (1:10), was not the only word God had given him to speak. He also was given a word of promise, which was meant "to build and to plant" (1:10). And while at this time the word of judgment was certainly, because historically, more evident than the word of promise, the day would come when clarity or, better, historical evidence, would also come concerning the promise. Indeed, the nature of that promise will be articulated clearly by Jeremiah later in Jeremiah 31 (as a new covenant) where the heart of the promise is expressed in these words: "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more" (31:31-34). What God will ultimately do to make good on this promise is not yet evident in Jeremiah. But it is to us. He will have to send his own Son to die and rise in service of bankrolling the new covenant of the forgiveness of sins.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : You [God] Test the Righteous

Not only does Jeremiah remember the promise, but he also now sees the suffering he is experiencing differently. They are not acts of trickery or enticement or seduction or provocation on the part of God. On the contrary, they are "tests [for] the righteous" (v. 12), says Jeremiah, whereby the state of the heart and the mind are revealed and the need for the promise reinforced. The prophet's sufferings are to remind him (as whistleblower) that all outcomes are in God's hands and that the righteous live by faith in the promise. Indeed, this too was revealed to Jeremiah by God when he was called: "They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you" (1:19). God did not

trick Jeremiah into his whistleblowing calling. God was straight forward and true blue from the start: both, with regard to the fact that he would suffer as God's whistleblower and that God would be with him to deliver him from his persecutors.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Sing Praises to the Lord*

And God did deliver Jeremiah in that Jeremiah did not give up on his calling to be a whistleblower. If the taunts and denunciations of Jeremiah's persecutors had tricked him for a while into thinking that God was duping him; if they had tempted him for a moment to forsake his vocation as whistleblower—those strategies failed! They did not prevail (20:11)! By remembering the promise and recalling God's straightforwardness, Jeremiah's lament has now been transformed into an appeal to everyone to "sing to the Lord" (v. 13), "to praise the Lord," for his promise "to deliver the life of the needy," like him, like you and me, "from the hands of evildoers" (v. 13). While the details of Jeremiah's career as a whistleblower are too complex to relay here, Jeremiah remained God's whistleblower to his dying day, even though the Judeans refused to heed it.