

Lenten Prophets' Insider Tips for Living through Political Chaos

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Introduction

The voices of three prophets cry out to our assemblies during Lent, 2018. They offer our assemblies bold words for faithful living from contexts of political chaos. Joel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah authored their biblical works in the midst of political, social, and ecological upheaval. They offer theological foundations for life during troubled and uncertain times. Today, the United States faces political, social, and ecological upheaval; our assemblies hunger for a biblical and theological word that sustains and activates faith and life during chaos.

This article shows three prophets speaking from their contexts of political upheaval to their people and also suggests that the prophets' approaches may inform preachers today who, likewise, speak in a time of political upheaval. Across the US political spectrum, people are concerned with the damaging decisions the president has made domestically and internationally. Domestically, from lambasting people in the aftermath of natural disasters (e.g., Puerto Rico in the days after being ravaged by Hurricane Maria) to tweeting inflammatory remarks regarding football, Trump damages unity in the US.¹ Internationally, from suggesting Mexico would pay for a wall that harms their country to divulging classified intelligence to Russia, Trump undermines the ethics and integrity of the US.² Not unlike the prophets, people in the US live in a time of political chaos.

The prophets have some "tips," i.e., theological strategies, for living through this time. In a section on Joel and a section on Jeremiah, this article explores three things:

1. The political/social background in which the prophet lived,
2. The specific Lenten prophetic text,
 - a. Joel 2:1-2; 12-17 for Ash Wednesday
 - b. Jeremiah 31:31-34 for the Fifth Sunday in Lent
3. Employing the prophet's tips for living through political chaos.

Between the section on Joel and the section on Jeremiah is an excursus in which Anna Geyer discusses how the alternate Ash Wednesday text, Isaiah 58, shows God's redemptive destruction.³

These three prophets speak with gritty determination because of their theological convictions that political/social systems need to change. Joel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah discern God's word, speak it boldly into their contexts of political/social chaos, and follow up on the change that God's word calls into existence.

Joel, Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2018
Socio-Political Background

Most scholars agree that although Joel is situated between two *pre-exilic* books (Hosea and Amos), Joel itself is a *post-exilic* work.⁴ For example, Joel does not take time to denounce the people's sin—a common *pre-exilic* theme. Instead, Joel builds up his people's belief in restoration because he lives at a time that the walls have been toppled...and restored.

Nevertheless, Joel serves a community that is under military and ecological threats. The specific threat to Joel's community is ambiguous, since it remains unclear whether Joel was referring to agricultural desolation or military assault. He speaks of a locust plague that destroys fields and livelihoods and brings drought. Whether or not the assault comes from armies of locusts and/or men, this land-community is devastated. "The prophetic text reimagines the years of violence and scarcity, the deaths of families as well as family markets. It breaks denials and confronts the pain of forced deportation and military defeat, which many no doubt read as the collapse of the world."⁵ The threats faced by Joel's community do not feel temporary; rather, they compromise the nation and the people's status and wellbeing.

The book of Joel takes the form of a communal lament liturgy: 1. Call to lament, 2. Cries of lament, 3. God's response, 4. Declaration of help. The whole nation is in grief; Joel gives expression to that grief through a liturgy that holds before God the people's cries of lament. (While some English speakers may have a negative connotation of lament, Joel's community would have known lament as an expression of *trust* in God's faithfulness. Lament is "a plea for God to come to the aid of those who maintain unswerving trust in him despite the trials of the moment."⁶) The language of lament seeks not to reinjure by recalling pain; rather, lament offers images accurate enough to be honest about the despair experienced.⁷

Joel relies on God's restorative acts. Addressing a context where many are losing hope while living in a time of uncertainty and chaos, Joel tenaciously recalls God's restorative acts and anticipates God restoring the land again. Joel believes that God is in control and will renew the people through ongoing acts of justice.

Joel 2:1-2, Ash Wednesday

Two times (v. 1 & 15) the ram's horn assembles the people, but for different reasons. In verse one, the shofar is sounded as a battle alarm for a nation who needs to prepare for a coming crisis. In verse fifteen, the shofar is sounded as a call to worship for a people who need to lament the chaos and suffering in which they are living. What is left in the wake of the attacking host vs. what is left by the presence of God in liturgy could not be more different. The attacking host leaves a desolate wilderness where Eden had been (2:3). God leaves a blessing (2:14).

While the crisis is still coming—as part of preparation for an approaching threat, God calls the people to gather in worship: "Even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart" (2:12). Fast. Weep. Mourn. Rend. Return. No one can miss this liturgy; not even the bridal couple gets an excused absence from this liturgy in which the ministers will lead the people in expressing lament for the sufferings in the land. This text shows God's desire to hear people's lament, which is more vital than ready-ing defenses, and this text offers a prayer of lament in which the people participate.

Employing Tips from Joel for Living through Political/Ecological Chaos

Joel invites assemblies to lament as an act of trust in God's ability to restore, which is congruent with Ash Wednesday liturgies. For example, one Ash Wednesday liturgy concludes a confession in this way:

Our waste and pollution of your creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us, we confess to you.

Have mercy on us, O God.

Restore us, O God, and let your anger depart from us.

Hear us, O God, for your mercy is great.⁸

Invitation to lament is needful for people who sense that there is suffering in our polis but who lack public and brave spaces to express grief and anger over suffering. Lament enacts trust because naming the difference between the life God calls forth and the deathly practices around us generates hope in God's coming renewal. God works toward restoration even in the midst of despair: out of the flood, an olive branch budded; out of the Exodus, a promised land flowed with new life; out of hell, Jesus burst the bonds of death. This is what God does. This is who God is. Like Joel's liturgy, Ash Wednesday is a liturgy of lamentation seeking restoration.

Any worship can be a time for lament; Ash Wednesday and this Joel text already are laments. Lamentation in preaching can end with or without resolution. A lament sermon can include resolution by overtly declaring confidence in God's restorative acts and announcing promise of a new day. A lament sermon can faithfully end without resolution (see Ps. 88), especially in the midst of confusion or close to the time of crisis. Unresolved lament may be a way God's word accompanies an assembly. Lack of resolution does not mean one has failed to preach the gospel, because lament itself is an act of trust that calls on God's restorative acts. Trust, calling on God's restoration, is itself good news—better news than any glib "It'll be OK" that the assembly senses as false.

The US has many communal laments this year: hurricanes, fires, mass shootings, global warming, and more. Ash Wednesday and Joel make space to do the hard and communal work of lament. Perhaps, this year, it is an occasion to include specific laments, for which there are bounteous resources.⁹ Communal lament is not something US society does well, but the church's heritage gives resources to step into this vacuum. In the lineage of the Psalms, Joel, and Jesus, the church knows prayers that lament, "My God, my God, why?"

Isaiah 58, Ash Wednesday, Alternate Text, February 14, 2018

Excurses: Restorative Destruction in Isaiah 58

By Anna Geyer

Prophetic texts call for destruction that is needed for restoration (Is. 7-9, Jer. 31, Ezek. 37, Joel 2). Restorative destruction tears down what is not of God in order to restore what God desires. Let me begin by saying that the concept of restorative destruction carries enormous embedded danger. Certainly there is danger at the hand of God, that is, destruction that we tremble at, but in the end is good. The danger I want to name at this moment, however, is the danger of humans misusing the concept

of restorative destruction. Humans, assuming the authority to name someone else's destruction as redemptive, are at risk of a grave form of idolatry. The research here is never to be used as a judgment of others' experience, but to show a process, found in the prophets, by which God re-forms people. This section explores how restorative destruction appears in the alternate Ash Wednesday text, Isaiah 58.

In Isaiah 58, the prophet Isaiah addresses post-exilic Israel with a startling message. Isaiah's community loves to seek God daily and delights to know God's ways. They draw near to God, fast, and humble themselves (58:2-3). Israel believes that their worship will win them God's favor and guidance. Yet Isaiah sounds the alarm—their religious practices veil a rebellion. Their rituals serve only their self-interests and lead to violence (58:3-4).

Urgently Isaiah calls for the destruction of this meaningless worship, which had developed over the course of Israel's history (58:4-5). The Israelites had become a people of entitlement who confined God to an endorser of their nation, a destroyer of their enemies, a sustainer of their wealth, their land, their religion. They ignored God's desire that worship continually form them into a nation of justice for all people (58:6, 7, 9-10).

Restoration of right worship is needed because it forms right relationships and a faithful nation. Israel needs to loosen the bonds of injustice, to throw off every yoke, to share food and home and clothing with the hungry, homeless, and naked, to fulfill duty to kinsfolk (58:6-7). Their light, then, would "rise in the darkness" (58:10). Yahweh would guide them, satisfy their needs, and make them strong. They would rebuild ancient ruins and "raise foundations of many generations" (58:11-12). The nation would be restored.

The dismantling practices of Lent offer destruction for that which blinds us and stops up our ears. We emerge, stripped of what is not of God, ready to receive God's restoration.

Jeremiah, 5th Sunday in Lent, March 18, 2018

Socio-Political Background

Jeremiah lived in Judah during massive political upheavals and socio-religious reform. To the north, the Assyrian Empire collapsed, which made way for Babylonian expansionism. To the south, the Egyptians used Judah as a political buffer against the aggressing Babylonians. Within this tense climate, Jeremiah lived through five political reigns:

1. Josiah's 31-year reign until he was tragically killed,
2. Jehoahas's less than 1-year reign until he was exiled by Egyptians,
3. Jehoiakim's eleven-year reign,
4. Jehoiakin's less than 1-year reign until he was exiled by Babylonians along with many Israelite leaders, and
5. Zedekiah's ten-year reign until Judah lost its independence to Babylon and experienced the deportation of thousands more Israelites.

Tensions arose when those exiled with Jehoiakin continued to see him as their ruler, and back home, the remnant understood his brother Zedekiah to be their ruler. Jeremiah also witnessed great socio-religious change. Josiah's reform, which came

after the discovery of a new law book, led to Josiah's destruction of shrines outside of Jerusalem and the centralization of worship at the temple. Jeremiah saw the 587 BCE loss of Judah's sovereignty and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

Jeremiah argues against the royal-priestly ideology, which claimed that the rulers were legitimately placed in charge and were, therefore, exempt from God's judgment. "The claims of the royal-priestly ideology repeatedly are embodied, generation after generation, in monopolistic centers of domination in every sphere of human life. These centers imagine they are immune from the risks and responsibilities of the historical process."¹⁰ In his argument against royal ideology, Jeremiah shows that the rulers are not exempt from God's judgment when he names deportation as God's covenantal response to Judah's unfaithfulness. God calls Judah out on their unfaithfulness because God desires restoration of a congruent covenantal relationship.

Jeremiah argues for commitment to covenantal mutuality that subverts domination and, instead, offers life. God's power subverts systems of domination, whether that system is Babylon or powerful people who benefit from royal ideologies. Jeremiah anticipates new life for Judah where God rebuilds a new community.

Jeremiah 31:31-34, 5th Sunday in Lent

A supersessionist reading of this text has been all too common and needs to be avoided by recognizing that, with the new covenant, Jeremiah is not attempting to refer to a covenant with Christians. Jeremiah refers to a former covenant between God and the Israelites, which Israelites disobeyed, and to the new covenant between God and the Israelites in exile, which Israelites are obeying.

The new covenant is a consolation to Israel that generates gratitude by giving at least four things: 1. solidarity, 2. awareness of who God is, 3. equal human access to God, and 4. God's forgiveness that makes new life possible.¹¹ For a people who knew intimately the gaps in their social fabric wrought by deportations and deaths—losses that Jeremiah interpreted to them as consequences of their unfaithfulness to the covenant—the announcement of a new covenant was an occasion for relief and active gratitude. New hope blossomed with God's promise that they would be able to keep this covenant because it would be internal to them—written on their hearts.

Employing Tips from Jeremiah for Living through Political Chaos

Jeremiah knows about living through the change of reigns and divided loyalties among one's people. He endured successions of national rule five times in his lifetime. He tried to serve people who were divided politically (and geographically). Those who serve congregations in the US can feel that people are more ideologically divided than in past decades—a trend that seems to be increasing.¹² In what ways could your congregation contribute to the health of civic life and confidence in the restoration of unity?

New life from God subverts royal ideologies that rule through domination and consolidate power for the powerful (e.g., money for the rich). A Christian can be certain that God is working to subvert royal ideologies of domination. How many times, after all, does the biblical witness present this pattern: God repeatedly acts with justice for the oppressed.¹³

There are so many topics where centers of domination lead to death and deathly practices: deportation, gun violence, irresponsible posturing between Trump and

Kim Jong-un over nuclear weapons, a presidential candidate welcoming Russia to meddle in the US election, to name a few.¹⁴ Jeremiah can speak volumes to each of these crises. Following in the footsteps of Jeremiah, each preacher will find what is politically called for and, at the same time, pastorally caring—a pairing that is the very crux of prophetic preaching. Biblical preachers (consider the prophets, Jesus, and Paul) continually address the political. It is only American civil religion that has convinced some that religion does not speak to politics—which is contrary to biblical authors who also misread the US’s First Amendment.¹⁵ Take it from Martyred Bishop Oscar Romero:

This is the fundamental thought of my preaching: Nothing is so important to me as human life. Taking life is something so serious, so grave—more than the violation of any other human right—because it is the life of God’s children, and because such bloodshed only negates love, awakens new hatreds, makes reconciliation and peace impossible.¹⁶

Romero was killed by or with the aid of El Salvadoran politicians for speaking and preaching against the government’s killings, injustices, and infliction of poverty on the vulnerable.

Conclusion

The books of Joel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah all emerged in contexts of political, social, and/or ecological upheaval, which influenced their writing and preaching. Joel urged communal, liturgical lament (regarding ecological and/or military disaster) in order to restore confidence in God’s redemptive action. Preaching and liturgies on Ash Wednesday are congruent with Joel when voice is given to lament that stimulates trust in God. Isaiah claimed that destruction (through exile and loss of sovereignty) was crucial but subordinate to God’s overarching movement of restoration for Israel. Preaching with the prophet’s idea of restorative destruction is never a judgment aimed at another’s experience. It is attentiveness to God’s incompatibility with evil and superabundance of restorative acts. Jeremiah showed that God and covenant people subvert systems of domination in favor of practices of mutuality. Preaching with Jeremiah will leave parishioners calling into question systems of domination that sacrifice the vulnerable for the benefit of the powerful. In times of political, social, and ecological upheaval, the prophets call preachers to expose the discrepancy between the world God calls into life and the deathly practices enacted in the world.

Notes

1 CNN, “Trump’s NFL and Puerto Rico Tweets prove his goal is to divide, not unite the country,” <http://www.cnn.com/2017/09/26/politics/trump-nfl-tweets/index.html>, accessed 10.5.2017.

2 *New York Times* “At a besieged White House, tempers flare and confusion swirls” <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/16/us/white-house-staff.html>, accessed 10.5.2017.

3 Isaiah texts are also appointed on Passion Sunday and Good Friday.

4 Joel has been notoriously difficult to date since Joel does not name people or historical events but refers to natural crises.

5 Louis Stulman and Hyun Chul Paul Kim, *You Are My People: An Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 195.

6 Graham S. Ogden and Richard R. Deutsch, *A Promise of Hope-A Call to Obedience: A Commentary*

on the Books of Joel and Malachi (Grand Rapids and Edinburgh: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 11.

7 For more on the concept of lament and trauma, see Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*.

8 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Pew ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 253.

9 <http://www.elca.org/blacklivesmatter>; <https://www.futurechurch.org/liturgy-of-lament-download>; <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/june-1997/time-weep-liturgical-lament-times-crisis>; Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel L. Migliore's *Rachel's Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope*; Luke A. Powery's *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching*.

10 Walter Brueggemann, *To Pluck Up, to Tear Down: A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah 1-25*, First Edition edition (Grand Rapids: Edinburgh: Eerdmans Pub Co, 1988), 13–14.

11 Walter Brueggemann, *To Build, to Plant: A Commentary on Jeremiah 26-52*, First Printing edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub Co, 1991), 71–72.

12 The Pew Research Center, “Political Polarization in the American Public” <http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>, accessed 10.6.2018.

13 E.g., Deut. 24:14, Ps. 14:6, Proverbs 22:22ff, Is. 1:17, Jer. 22:3, Mal. 3:5, Mk. 12:40, Lk. 4:18ff, 1 Cor. 10:24, 1 Jn. 3:17ff.

14 *New York Times*, “Donald Trump Calls on Russia to Find Hillary Clinton’s Missing Emails,” by Ashley Parker and David E. Sanger, July 27, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/28/us/politics/donald-trump-russia-clinton-emails.html>, accessed 10.6.2017.

15 For a concise refresher on preaching and the first amendment, see page 11-12 in Audrey Borschel’s *Preaching Prophetically When News Disturbs*.

16 Oscar A. Romero, *The Violence of Love*, trans. James R. Brockman (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2004), 204.