

# When the Music Starts Again

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Any family or communal festive occasion can become a “sign” or a marker. It could be a graduation, a birthday, a funeral, or a reunion. But let us consider a wedding...a wedding as a “sign” or a marker of social, historical significance. This is how it was for the ancient prophet Jeremiah as he watched his beloved Jerusalem sink into misery. He must have thought, “Let us consider a wedding as a significant social, historical marker and sign.” As he thought that, he noticed that weddings in the city had stopped. There were no more weddings in Jerusalem! He took the cessation of weddings to be, on the one hand, a sign of *God’s active sovereignty*, and on the other hand, *a measure of the dislocation* that the city must face in time to come.

The book of Jeremiah has the prophet comment on the matter of weddings three times (though it could be that the three citations are editorial reiteration). At the end of his “temple sermon” (Jeremiah 7) in which he anticipates the gruesome sight of many dead bodies piled up (7:32-33), Jeremiah concludes: “And I will bring an end to the sound of mirth and gladness, the voice of the bride and bridegroom in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; for the land shall become a waste” (v. 34). There will be no singing, no dancing, no laughter, no celebration. All weddings will be ended, a sign that the city will end in “waste.” In that “sermon,” it is anticipated that the end of weddings comes about, according to the prophet, because of a systemic violation of Torah, a contradiction of the purpose of God: “Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house” (vv. 9-10)? The shame of such violation is compounded by the fact that after such systemic violation, the perpetrators come piously to the temple and imagine that they are “safe and secure from all alarms,” hiding like a “den of robbers” (vv. 10-11).

The point is a second time articulated in Jeremiah 16. In that prose passage, the prophet anticipates a wholesale devastation of the city. God declares: “Do not enter the house of mourning, or go to lament or bemoan them; for I have taken away my *peace* from this people, says the Lord, my *steadfast love* and *mercy*. Both great and small shall die in this land” (vv. 5-6).

The city cannot and will not prosper without the divine gift of peace, steadfast love, and mercy. After a devastating portrayal of massive death, the cessation of weddings is a measure of the trouble to come: “I am going to ban from this place, in your days and before your eyes, the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride” (v. 9).

In response to this verdict, the prophet has his people wonder why such trouble has come upon their city: “They will say to you, ‘Why has the Lord pronounced all this great evil against us? What is our iniquity? What is the sin that we have committed against the Lord our God?’” (v. 10)?

And the prophetic response is: “It is because your ancestors have forsaken me, says the Lord, and have gone after other gods and have served and worshipped them, and have forsaken me and have not kept my law; and because you have behaved worse

than your ancestors, for here you are, every one of you, following your stubborn evil will, refusing to listen to me” (vv. 11-12).

The theme is reiterated a third time in Jeremiah 25. In this version the point is made more specific with reference to the coming of the Babylonian army of Nebuchadnezzar who will utterly destroy the city and reduce it to shame and humiliation. The prohibition of weddings is linked to a climactic assertion of ruin and waste at the hand of the Babylonians:

I am going to send all of the tribes of the north, says the Lord, even King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all the nations around; I will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and hissing, and an everlasting disgrace. And I will banish from them the sound of mirth and the sound of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years (vv. 9-11).

It will be evident that this prophetic tirade does not hesitate or blink at the direct linkage between *historical eventuality* and *divine governance*. In all three usages, the cause of cessation of weddings is divine agency: “I will bring an end” (7:34); “I am going to banish” (16:9); “I will banish” (25:10). I call attention to this because this is a direct linkage that most of us would not make and almost none of us would want to make. We do not readily imagine God’s governance to be so direct, nor do we consider that the God of covenant would so willfully cause the suffering and death of God’s own people. (The reader may notice that in my little book, *Virus as Summons to Faith*, I have given careful nuance to this difficult matter.) It is nonetheless important for us to notice (and perhaps flinch) that the prophetic tradition has no such caution in making that direct claim for governance.

This lack of reticence on the part of the tradition may give us some nerve and courage to imagine what it is like to live in a world where the purposes of God cannot be mocked with impunity. In the end God will not be mocked, not by our wealth, not by our wisdom, and not by our power. The weddings stopped. The music was silenced. The laughter ceased. Historical circumstance was too sobering. Social reality was too devastating. The songs stuck in our throats. Our feet were unmoving on the floor. Maybe there were weddings, but no glad sounds. Or maybe not at all, because lived reality had sunk deeply into an unmanageable pause.

Such poetic extremity as these verses of Jeremiah might give us an angle of vision on our social “shut down” amid the pandemic. Among us it is as though the celebration has stopped, that singing has silenced and the dancing is paralyzed. Weddings have been delayed, family reunions postponed, churches vacated, schools hit and miss on-line and in person, and cinemas are darkened, sports events are without fans. Social life, social interaction, and social possibility all have come to a halt (except for some daring super-spreaders!). The pandemic is reason enough as an explanation for the silencing shut down. We do not need to look further for an explanation. The prophetic tradition, daring otherwise, pushes back further to the sovereignty of God who occupies active verbs like “banish” and “bring to an end.” We would not

push that far for an explanation; the silencing, nonetheless, is a stunning reminder of how unmistakably penultimate we are in managing the mysterious givens of our common life. Such an awareness of our penultimacy at least lets us resonate with the texts of Jeremiah. As we study the rising numbers of cases and deaths daily among us, we can draw close to the imagery of Jeremiah 7:32-33, of corpses piled up for bird food; in our case, refrigerated trucks are outside hospitals with many beloved bodies therein. As we stay safe in self-quarantine, we can weave into the urgency of Jeremiah 16:7-8 with no “cup of consolation” to drink and the avoidance of “the house of feasting.” As we notice that our number of cases and deaths is even worse than that of Brazil, we can expect that the United States is something of an object of “horror and hissing” among the nations (see 25:9). And if Donald Trump would have his way, he would readily cast “China” in the role of Babylon who will “lay waste the whole land” (25:9-11).

Of course this is all an over-reading of Jeremiah. It nonetheless gives us pause as we read the old text that we claim to be “revelatory.” What is “revealed” is that in and through the pandemic via this poetry is the truth that the world operates on a scale, at a pace, and in a texture other than one of our choosing. It is the singular work of poets, ancient and contemporary, to summon us into this mystery that is beyond our explanation or management. We begin with the obvious: the cessation of weddings. From that we work deeply into the mystery of our helplessness and our extensive efforts to “stay safe.”

After these three instances of silenced weddings in Jeremiah, it may surprise and amaze us in a most welcome way that the prophet offers, eventually, a fourth usage of the imagery of a wedding in Jeremiah 33. That usage occurs in a chapter that is filled with the restorative promises of God. In verses 1-9, we are offered a sweeping promise of recovery, healing, prosperity, security, and cleansing: “I am going to bring it recovery and healing; I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all their guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me” (vv. 6-7).

In verses 12-13 we get a vision of a restored environment with viable agriculture in every part of the land: “In the towns of the hill country, of the Shephelah, and of the Negev, in the land of Benjamin, the places around Jerusalem, and in the towns of Judah, flocks shall again pass under the hand of the one who counts them, says the Lord” (v. 13). In verses 14-22 it is promised that the Davidic line will be continued and restored, as certain as is God’s covenant with day and night: “If any of you could break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night would not come at their appointed time, only then could my covenant with my servant David be broken, so that he would not have a son to reign on his throne” (vv. 20-1). The chapter concludes with reassurance about God’s most elemental promise, the one made to the offspring of Abraham: “Only if I had not established my covenant with day and night and the ordinances of heaven and earth, would I reject the offspring of Jacob and my servant David and not choose any of his descendants as rulers over the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes, and will have mercy on them” (vv. 25-26). This chapter mentions every possible dimension of God’s commitment to Israel. It affirms that God is the keeper of every such promise.

And right in the midst of this overwhelming collage of promises is our theme:

“There shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord” (33:11). Weddings will begin again! Life will be resumed in all its joy. Churches will be opened. Sports will be on offer. Cinemas will be available. Social life and social possibility are at hand!

In response to this renewal and restoration grounded in God’s goodness, Israel will bring thank offerings. These offerings consist in generous material returns to the God of all goodness. And like all good thank offerings, these offerings are accompanied by words of acknowledgement, explaining why the generous gratitude of Israel: “Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for his steadfast love endures forever “(v. 11).

For a time God’s steadfast love had been absent in Israel (see 16:5). But not now! In the liturgic tradition of Israel, thank offerings are a glad recognition that God is good. Beyond that, God’s abiding tenacious fidelity has persisted in and through the trouble, that is, in and through the pandemic. And then, as if to seal the deal, the text in verse 11 adds the great tag-word of rehabilitation: “Restore the fortunes.” The promise is for return to something like normal, the measure of which is the singing, dancing, and laughter of wedding joy that every time is bet upon the future. It is no wonder that Jesus, in the wake of Jeremiah, appeals to the same imagery of wedding, bride, and bridegroom for the arrival of God’s new future (Matthew 25:1-13).

These four uses of the imagery of a wedding in Jeremiah—three negative and one positive—provide a screen through which to reread and reimagine our own pandemic with its *shut-down* and its *awaited reopening*. Beyond that, the imagery takes up this most treasured social practice of a wedding and lets it be a vehicle for articulation of God’s steadfast love. The silence and restoration of wedding singing and dancing bespeak a regular feature of Israel’s covenant faith, a faith practiced in *exile and homecoming*, a faith that in Christian parlance is reflected in the shut-down of Good Friday and the opening of new life on Easter. Judaism, and we Christians in its wake, can gladly attest: “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning “(Psalm 30:5). The first two lines of this verse are awkward for us, because we do not readily speak of God’s anger. But the Psalmist will give it voice: “For his anger is for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime” (Psalm 30:5). The accent is on God’s favor...for a lifetime, a very long time! There is, however, no denying the intense alienation from us that God knows. This is very hard to voice; we nonetheless observe it enacted in our empty social calendars.