

Creating Peace

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Jeremiah found himself in quite the difficult position. You see Jeremiah was a prophet in Ancient Israel who often found himself stuck in the middle of things. In what was perhaps the most dramatic scene of his very dramatic life, he found himself in the city of Jerusalem surrounded by the Babylonian army. It was a scene eerily similar to the Alamo. The overwhelming forces of the enemy were at the gates of the city. They were intent on invasion, just as the Babylonians had invaded throughout the region. Israel was about to become the next in a long line of conquests. It seemed inevitable at that moment.

This had not always been the case. There had been a time in the years leading up to this siege that Babylon had seemed and felt like someone else's problem. It may be something those other nations have to worry about but not us. So for three generations the kings of Israel ignored their religion, their heritage, and embraced hedonism and idolatry. Finally the new

king, King Josiah, sought a return to the covenant with God. He reestablished the rituals laid out in the Torah. But the populous at large was harder to convince.

And so Jeremiah, a prophet of Israel who began his ministry shortly after Josiah had come to power, found himself stuck in the middle. You see people will embrace a lie if it is what they want to hear, rather than the truth that is unpleasant or uncomfortable. Jeremiah was always spouting off these unpleasant truths. He was the original, “Embrace God or else the day of judgment is at hand!” prophet. Those guys we see and hear at the street corners holding up signs to repent for the end is nigh, are really just weak echoes of Jeremiah’s prophetic witness.

Of course in Jeremiah’s time, ignoring the sense of impending doom was the delusion. There were false prophets that told everyone that everything is fine. Forget about the old covenant – do whatever you want. To most of us that sort of hedonistic mentality probably doesn’t need too much encouragement! People like that message from their prophets. It is these guys who tell us to go back to the life of responsibility and faithfulness that are frankly kind of annoying. Making us feel guilty all of the time. And so Jeremiah’s message was not embraced very readily. In fact he was so reviled that a group of these false prophets and their followers grabbed him and threw him into one

of the city's cisterns. I can only imagine what that experience must have been like. However the intention was clear; they meant for him to starve to death down there.

The prophetic tradition in the Bible is a strong one. Indeed the notion of a prophet that speaks the truth to the powers that be is one of the main threads that run through both the old and new testaments. Prophets speak the truth, even and especially when that truth is difficult or painful to hear. Prophets are dramatic. They are the original street performers. They do crazy things to get their point across. Their job is to do anything to pierce through the illusion of denial and penetrate the conscious and conscience of the people. Toward the end of the Exodus, when the Israelites are close enough to Promised Land to scope things out, but haven't entered into it yet, Joshua comes to Moses with a concern. He says that some of the people are prophesying among themselves. Moses' reaction is: good! "Would that all God's people were prophets that his truth was on their lips." It is from this scene that James Luther Adams first got the idea of the "prophethood of all believers." According to Adams' theology, being a prophet, not in the sense of trying to predict the future, but proclaiming a vision of the world transformed by our religious values, is a cornerstone of Unitarian Universalism.

Prophets are in short supply in our world. Watching the news it is easy to get a feeling perhaps similar to what it must have been like to have lived in Jerusalem during those days when the Babylonian army surrounded the city. Only instead of being under siege from weapons and warriors, we are under a siege of information. We are surrounded by information, but lack clarity on the truth. Which voice, in the cacophony that is modern American culture, is the voice of the prophet?

And if you think it is bad for you and me, imagine what it must be like for President Obama right about now! With Vladimir Putin running rough shod over Crimea, it can be hard to know what to do. On the one hand America is war weary both financially and culturally. Having just emerged from two long protracted wars, there are few civilians or military people who relish the thought of jumping back into that fray. Sadly it seems, other countries in the world are acutely aware of this weariness and try to take advantage of it. With most of the world's military spending, personnel, and hardware, centered in America, there are few other credible military deterrents. Putin saw his opportunity and he took it.

Those are the facts. Confusion sets in when we start to interpret those facts. Here is where history, and our hyper-awareness of history, becomes problematic. Is this the Cold War

all over again? Putin was certainly a player back in those days, and is steeped in that mentality. But then again so are many of the voices who raise this as a possibility. Is this Germany and Czechoslovakia in the 1930s, when a dictator moved his army into a portion of a neighboring country? Or do we take it all the way back to the nineteenth century in which Russia waged at least one full war, and parts of other wars, trying to gain a foothold in Crimea and therefore a warm water port? Certainly the Crimean War, World War Two, and the Cold War are not experiences anyone wishes to repeat. But which is true? Which echo of history is really being played out here?

I think the answer is all of the above to some degree. However I also subscribe to the old saying that history doesn't repeat itself; only historians do. While history certainly plays an influence upon us, I think it is overly simplistic to simply assume that all American-Russian relationships are the Cold War or nothing. We live in a new era, an interconnected multi-national era where Russia and America have been business partners for the past few decades. To put it simply, America and Russia have made a lot of money since the Cold War by doing business together. There is a great deal of economic and political leverage to be had as a result of that. There are new possibilities today that were not there in the 1980s and 90s.

But leverage toward what? That still does not solve our dilemma: what is the truth? How do we envision peace when tensions run high? Our prophetic proclamations can sound hallow in the face of armed aggression. And yet that is what religious people are called to do. We are called to proclaim a vision of a better world than the one we currently find ourselves in. The time when the enemy is at the gate is far too late. Our time is before the moment when war seems like the only option and creative thinking has disappeared. That is the moment when prophetic truth is at its most effective.

Certainly no one knew that painful reality better than our friend Jeremiah. For three generations the Israelites abandoned their covenant with God. Even with Josiah as king, the reforms were slow to be embraced. How can one expect to turn it around so soon? What is a prophet to do? Preach to people the truth of what they have up until now been very successful in ignoring, and they will not thank you for it. Indeed, you find yourself tossed into the city's cistern. You might guess what happened to Israel. The Babylonians did sack the city. This was the beginning of one of the darkest periods in Jewish history: the Babylonian Exile. Probably the darkest up until the twentieth century and the horrors of Nazi Germany. The Babylonians destroyed the temple, and with it the centerpiece of Jewish religious life. Judaism, in order

to survive without a temple, would have to undergo one of the most significant transformations in the history of religion. It would do so successfully, but that is a tale for another day. I want to go back to what happened to Jeremiah?

He was rescued from that cistern – by of all people the Babylonians! In fact he was able to go free and eventually, according to tradition but not biblical scholars, he supposedly wrote three of the books of the Old Testament. It is thought that he lived out the rest of his life, ironically, in Egypt. Although Jeremiah survived, sadly his people were scattered. So many of the warnings of his early ministry came to reality. The truth had ultimately prevailed, and unfortunately the Jewish people were on the wrong side of history.

Jeremiah teaches us, both through his life and his words, that our vision for a world transformed by our values is fundamentally important. Jeremiah could not have had a prophetic witness to preach to the King if he did not have some sense of how the world could be better. Or more correctly, how the world should be better. He didn't start talking about this when the enemy was already surrounding the city. Oh I am sure there are people who started to believe what he had been saying right about then, but Jeremiah had been laying out his prophetic witness long before that.

If we are to continue the Unitarian Universalist tradition of a “prophethood of all believers” then we too need to have a vision of how the world would be different as a result of our values, our principles, and our mission. In his new book “Reclaiming Prophetic Witness; Liberal Religion in the Public Square” the UU theologian Paul Rasor says that Unitarian Universalists can do this. We can find our prophetic voice in the world today, but we cannot keep conceding religion to the evangelicals. Too often when most people in America think of the “religious” perspective on various social issues, they assume that the “religious” voice is the “conservative” religious voice. Of course this assumption is overly simplistic, but that is the wider cultural conception. Unitarian Universalists tend to shy away from adding their faith to their social action, he says. We like to rush into the nuts and bolts of policy work rather than to take a step back and consider what the big picture looks like. What is that vision we are trying to make come into being? Before we rush out into the streets wearing yellow shirts and getting our picture taken for the newspaper, what are we really striving to achieve? Too often that is it: the protest or march becomes an end in itself. We feel good because someone on the news actually uttered the word “Unitarian” or maybe even “Unitarian Universalist.” That is a nice thing, but attention getting for its own sake just feeds our

collective ego. Attention getting so as to be able to proclaim a vision of the world as it should be based on our understanding of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist – is a prophetic witness.

Paul Rasor is one of us, but critical of most Unitarian Universalist efforts to make this prophetic witness. He does, however, lift up one very notable exception: the 2010 resolution called “Creating Peace.” As you heard from our reading this morning, “Creating Peace” goes beyond the usual laundry list of policies that we think the government should implement. It goes on for some pages beyond what I read, to include examples from our history, from our theological thinkers, and describes a vision for what peace looks like in our world today.

Creating Peace can be the foundation of a prophetic witness for peace in our world. It is explicitly Unitarian Universalist. It also speaks directly to the political reality we face as a nation. This was a resolution that was in response to those long protracted wars that have supposedly left Obama looking like a weak leader on the international stage. Part of what I found so compelling about it was the statement about creating a “culture of peace.” Normally we think of peace as merely the absence of war. Martin Luther King Jr. said that peace is not the absence of war but the presence of justice. Peace is a proactive activity, not

just the failure to engage in combat. Peace should be how we live everyday in a pluralistic society where misunderstanding and division could easily erupt in violence.

It is too late to talk about peace when the enemy is surrounding your city, or when the army has invaded another country. By that point, one may have few options available. Rather peace is a prophetic vision of how the world should be, how we live each day and treat our neighbors and our fellow citizens of the world. Oppression, racism, environmental degradation, all of these practices eventually leads to war and aggression. They create the conditions for violence to erupt sooner or later. There are many things we can do as Unitarian Universalists. We heard about one possibility already this morning. The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee is a good example of concrete things we do as a faith to promote a culture of peace throughout the world. By supporting the UUSC we lend our support to an organization that embodies our Unitarian Universalist vision for a world transformed by our principles and values.

May we have the courage to speak to those values when the time and place is right. May our voice be joined with all those who seek both peace and justice throughout the world. And may our prophetic witness bear the fruits of love. Amen Blessed Be.