Election Sermon

Our task in this election cycle is three-fold:

I was going to start with keep calm but not sure that’s our task. But I think God respects freaking out as much as keeping calm. So I’m going to revise keep calm to...

1. **Keep loving our loved ones and our fellow human beings** who are not approaching this election with the same clarity of insight that we assume to be ours.

2. **Be wise and pick sides.** NT talks about the responsibility of leaders to lead, of governors to govern. In a democratic republic, every voter is a governor. Governing means making tough choices between options that may or may not be ideal. We express that by voting. Be wise and pick a side.

3. **Listen beyond the noise for what the Spirit is saying to us.**

Jesus came in tradition of Hebrew prophets, which means church is at her best in **prophetic mode.** For that, we must step back from what scapegoating mob is blind to. The revelation of **Law & Prophets,** fulfilled in Jesus is the unmasking of the scapegoat mechanism. We tend toward rivalry/imitative violence, so conflicts spread like a contagion through communities. We resolve conflicts, temporarily, by projecting own violent tendencies on a vulnerable individual or group; the scapegoat. The all-against-all becomes all-against-one.

I’ve spoken to people of color, LGBTQ, immigrants, women, and they all feel less safe, more targeted as a result of this season.

Today apply message of Jeremiah—known as one of exile prophets—to the contagious conflict that this election cycle is forcing us to see. [Credit: Walter Bruegemann *Hopeful Imagination* and *Reality/Grief/Hope*]

Jeremiah spoke to Israel in severe crisis leading up to, during, and after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC.

Israel fell prey to temptation faced by all “blessed by God” people: the blinding effects of **ideological exceptionalism.** *We are exceptional/chosen by God so what we do must be good.*

Exceptionalism distorts our view of reality thru denial. We use our exceptionalism to block negative data that doesn’t comport it.
Corporations sometimes believe their own marketing and refuse to see what doesn’t fit with their marketing image.

**BP classic example.** Oil is oil so oil companies have to be set them-selves apart. BP decided to be the environmentally sensitive oil company. But their marketing got way ahead of their environ-mental responsibility. In as they made it their marketing image, their environmental performance worsened: more violations of environmental standards than any other oil company. The more BP execs believed their own hype, the more they denied evidence to the contrary. That’s what led to Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

The “chosen people promises” first given to a band of nomadic former slaves. Promises to King David like “your house shall remain forever” made before monarchy was expanded under Solomon. David spent most of his career on the run....

Samuel, prophet who anointed David king, had warned Israel not to organize as a monarchy in first place: “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots....He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and courtiers. He will take...the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. You shall be his slaves. In that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day” (1 Sam 8:11-18).

Exactly what happened. David gave way to Solomon who built a massive temple in conjunction with an expanded palace complex (700 wives, 300 concubines). Created an aristocracy. Jerusalem elite claimed all promises of chosenness given originally to newly freed slaves and turned it into an ideology of exceptionalism.

To fund the palace-temple complex, elite extracted whatever they could from the surrounding peasantry. Under heavy taxation, peasants went into debt and their debtors took their land. They became slaves without the title.

**Sounds like what happened to people during mortgage crisis of 2008 doesn’t it?** Add to this, the preexisting heritage of slavery—absence of inherited wealth among African Americans. Until Civil War and many years later, all land in US owned by white men. Huge effect on black brothers-sisters and ancestors of original people displaced from their lands by European settlers.
Add to this, economic disadvantages of being a woman, making 70 cents on dollar. Add to this, fact that in many states, including ours, no legal protection from being fired for who you love.

Listen to words of Jeremiah against those blinded by ideological exceptionalism to the injustice around them: *Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord” For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.* (Jer. 7: 3-7)

Like Israel in time of Jeremiah, we can be blinded by our own form of exceptionalism: **American exceptionalism** (if you want to get elected you don’t deny American exceptionalism)

We are land of free, home of brave, a city set on a hill. One could say we are exceptionally blessed as a nation by God, but from point of view of the Prophets we cannot let that sense of blessing blind us to reality. Real God only exists in realm of reality. We cannot face God of Hebrew prophets w/o facing whole of reality, not just part of reality that our ideology of exceptionalism admits.

The second verse of *America the Beautiful*, rarely sung, has this line in it: **“America, America, God mend thy every flaw!”**
Imagine that as a **campaign slogan**: God men out every flaw!

Election is shining spotlight on some ugly flaws for all to see: economic injustice, racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia.

Those are just terms, sound like buzzwords. What they represent is **unrelenting pressure on real people**. A pressure that holds people down, like strapping leg weights on a runner before a race. Or putting sand in your gas tank or a virus on your computer.

The biblical word for this is **OPPRESSION**. Unrelenting pressure that a person lives with every single day.

Talking to a member of this church who is black. Neighborhood FB group, woman posts that 3 people with hoodies in neighborhood look suspicious. Comments start flying—people are talking about calling police, about having guns ready, assuming, without any knowledge that people in hoodies are young black men up to no good. Now let’s say that was on your neighborhood FB feed and you were mother of a young black man? How would you feel?
In an election in which KKK is feeling like they can come to surface and have a legitimate voice again, how would you feel?

If you face the oppression you feel it. But we don’t all face it and we don’t all feel it. We don’t tend to see what we don’t have to pay attention to.

What’s the prophetic response of the church in such a time?
1. To acknowledge realities, we are tempted to deny.

To name it, to call it out. We are a nation deeply affected by oppression of poor people, black people, native Americans, other minorities, immigrants, and women.

For many of us, that’s a call, first of all, to listen. All of us need to listen to somebody. If you’re a woman, you get what sexism does, but not necessarily what minorities face. If you’re gay you don’t know what African Americans live with, vice versa. If you’re a white male like me, you may have a lot of listening to do.

Rotating shelter: a time and a place to listen. The people on the lowest end of economic ladder have almost always suffered some pretty obvious injustice. Been sent fight wars started by people who will never see combat. Suffer invisible injuries in war that can’t easily be healed. Or they lost a home in mortgage crisis and didn’t enough family support to see them through. Or they suffer a mental illness that can be treated but don’t have access to good care. Or they were in a foster care system that none of us could possibly thrive in. And on and on.

At rotating shelter, time to sit down for dinner and often without prying, just asking “Where you from?” they tell their stories. Legitimate debate over whether the best solutions to these problems are progressive, conservative, libertarian, socialist, but none of that means anything if we deny their reality. And we will deny their reality if we don’t pay our listening dues.

2. To lament these realities so we can receive and work toward a better one.

The prophets of exile named and claimed the ugly realities of Israel’s common life. And called Israel to lament. There’s an entire book of lament ascribed to Jeremiah called “Lamentations.”

Here’s the thing: we can’t let go of what we don’t mourn. If we deny the sad, mad is all we have left.
Lectionary reading today for NT is “Blessed are those who mourn, they are the ones who will be comforted.” The one thing my wife’s death taught me: You don’t have to be afraid of mourning.

The Jewish people light candles to recognize a time of mourning. Light a candle on election to mourn what this election season is revealing about our common life.

Fasting is an expression of mourning. Fast from something on election day: solid food until polls close or FB or something.

SC is having a prayer vigil 7am-7pm on election day.
How appropriate. (Stop by chapel for some quiet prayer)

3. Embrace prophetic vision of a better world.

Read Jer. 7 again listening for the kind of world God wants. For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. (Jer. 7: 3-7)

Nothing fancy about the world God wants to give us. It’s a world marked by neighborliness.

New neighbors. Met wife, not husband. Last year, no heat in social hall. Got a call. Hauling space heaters into car. Neighbor I never met came out and said, do you need some more space heaters?

The listening I mentioned earlier, that’s neighborliness. Mourning the reality of oppressions that we don’t ourselves suffer— “Mourn with those who mourn”—that’s neighborliness.

Signing up to help out at rotating shelter: neighborliness. What many of you are doing to resettle refugees; neighborliness.

What do we get when we multiply acts of neighborliness? We get a neighborhood! People lifting each other.

Caleb Brokaw, Matt Johnson, Sue Eckstein were all ways the perfectly fit their personalities adept in the art of neighborliness.
Here’s the thing: As we move toward that world, something mysterious/transcendent begins to happen. The world gets re-enchanted because it’s a world in which God comes to dwell.

Our task is to hope for that vision, to keep it alive, to long for it, and to take whatever small or big steps we can to realize it. We have a mission, a purpose, a prize to keep our eyes on. And God will even inhabit the hoping, the longing, and the hurt from which they spring.