

The Dangerous Comfort of Showing Up

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[0 : 00] In August of 1967, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. stood before a gathering at a conference of New Politics in Chicago.

! And there he gave one of the speeches that has come to define his legacy.! Four years earlier, almost to the day, he had delivered the most famous speech of his life. A speech about his dream for the nation.

A speech that was as brilliant and fresh then as it is manipulated and palatable now. Unlike in Washington, King's subject in Chicago was not the dream he envisioned, but rather the nightmare that he saw unfolding.

In the era of the Vietnam War and amid worldwide struggles for liberation from colonial oppression, he was candid about the seemingly immeasurable distance between the dream and the reality.

Before going on to name with clarity what he called the triple-prong sickness of racism, excessive materialism and military, he began the speech by recalling a time when he was booed at a rally.

[1 : 35] He narrated the experience of confusion and shock that were his first reaction because the booze came from men in the movement. Men whom he understood to be on his side.

In his attempt to illuminate the experience, he writes these words. For 12 years, I and others like me have held out radiant promises of progress.

I had preached to them about my dream. I had lectured to them about the not-too-distant day when they would have freedom all here now.

I had urged them to have faith in America and in white society. Their hopes had soared. They were now booing me.

Because they felt that we were unable to deliver on our promises. They were booing because we had urged them to have faith in people who had too often proven to be unfaithful.

[2 : 47] They were hostile. They were hostile. Because they were watching the dream that they had so readily accepted turn into a frustrating nightmare.

In that speech, which has come to be known as the three evils of society, King warned of impending disaster.

If the nation didn't change its ways. Without what he termed a radical revolution of values, he saw only a future of national death and spiritual decay.

Now, last week we started a sermon series on the book of Jeremiah. And we're calling it Surviving Saturday. Our hope in the next several weeks of the series is to explore what it means to be faithful in the space between the Fridays of our lives when it seems like God has died.

And the Sundays of our deepest hope when resurrection and restoration decisively take shape. Through the words and the life of Jeremiah, we get a sense of what it means to be faithful in times that feel like exile when all that we have taken for granted about our nation is crumbling.

- [4 :13] And all that we have taken for granted about our faith lives seem to be corrupted. See, Jeremiah, like Dr. King, was a prophet in a time of national and spiritual disaster.
- Like Dr. King, Jeremiah had lived through a time of reform. He had been alive when one of the most righteous kings in Israelite history rediscovered the book of the law, recognized how far the people had strayed from God and undertook a program of reform.
- Jeremiah had witnessed the good work of change, of following a dream, only to see that dream become distorted.
- That dream traded in for performance and platitudes that never penetrated reality. He had witnessed people reading their Bibles.
- Okay, there weren't Bibles fully back then, but you know what I mean. They were having their quiet times. They were faithfully living and doing these things because their leaders had told them to, only to realize later that their leaders' lives were fractured and full of false devotion.
- [5 :36] Jeremiah had witnessed national acts of reform pass. He had heard promises that had never before seemed possible. And he discovered that far too many of those promises were just pretense.
- That they weren't transformative. Jeremiah, like Dr. King, had known times of hope.
- Times of deep hope and of national possibility. And yet as time had passed, he had to recognize that those hopes had been betrayed.
- Tomorrow, many of us, many of us will take part in MLK Day rituals of rest or of protest.
- And as you do, don't forget that Dr. King was a prophet of hope who became a man warning of impending disaster. He understood why there had been such a loss of faith in the dream.
- [6 :44] And he urged people to grapple with the reality of Saturday. Jeremiah is a prophet of Saturday. And it is from him that we are attempting to learn in this series.
- Now, if you were here last week or saw the email announcing the series, you might have picked up the book of Jeremiah to acquaint yourself with it or to refresh your memory.
- You might have fulfilled one of my deepest, darkest fantasies by running home after service and making an entire afternoon of reading the book of Jeremiah.
- Yeah? Okay. I know, salacious, I know. If you did any of that, then you might have quickly noticed that this book is, as a lot of scholars have named, it's nearly unreadable.
- It is. It doesn't ever stay long with any discernible narrative structure. It's not in chronological order. It has all these different types of literary material.
- [7 :58] There are sermons. There are poems. There are pieces of biography and liturgies and laments and proverbs and prayers. And this is in large part because the book was written, edited, and put into final form over this really long period of time.
- One of my favorite scholars of the Jeremiah tradition, Kathleen O'Connor, describes the book like this. This long, complex book resembles a collage constructed of a motley collection of materials like paper, fabric, paint, photographs, newspaper clippings, feathers, and found objects.
- All glued together by some not entirely clear connections to the prophet Jeremiah. The book is an expression in her view of what she calls literary turmoil.
- The reason the work of O'Connor fascinates me, however, is because she's one of a number of scholars who apply the lessons of trauma and disaster studies to the Bible.
- She explains the book, quote, reflects the interpretive chaos that follows disasters. When meaning collapses and formerly reliable beliefs turn to dust.

[9 : 20] Jeremiah's literary turmoil is also an invitation to the audience to become meaning makers. Transforming them from being passive victims of disaster into active interpreters of the world.

As we move through the book of Jeremiah in the coming weeks, as we extrapolate lessons, I don't want you to forget this one.

You are invited to make meaning again. You're invited to interpret the Bible.

To interpret the world around you. To be an author of the story instead of just a recipient. A mark of national collapse is the temptation to give in to passivity.

A mark of spiritual collapse is becoming numb. But the book of Jeremiah spills out word upon jumbled word in an attempt to make sense of it all.

[10 : 32] To make meaning. To try to begin to order the world again after the plot has been interrupted. To come back to a willingness to interpret.

To come back to a willingness to interpret. To come back to trust in yourself. And to trust in God. It is one means of survival in a world of exile.

Still, even amid the chaos of this book, there are some handholds that can help us. For example, we can think of the book as divided into two parts.

The first part, chapters 1 through 25, are about anticipating the coming disaster of the Babylonian invasion. And then the rest of the book is kind of a living after.

What does it mean to live after the disaster of the invasion? The first part has more to do with dismantling. And the second part with building up. And it mirrors Jeremiah's larger mission as given in chapters 1.

[11 : 36] See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.

And you'll find as we go through this series that Jeremiah's life in general embodies the life of the people. So you'll often see mirrors like that. Throughout the entire book of Jeremiah, there's this repetitive note that revolves around warning of judgment.

Over and over and over again. And one of the clearest statements of what Jeremiah is all about comes up in what is known as his temple sermon.

And this morning, that's what I want to explore. So, as you might have already been able to tell, this sermon is very much, we're getting grounded in Jeremiah. I'm going to read a bunch of scripture, so I ask you to hang on.

Can you do that for me? Okay, good. Can I get a, I'm going to hang on. I don't like when pastors do that, but I had to do it today. I had to do it, okay.

[12 : 43] All right, I'm feeling good. Thank you, thank you, thank you. All right, so we're going to go to Jeremiah 7, 1 through 15. And we'll, again, get some grounding overall in what Jeremiah is about.

And also, I'll try to pull out one lesson for us that's more practical. Jeremiah 7, 1 through 15. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord.

Stand in the gate of the Lord's house and proclaim there this word and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah. You who enter these gates to worship the Lord.

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 with one 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 to your ancestors forever and ever.

[14:07] Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you still 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, which is called by my name, and say, We are safe. Only to go on doing all these abominations.

Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? I, too, am watching, says the Lord.

Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel. And now, because you have done all these things, says the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen.

And when I called you, you did not answer. Therefore, I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave you, and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh.

[15:13] And I will cast you out of my sight, just as I cast out all your kinsfolk, all the offspring of Ephraim. Now, as we get further into this series, we are going to deal a little bit with this idea that God is responsible for what happens.

But today, we're just going to stay inside the text, okay? So, I just want to give that caveat, okay? I'm not becoming Pat Robertson up here. I'm not, you know, connecting this causation to, no, we're not doing that.

But we're going to stay in the text. So, Jeremiah's temple sermon begins with him standing outside the gate of the Jerusalem temple and proclaiming a word from the Lord.

Scholars surmise that Jeremiah was likely preaching at the gate on a day when there are lots of people present. Perhaps, you know, maybe during like a major pilgrimage festival. It's clear that Jeremiah hasn't chosen a quiet day for his activities because we learn from the biographical version of this story that comes in chapter 26 of the book, that Jeremiah gets in a bunch of trouble for what he says outside this temple.

He actually, he essentially is accused by the group of treason, and he's essentially detained. His words are straightforward.

[16:41] Reform your actions and your ways. If you don't change, you will lose the right to call the place here. You will lose the right to call it your home.

The issue is straying from covenant faithfulness. Eager participation in idolatry and theft and violence. Forsaking the oppressed and those on the margins of society.

They ceasing to be the people that God had called them to be when God delivered them from slavery in Egypt centuries before. Jeremiah warns them that they have trusted in words that are deceptive.

When he assures them that they cannot go on like this without judgment, he says that they say, but this is the temple of the Lord. The temple of the Lord.

The temple of the Lord. They assume that what they most hold dear can never be taken away. That despite their behavior, they are exceptional.

[17:46] Exceptional. And they believe this because they have been taught a national and spiritual myth. They believed this because years before, when the Assyrian Empire had been the dominant regional power and had destroyed the northern kingdom, the southern kingdom centered in Judah survived.

And this tradition developed that's well captured by the book of Isaiah. Therefore, says the Lord concerning the king of Assyria.

He shall not come into the city, Jerusalem, shoot an arrow there, come before it with a shield or cast up a siege ramp against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return.

He shall not come into this city, says the Lord, for I will defend this city to save it for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David. The people had come to believe that Jerusalem as a place where God lived was untouchable.

It would forever be secure. And then years before the Assyrian threat, the people understood God to have promised David a throne in Jerusalem forever.

[18 : 59] They had taken the words of the prophet Nathan to David seriously. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure before me.

Your throne shall be established forever. From these traditions, the leaders and the people had developed a false sense of well-being.

They had developed a sense of entitlement, allowing the temple to become a place of self-interest and social control. They had begun consuming religion.

In our time, we don't say this is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord. But we do say, I go to church.

I go to church. I go to church. We say some version of I'm saved. I'm saved. I'm saved. It's all too easy to claim well-being when our hearts are far from God.

[20 : 03] Just as the people of Judah did with the temple, it's all too easy to make the thing adjacent to God into our God. To make the thing that allows us to claim closeness to God an idol.

To trust in what one scholar calls the secondary point of reference instead of the primary mover.

We do this as much with our nation as with our faith. Repeating the phrase, more perfect union, more perfect union, more perfect union. Over and over, in an unwilling to accept the fact that many of our ancestors never experienced anything nearing union on this American soil.

And certainly would not have seen the foundations of this country as nearing perfection. Jeremiah insists on warning his people that they are not exceptional in their need to actively pursue God.

They are not exceptional in their need to actively pursue justice. The theme of his preaching here as throughout the book is that Babylon will destroy Judah.

[21 : 23] That they will become like that ancient shrine city in the north which had formerly housed the Ark of the Covenant containing God's glory. But which had been reduced to rubble.

Like the temple Shiloh was to have been the point of entry into a relationship with God. A beginning for a covenant community based on care for all.

But the people were concerned more about the image than the substance and thus were ruined. Even though Jeremiah sees the people as effectively past the point of return.

As he continues to warn of the coming Babylonian invasion, we get some even more instructive details about where they have gone wrong. And thus where we might go right.

See if you can listen for one particular piece of language that's repeated. So this is further along in the temple sermon starting in verse 20.

[22 : 32] Therefore, thus says the Lord God. My anger and my wrath shall be poured out on this place. On humans and animals and on the trees of the field and the fruit of the ground.

It will burn and not be quenched. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel. Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifice and eat the flesh.

From the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this command I gave them.

Obey my voice and I will be your God. And you shall be my people. Walk only in the way that I command you so that it may be well with you. Yet they did not obey or incline their ear.

But in the stubbornness of their evil will, they walked in their own counsels and looked backward rather than forward. From the day that your ancestors came out of the land of Egypt until this day, I persistently sent all my servants, the prophets, to them day and after day.

- [23 : 34] Yet they did not listen to me or pay attention, but they stiffened their necks. They did worse than their ancestors. So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you.

You shall call to them, but they will not answer you. You shall say to them, this is the nation that did not obey the voice of the Lord, their God, and did not accept discipline. Truth has perished.

It is cut off from their lips. Truth has perished. Jeremiah laments that the people have made their core task sacrifice when it was supposed to have been covenant.

And what is the fundamental act of covenant that has been forsaken in this passage? It's really simple. It's extremely simple.

It's the act of listening. Did y'all catch that? It was said six times that language of obey, listen, hear was all there.

- [24 : 41] Over and over, they are indicted for not listening. See, the second lesson, even as we think about what it means to no longer plead inadequacy, the second lesson I want us to consider from the book of Jeremiah is that listening to God is not optional.

Listening in the context of Jeremiah, says one scholar, is readiness to be addressed. Readiness to be commanded.

Readiness to be commanded. To have life ordered by God. See, in the Saturdays of our lives, it is so much easier to flail.

So much easier to fight, not as considered action, but just to keep our hands busy. So much easier to flee into denial or passivity.

So in this new year, how will you intentionally cultivate a space in which you can listen to God?

- [25 : 51] And I don't mean that in the abstract. I mean that in the where, when, how. Because y'all, I looked at the headlines this morning.

Where, when, how will we listen? This is not a mastering of some kind of technique.

But rather, a centering down, because we know that in a world where Dr. King's nightmare seems closer to realization than his dream, that there is no other way.

Listening, writes Pastor Emma Justice, does not happen with closed hands, crossed arms, or clenched heart.

Listening, hospitality requires willingness and ability to be open to the other. So how is God inviting you just this very minute to open your hands and uncross your arms?

- [27 : 03] To become just a little bit more vulnerable in a relationship of communion. The good news underneath Jeremiah's many, many, many words is that God desires to draw near to you.

And so how will you respond to that this year with a listening heart? Friends, the counsel of Jeremiah's temple sermon is to stop consuming deceptive words of well-being.

To stop believing the lie that, in our context, it will not take intentional work to reconstruct your faith. To stop believing that just attending this church can somehow stand in for the rich life of faith that God longs for you to have.

To stop believing that the better angels of our nature are close at hand when it comes to the problems of our nation. To stop believing that you have to give control of your story, the story of your personal life, the story of this nation, to another for interpretation instead of interpreting it for yourself.

As Dr. King drew his speech on the three evils of racism, excessive materialism, and military...

[28 : 33] Ooh, the M's, y'all. The three evils of racism, excessive materialism, and militarism to a close, he said these words.

May I say, in conclusion, that there is a need now more than ever before for men and women in our nation to be creatively maladjusted.

When the dream threatens to become a nightmare, when deceptive words are all around, we have to be people who are creatively maladjusted. And the book of Jeremiah reminds us that the only way for us individually and communally to know how to do that is to listen.

So friends, may the word of God come to you in all your seasons of Saturday.

And may you have hands and hearts open enough to listen and respond in faithfulness. Amen.