

# Sermon

## “Walking in the good way, the ancient path”

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, January 17, 2021

Second Sunday after Epiphany

## Prayer for Illumination

You are the God of earth & sky, land and sea — creator of all that is. We praise you.

You are the God who chooses a people *through whom you intend to bless the whole world*.

As was true of our ancestors we imagine ourselves “chosen,” by you. “Chosen, holy, and beloved” (Col. 3:12-ff).

In a little while we will sing, *I Was There to Hear Your Borne Cry* and reflect on your enduring presence in our lives from beginning to the end. We are consoled in your intentions of mercy.

And yet, we also say, “The Word of the Lord!” And, “Thanks be to God!” And by these declarations we signal that we are people *of this text*. *This vexing, haunting, troubled-text*. A text today which declares the great danger of treating with contempt your fierce determination to establish a human community of equity, justice, and neighborly kindness.

We gather today in the presence of your Words given in the poetry of the Psalmist and the Prophet Jeremiah. Poetry which is unambiguous in its assertion that you are not a God to be mocked. That your ferocious will is on the side of justice and equity, and that you are the sort of God who can lose patience with us after repeated efforts to warn — with a global pandemic taking more than 2 million lives, with a collapse of civility and neighborly grace, with the staccato of gun violence, and the of tramping boots across the land. We are haunted by the memory that you have many times put your people into free-fall . . . that you regularly remove the systems of certitude and order to which we are so enslaved.

We hear the poetry which describes your deep woundedness in the face of our infidelity. We hear the verses which describe your fierce wrath . . . and we are left to wonder about our casual habits of betrayal:

- † Our indifference in the face of other’s hardships
- † Our parsimony in the face of other’s poverty
- † Our hard-heartedness in the face of other’s illnesses which go untreated for lack of access

We wonder . . . and when we are honest — we worry.

Worry that it is too late — that you will rise up yet again to do your awful rearranging of the world-order. . . . we already notice our world on the brink of chaos:

- † Broken political systems prone to insurrection
- † A loss of respect for and pursuit of truth
- † Economy which only works for those at the top of the economic pyramid

So Lord, before it is too late — open our ears to hear your Word, soften the hard-heartedness within us, move us to rethink:

- † Our hostilities toward one another
- † Our passive acceptance of things your ferocious will cannot tolerate
- † Our impulses to ideologies over love.

Help us to, in the words of the Psalmist,

*See if there is any wicked way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Amen.

*Jer. 6:16 Thus says the LORD:  
Stand at the crossroads, and look,  
and ask for the ancient paths,  
where the good way lies; and walk in it,  
and find rest for your souls.  
But they said, “We will not walk in it.”*

*Jer. 6:17 Also I raised up sentinels for you:  
“Give heed to the sound of the trumpet!”*

*But they said, “We will not give heed.”*

*Jer. 6:18 Therefore hear, O nations,  
and know, O congregation, what will happen to them.*

*Jer. 6:19 Hear, O earth; I am going to bring disaster on this people,  
the fruit of their schemes,*

*because they have not given heed to my words;  
and as for my teaching, they have rejected it.*

*Jer. 6:20 Of what use to me is frankincense that comes from Sheba,*

*or sweet cane from a distant land?*

*Your burnt offerings are not acceptable,  
nor are your sacrifices pleasing to me.*

*Jer. 6:21 Therefore thus says the LORD:*

*See, I am laying before this people  
stumbling blocks against which they shall stumble;*

*parents and children together,  
neighbor and friend shall perish.*

*Psa. 139:0 To the leader. Of David. A Psalm.*

- 1 O LORD, you have searched me and known me.*
- 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from far away.*
- 3 You search out my path and my lying down,  
and are acquainted with all my ways.*
- 4 Even before a word is on my tongue,  
O LORD, you know it completely.*
- 5 You hem me in, behind and before,  
and lay your hand upon me.*
- 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
it is so high that I cannot attain it.*

*Psa. 139:7 Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?*

- 8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*
- 9 If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,*
- 10 even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.*
- 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light around me become night,"*
- 12 even the darkness is not dark to you;*

*the night is as bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.*

*Psa. 139:13 For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.*

*14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
that I know very well.*

*15 My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*

*16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.  
In your book were written*

*all the days that were formed for me,  
when none of them as yet existed.*

*17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!  
How vast is the sum of them!*

*18 I try to count them—they are more than the sand;  
I come to the end—I am still with you.*

*Psa. 139:19 O that you would kill the wicked, O God,  
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—*

*20 those who speak of you maliciously,  
and lift themselves up against you for evil!*

*21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?  
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?*

*22 I hate them with perfect hatred;  
I count them my enemies.*

*23 Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my thoughts.*

*24 See if there is any wicked way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

## **I. From the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE to the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE the nation of Israel endured a number of devastating**

**invasions:**

- 1. Assyrians**
  - 2. Babylonians**
  - 3. Persians**
  - 4. Egyptians**
- 
- A. The prophets are poets who tried to make theological sense out of these calamities — none more violent and devastating than the deportation of 587 to Babylon.**
    - 1. Prophets are not fortune tellers - they don't predict the future.**
    - 2. They are poets who observe where things are heading, given what they see going on and the create these very disturbing poems which have a few things in common.**
  - B. In prophetic imagination:**
    - 1. God wants a society built on**
      - a. economic equity**
      - b. legal justice**
      - c. neighborly kindness**
    - 2. When these non-negotiable expectations from the covenant given at Sinai are not met . . .**
      - a. Creation suffers**
      - b. The people suffer**  
**This next one will be hard to hear....**
      - c. God sends a destroyer to raze the city/ temple and begins again.**
    - 3. Jeremiah describes this unwelcome cleansing**

**which the Lord brings to those who refuse to join God in the noble and holy work of establishing equity, justice, and kindness.**

*Jer. 6:17 Also I raised up sentinels for you:  
“Give heed to the sound of the trumpet!”*

*But they said, “We will not give heed.”*

*Jer. 6:18 Therefore hear, O nations,  
and know, O congregation, what will happen to them.*

*Jer. 6:19 Hear, O earth; I am going to bring disaster on this people,  
the fruit of their schemes,*

*because they have not given heed to my words;  
and as for my teaching, they have rejected it.*

## **II. We might be tempted, we “enlightened” and modern people.**

**A. We might be tempted to think this is primitive and magical thinking to suggest that God has a hand in the affairs of the world.**

- 1. We would not be the first to think that way**
- 2. Zephaniah addresses such thinking:**

*Zeph. 1:12 At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,  
and I will punish the people  
who rest complacently on their dregs,  
those who say in their hearts,  
“The LORD will not do good,  
nor will he do harm.”*

*13 Their wealth shall be plundered,  
and their houses laid waste.  
Though they build houses,*

*they shall not inhabit them;  
though they plant vineyards,  
they shall not drink wine from them.*

**B. The sobering testimony of Sinai, which is replete throughout the prophets, is this —**

**“You cannot ignore God’s intention that:**

**1. Everyone have enough and no one has too much  
\* Food, housing, land, power... (See Exodus  
16:1-21 if you need to see this)**

**2. There be Justice! And justice for *all people***  
*Deut. 16:20 Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that  
you may live and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you.*

**3. That neighborly kindness & generosity must define  
our relationships with all people - particularly with  
those we find inconvenient or hard to love.**

*Deut. 15:7 If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your  
community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is  
giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy  
neighbor. 8 You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to  
meet the need, whatever it may be. 9 Be careful that you do not entertain a  
mean thought, thinking, “The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,”  
and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your  
neighbor might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt. 10  
Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the  
LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.  
11 Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore  
command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your  
land.”*

### **III. So how shall we respond to this perilous moment?**

#### **A. Jeremiah advises that we remember . . .**

*Jer. 6:16 Thus says the LORD:*

*Stand at the crossroads, and look,  
and ask for the ancient paths,  
where the good way lies; and walk in it,  
and find rest for your souls.*

#### **B. I trust by now that you see that at this crossroad we choose the “ancient paths,” and the “good way” of joining God in:**

- 1. Economic equity**
- 2. Legal and social justice**
- 3. Neighborly generosity & kindness**

### **IV. The nature of the modern American experiment is that nearly *all of us***

#### **A. Both voices on the political left & political right**

- 1. Are more and more strident**
- 2. Are awfully sure that we are right.**

#### **B. I have likely shared with you my mother’s description of “Lang males” who are “frequently wrong, but never in doubt.”**

- 1. I definitely inherited that gene!**
- 2. I often think that I am right about ...  
everything.**

#### **C. Bob Ramey — “Kindness is better than being right.”**

### **V. Please do not hear me as an echo of those who have stood upon the floor of our congress and suggested that**



**“There is nothing to see here. Let’s just move along and forget what has happened.”**

- A. To do that would be to ignore the teachings of the prophets.**
- B. BUT - as hard as it is - we must find a way to remain “kind.”**
- C. In monitoring my own self-righteousness in recent days I have seen how impatient I am with the foibles of others . . . and how gleeful I can be at their demise.**
  - 1. I suspect I am not the only one who is struggling to remain humble and kind in the face of current events.**
- D. The Psalmist points the way forward — to focus our attention on our own participation in all that saddens God:**

23 *Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my thoughts.*

24 *See if there is any wicked way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

## **VI. Finally, two quotes in closing:**

- A. One from a moment in our nation not unlike the present — where divisions and hostility run rampant and one side might be expected to gleefully celebrate its victory:**
  - 1. Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address (Just before the end of the Civil War)**
    - † He resists the urge to gleefully celebrate**

† **The whole address is a study in self-reflection and political restraint — I commend it to your reading:**

*“I am loth to to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.”*

**B. The second is from one of the great voices of Christian faith in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century — Merton.**

**1. 1949 - as the reality of the end of WWII came into view and the anticipation of the Cold War too . . . he penned the following: [edited for inclusive language - PHL]**

*“If [people] really wanted peace they would sincerely ask God for it and [God] would give it to them. But why should [God] give the world a peace which it does not really desire? The peace the world pretends to desire is really no peace at all.*

*To some ~~men~~ peace merely means the liberty to exploit other people without fear of retaliation or interference. To others peace means the freedom to rob others without interruption. To still others it means the leisure to devour the good of the earth without being compelled to interrupt their pleasures to feed those whom their greed is starving. And to practically everybody peace simply means the absence of any physical violence that might cast a shadow over lives devoted to the satisfaction of their animal appetites for comfort and pleasure.*

*Many ~~men~~ like these have asked God for what they thought was “peace” and have wondered why their prayer was not answered. They could not understand that it actually was answered. God left them with what they desired, for their idea of peace was only another form of war. The “cold war” is simply the normal consequence of our corrupt idea of a peace based on a policy of “every man for himself” in ethics, economics, and political life. It is absurd to hope for a solid peace based on fictions and illusions!*

*So instead of loving what you think is peace, love other [people] and love God above all. And instead of hating people you think are war makers,*

*hate the appetites and the disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed — but hate these things in yourself, not in another. — 1949*