



“Where is God?”

Text: Jeremiah 14-10, 7:1-11

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

It is the last Sunday of the year. You may think I'm still on beach time, but it's true. This is the last Sunday of the year - the church year - the liturgical year. Next week is the First Sunday in Advent, which means it is the First Sunday of the new worship year.

This Sunday is known as “Christ the King” Sunday and it is a celebration of one of the Reformation's central ideas: that God is the Sovereign Lord of all time and space. It is a day when we intentionally remind ourselves that, no matter the political conditions and climates of our world, God is the Lord of heaven and earth and we watch and wait for the coming of God's realm of righteousness, justice, and peace. For us, that realm was ushered in through the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And we believe that realm continues to be revealed and made known and will find its ultimate expression in the consummation of time that we refer to as “the second coming of Christ.” This crucified and risen Lord alone claims our adoration and allegiance and we proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. Today we recognize and celebrate that central truth.

But there are times - aren't there? - when we scratch our heads and wonder where God is. Where is God when cities are destroyed and lives are lost by horrific fires? Where is God when hurricanes obliterate the landscape and the people who called it home? Where is God when the cause of evil seems to triumph and truth and righteousness seem absent and lacking?

It's easy to find God at the Thanksgiving table, groaning under its bounty. God is very present when the family gathers around the Christmas tree and the Easter table. God is right there when a baby is born and God can even be there when a long-suffering saint shakes off this life and enters the next.

But, where is God when things don't seem to be going well?

Our central text comes from the prophecy of Jeremiah. Walter Brueggemann, whose commentaries on Jeremiah are brilliant and the source of much of the background for this sermon, tells us that “the book of Jeremiah ‘re-describes’ the historical process by which God’s people *go into exile* and surprisingly, come *out of exile*. That description hinges on the powerful presence of God in the historical process through God’s word that has its own free say, without reference to human strategies and calculations.”¹

The prophecy of Jeremiah is all about the sovereignty of God. It is a profound statement that God is in charge, regardless of what earthly leaders of church and state proclaim. It is a reminder that God will have history move in the direction that God desires for it to move. And it jogs our memory and brings back to the forefront of our attention that God uses human beings to bear God’s word that will decide the fate and “future of the city, the temple, the dynasty, and, indeed, the nation.”²

The sovereignty of God is proclaimed again in the use of six words - verbs - that appear: “pluck up,” “pull down,” “destroy,” “overthrow,” “build,” and “plant.” The first four are negative. Nothing any human being can do can affect the course of God’s plan for history when God has judged that situation. The last two - build and plant - remind us that when God chooses to make a way, a way is made. God can bring newness to the most conflicted situation and God can work redemption in the midst of the worst condemnation. There are no dead ends with God.

And that is the heart of Jeremiah’s message to the people. Stay on the course you are on and God’s judgment will fall on you with full force. Turn back to God’s way and there will be something new. That’s the first message we receive from Jeremiah this morning.

The second message is challenging to people who are torn between the political world and the world as God sees it and wants it to be. Jeremiah lived in such a time. In Jeremiah’s day, the temple taught an ideology that supported the state. It was based on the assumption that because God had made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that promised land and dominion that there was nothing that could contravene that covenant. So, the message of the temple and the state was that nothing could ever break the covenantal promise of land and they taught that message in concert with each other.

Jeremiah’s message is an uncomfortable one to hear. It was even more uncomfortable for Jeremiah, who was called to deliver it. It was a message that could be deemed treasonous by the state. Jeremiah declares: “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...’” Do not trust in these deceptive, or false, words and teachings. Don’t accept this message by religious people that prop up politicians. When you preach sermons like that, you get mail.

Jeremiah is not deterred. He continues:

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.

If you change your ways, then, says God, you will stay in the land and I will dwell with you. If you persist in walking in a way that is contrary to my way, says God, then you will be removed from the land and from my presence. If you live by God's law, as offered in the Torah, you will live. If you abandon that law, you will be wiped out.

We may not like that kind of language. But, remember where this all started. God is sovereign and God can do as God pleases. And we have the power of choice. We can choose to walk in the way God intends for us to walk, or we can abandon God's way and live with the consequences.

If you pursue justice, if you do not practice oppression, if you do not shed innocent blood, and if you remain faithful to me, says God, all will be well. It reminds us of Micah's summation of the law: "do justice, practice kindness, and walk humbly with your God." It is the synopsis of the law. When Jesus was asked for such a summation, you know what he said: "Love God...and love your neighbor." This is the way we are called to live. That's Jeremiah's second message for the morning.

Now, here's the problem. We are religious creatures. If we were not, we wouldn't be here this morning. And we are political creatures. We have certain political positions and philosophies which we hold dear. And there is absolutely nothing wrong with that.

But there are times when they come into conflict. When our political ideas supersede our faith responsibilities, we run into trouble. When being a Republican, or a Democrat, or an Independent is more important than being God's person, we are, as they say, "fixin' to mess up."

It has everything to do with this day that we are celebrating. The earliest creed in the Church was simply, "Jesus is Lord!" That meant that everyone and everything else wasn't. It was also a direct challenge to the political leader - the Emperor - because a good citizen of the Roman Empire would joyfully say, "Caesar is Lord!" Caesar? Or Jesus?

For Christian people, there can be no doubt - and no room for doubt: Either Jesus is Lord or someone, or something else, is. If God is Sovereign - as we profess God is - then all others fall beneath God's authority.

What does that mean for us? Exactly what it meant for the people of Jeremiah's day. "Act justly one with another...do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow...do not shed innocent blood...and...do not go after other gods to your own hurt." It means "doing justice...practicing acts of love and kindness...and walking humbly with our God." It means "loving God and loving neighbor." It means living by that credo no matter what. It means being God's person first and foremost.

And when other voices persuade us to abandon God's way, we must respond, "no." When political leaders and their philosophies make mockery of God's laws and commandments, we must reject their words and actions. Whenever we are presented with an alternative to the good news of God's grace and love - whenever we are called upon to tolerate injustice, overlook oppression, abandon those in need, reject

those who look to us for hope, and are challenged to deny the humanity of another - we are bound by our baptism and our acceptance into God's family - to reject those words and actions and to live God's love.

It was in 1933 that the Protestant churches in Germany met together in a place called Barmen to speak together about what it meant that the Third Reich was establishing a church of the Reich with Hitler as the head. What grew out of that gathering was a statement that appears in our Book of Confessions. Known as "The Theological Declaration of Barmen," it is a document that reminds us that God is the supreme authority, that Christ is head of the church, and that God's way of life is the way of life that leads to peace, justice, and happiness.

Living under the most dire circumstance we can imagine and at a time when their lives could be taken for simply stating their faith, these Christians stood up to the most vile and malicious political philosophy ever devised and affirmed in the strongest possible terms their commitment to God, through their discipleship to Jesus Christ. They stated,

We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords - areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.³

Sisters and brothers, on this Sunday of Christ the King, the question is: "Where is God?" The answer is "everywhere." God is above, below, beside, behind, and before. God is in charge, in control, and involved in this world of God's creating.

James Russell Lowell was a professor, lawyer, poet, and abolitionist, who wrote a hymn I learned a long time ago. The hymn was written in opposition to the war on Mexico in the 1840s. The final verse has always stayed with me:

Though the cause of evil prosper, yet 'tis truth alone is strong;
Though her portion be the scaffold and upon the throne be wrong:
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above His own.

Where is God? God is where there is justice and acts of kindness. God is where oppression's burden is lifted. God is where the powerless are treated as befitting those created in God's image. God is where the neighbor is loved and respected. God is where honesty and humility are experienced between God and God's people.

And when we have trouble seeing God, or knowing that God is near, remember:

...behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above His own.
For now and evermore. Amen.

1) *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, p. 23

2) *Ibid*, p. 25

3) Theological Declaration of Barmen, PCUSA