

“Just Cause”

First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 12:1-4

New Testament Lesson: Matthew 5:43-48

In the real-life movie Operation Finale, Peter Milkin (played by Oscar Issac) is on the trail of a Nazi war criminal named Adolf Eichmann, known as the architect of the Final Solution, Hitler’s use of gas chambers to kill 6 million Jews during the Holocaust.

Milkin starts out wanting to kill Eichmann with his bare hands, but they need to bring him to justice, not vengeance. And justice demands that Eichmann sign a letter agreeing to be tried in Israel. To accomplish that, Milkin uses another tact, tries something different.

Whether he succeeds or not and what he tried, I’ll leave to the movie. The point is, it is not for us to exact our brand of justice at all costs. Instead, we are called to trust in God to work out justice and righteousness his way, on his timetable. The problem with justice is it does take time, it can be uncertain, and sometimes the bad guys do get away with it – at least as far as we can see.

That was the case for the Prophet Jeremiah, who was seeking justice and seeing around him only evil. Jeremiah lived some 600 years before Jesus, at a time when the Israelites had lost touch with God in their day-to-day lives. They let themselves be lured into practices that distracted them from the faith, as handed down from our spiritual ancestor Abraham. They were placing other things ahead of God and hanging out with people not interested in good and healthy religious and spiritual practices.

So God raised up a king, King Josiah to tear down the shrines they had built for other gods and return the people to the basics of the faith, God’s covenant with his people Israel with us. Jeremiah, as the spokesperson for God, was seen as the person tearing down the shrines, shrines where countless priests and other national leaders made their living.

Now, tell me, if you were to threaten another person’s livelihood, how do you think that person would respond? Not kindly, right. Maybe violently. Well, that’s just what happened to Jeremiah. As the prophet of God, Jeremiah was the lightning rod for the anger and wrath of the priests and officials about to lose their jobs. They wanted to kill him; literally!

In Nazi Germany the Jews became the lightning rod for the anger and wrath of a deranged political newcomer hell bent on wealth and power, Adolf Hitler. Hitler rose to power very quickly. But instead of serving the people and attracting followers, he created enemies to secure his leadership position.

Similarly, the priests who were leading people away from the faith needed an enemy to secure their position, and that enemy was Jeremiah. Realizing his life is in danger, Jeremiah calls out to God. He starts by asking God for help. Earlier in, chapter 11, he says, “Let me see your retribution upon them, for to you (O Lord) I have committed my cause.” Jeremiah is 100 percent behind the Lord God Almighty even if everyone else wasn’t.

There was once a large group of people with Jesus standing on one side and Satan on the other. A fence ran through the group, separating them. Jesus and Satan began calling to the people. One by one, each made up his or her own mind and went to either Jesus or Satan. This kept going until Jesus had a large group gathered around him, as did Satan. One man stood in the middle, having joined neither group. Instead, he climbed the fence and sat there. Jesus and his people left. So did Satan and his people. And the man sat on the fence. Suddenly, Satan came back looking for something he'd left behind. The man said, "Have you lost something?" Satan looked straight at him and replied, "No, there you are. Come with me." "But I sat on the fence" said the man. "I chose neither you nor him," "Oh, you made a choice," said Satan. "That fence is mine."

When it comes to picking sides, it's never a good idea to sit on the fence. It's always better to pick Jesus over Satan, right over wrong, spiritual sacrifice and growth over worldly consumption and distraction. Even if all the people around you seem to be doing the Devil's work, that's no reason to give up on your faith to God.

That's not to say, however, that we can't be mad at God for the way things are. Even though Jeremiah was 100 percent on the side of God, he got angry, he couldn't help noticing things weren't going too well.

Jeremiah looks around and sees the world as it is and he's upset. God has not brought down his enemies. In fact, the enemies of God seem to be prospering. And Jeremiah cries out to God, saying, "Why does the way of the guilty prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?"

Well, we can relate to that. We need only look around to see people rewarded with wealth and power even amid scandal after scandal. There's the Hollywood sex scandal, the political quid-pro-quo scandal, the priest and bishop sexual-abuse scandal.

And it's not just these national and international scandals we see. We see little scandals happening all around us everyday – the kid who cheats at school and gets a better grade than you, the brother or sister who lies to dad and hides behind mom, the adult siblings who leave the care of your dear, sweet parents in your hands, with little help or support.

These and a hundred other little injustices everyday drive us crazy. We cry out to God for help. How can this kid be cheating like that and get away with?!? Why do some people get to sit back while others are working their butts off?

Or in the words of Jeremiah, "You plant them," O Lord, "and they take root; they grow and bring forth fruit; you are near in their mouths yet far from their hearts." In other words, they act all nice and holier than thou, but you and I, God, we both know they aren't doing the right thing, and still they get away with it – neglecting their family responsibilities, lying to save their own skin, cheating to get ahead, scheming to stay in power, and being as vulgar and abusive as they want just to satisfy their sick sexual addictions. What's the world coming to?

That's just what Jeremiah wanted to know. So he calls out to God, saying, "How long will the land mourn, and the grass of every field wither? For the wickedness of those who live in it, the animals and the birds are swept away, and because people said, 'He is blind to our ways.'" "God doesn't see or care."

What Jeremiah is noticing – and we see it too – is that wickedness is allowed to run rampant, even while it tears apart the planet, destroys basic decent, and has bad people trample on the good. Or as Jeremiah says, “The land (itself) mourn(s), the grass ... withers, and the birds are swept away” all “because people” think God “is blind to (their) ways.”

But God is not blind to the ways of the wicked. He wasn't blind to it in the days of Jeremiah and God is not blind to it now. God knows what's going on in this world. And day by day, God is shining light into the darkness, and praying that we wake up and change our ways. Yes, God prays for us ! Prays we return to him and his ways.

God is always on the side of justice and righteousness, no matter what side we find ourselves on. And yet, it's true, sometimes we get dealt dirt for no good reason. Sometimes it's because of the wickedness of others. Sometimes it's just life. We live in an imperfect world, where bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. And we cry out to God, “How long?!? How long does the world have to put up with this?”

Just like Jeremiah, we search for an answer and we're not sure anyone's listening. If God is saying anything reassuring, we're just not getting it. And still, I'm here to tell you that God is listening to our pleas for justice and God has and is answering with the assurance of righteousness. And those of faith know that. We know we can trust in God when all's said and done. And so did Jeremiah. “You will be in the right, O Lord,” he says. Jeremiah has faith that despite any evidence to the contrary, God is still large and in charge, and that God is just and righteous.

Israel was restored as God's people, as our spiritual ancestors. Nazi Germany was destroyed. Lying and cheating are never for the best, and divine light is still shining the world over, even in the darkest recesses of society, even amid sexual, political and economic abuses. We can't know the day or hour of God's judgment. We can only know the outcome, and that outcome, like God himself, is just and right.

So no matter what unfairness you experience in life, no matter what injustice you see in the world, do not despair; continue working for justice and righteousness. God is still large and in charge, just and right, and God's way will triumph. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of heaven and earth and sea, we pray for those whose lives have been disrupted, whose homes have been destroyed, whose families have been injured or endangered by hurricane Florence.

Send your sense of calm and peace amid the storm, your abundant provision amid the scarcity, your comforting spirit amid the grief.

We cry out to you, Lord, also amid the chaos that so often engulfs our lives. Help us to trust in you to restore order where there is disruption, an abiding peace where there is fear, love in response to anger, healing amid illness and disease.

We pray for all those undergoing medical treatments and recovering from illness.

We pray, too for our nation, our community, and our world. We trust you, O God, to bring us to a closer walk alongside Jesus, that all creation would reflect your glory and truth and righteousness.

And to ensure that we pray rightly, we join in the prayer that you taught us in sending Jesus to light our way. We pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.**

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.