

November 25, 2018

How to Be Safe

Annette Hill Briggs

Jeremiah 7:1-11

⁷ The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ² 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 that enter these gates to worship the Lord. ³ 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. ⁴ Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord."

⁵ For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, ⁶ 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, ⁷ then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

⁸ Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. ⁹ Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, ¹⁰ 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? ¹¹ Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord.

Jeremiah was a prophet. And he never had a good friend his whole life. No one understood a single word he said and, in the end, he drank the same bitter wine drunk by everyone else in Judah: the bitter wine of exile. Wine fermented by the deep conviction that hearing the truth was the same as doing the truth, the conviction that our covenant promises can be faithfully ignored while God keeps God's, regardless – because that's who God is.

With Jeremiah, we've come close to the end of the Old Testament narrative. Babylon is crushing Assyria everywhere. Egypt wants Judah in place as a buffer on her northern border between herself and Babylon. Both Egypt and Babylon offer alliance with Judah, and the successive kings of Judah tease them each in turn, until Babylon has had enough. They invade. They occupy. The deportations begin in 598 BCE.

Jeremiah escapes into Egypt, which is exile all the same. Eleven years later, there's nothing left of Judah politically. The Temple is destroyed and the last deportations occur. All the while, Jeremiah is preaching repentance. Because no matter how late the hour, the truth is still the truth, even when conducted by kings and presidents. Repentance is

theological work. Foreign alliance may or may not have been bad politics. It was terrible theology.

Judah made her alliance centuries before, in the wilderness promises of covenant. Promises summed up by the prophet Micah as *“Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly.”* But as Israel grew in power and in wealth – became an empire in her own right – that theology morphed into another, one that said *“we can do what we want, since God can't help loving us most,”* despite all prophetic preaching to the contrary. Then other empires grew ever bigger, ever stronger, and these biblical people found a way to align themselves with empire values and still keep their theology – at least the part about being God's favorite people, about God's dedication to their personal well-being and safety.

They kept this theology, even as Israel collapsed to Assyria, even as Babylon breathed down her neck in pursuit of Egypt. Along came the next prophet Jeremiah, preaching into the wind, because no matter how late the hour, the truth is still the truth. *Your presence in the Lord's house does not qualify as obedience to covenant,* he said. *Don't oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow; don't shed innocent blood in this place; don't go after other gods.*

Who is he describing? He's describing every worldly empire everywhere. And Judah too, if they choose to make alliance. *Their values will be yours,* Jeremiah says. *You don't get their protection without their reputation too. The blood they shed is on your hands as well.* The prophet continues, *You stand here, trusting in deceptive words, to no good end. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, lie, pledge allegiance to idols?*

Is there any line you won't cross? seems to be his question. *Then come back in here, stand before me, in my house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are safe!’ – only go leave again and keep doing the very same things? Has this house become a den of robbers?* (That should sound familiar to you!) *You do know I can see everything you're doing, right?* says the Lord, in the voice of Jeremiah.

The tricky part, of course, is that no one thought they themselves were doing anything wrong. Such is the nature of systemic injustice, systemic evil. Everybody feels personally innocent. Or, at least, nobody feels personally responsible. And great is the temptation, of course, to compare the times, to note how so-called biblical people in our own day bow down to empires, after kings and presidents who promise to keep us safe, no matter the price in terms of justice, kindness and humility, the things we know God requires of us.

And yet, I'm more and more convinced that faithfulness to the gospel is not concerned with how others ought to live, but how I choose to live. And how I live begins and persists with how I pray. And by *pray*, I merely mean, live inside my own heart, and soul, and head. Which is no small thing. And I keep wishing it came down to something other than this, other than each of us getting our own hearts/heads/souls right with God.

But if I skip that, I am ever-so-slowly coming to understand, nothing works. The longer I listen to myself pray those lists of things I'm always praying – the list of things I'm grateful for; the list of things I think I need, for myself, for others, for the world; and the list of things that grieve me and give me cause for fear – the longer I hear myself praying these three prayers, the more clear it becomes to me how innocent I believe I am when I'm not praying. The sense that this is MY life. That MY life is in some way removed from the flow of all life and every other life. The more it's clear to me that the great pretense of my life is that all our destinies are not wrapped up together when, in truth, they are. The world does not go to hell in a handbasket and the church NOT go with it, simply because we think we are safe.

Jeremiah knew what was true and right. He knew what was wrong with Israel and Judah. But knowing did not save him from their same fate, any more than knowing will save us, if we are wise enough to know. Which I am certainly not.

Real prayer isn't political. It isn't knowing who is right and what the right course of action is. Real prayer is remembering where our alliance lies, so that our faith and hope can be rightly placed and our lives directed, not by the values of empire, but by the values of covenant: justice, kindness, humility. In prayer I put myself – heart, soul and head – before God alone, and stay there unafraid of whatever is at the gate or border of my country or my heart, unswayed by the empires or the personal promise-makers who beg for my allegiance as if they can protect me from the destiny of forgetful people or my own failing faith.

Those first Bible people used the word *chosen-ness* to describe God's favor upon them. We Jesus people use the word *grace*. God's grace is what gathers us together; grace is that to which we sing and speak and testify. Grace is not most visible in here, but out there where we walk and talk, where we spend our money and take our stand.

Grace is first of all theological. It says the allegiances offered by the empires of this world are *too little too late* for humanity now. That what's needed, most of all and all the time, is justice, kindness, and humility. Covenant-keeping in quotidian scale. Daily justice. Daily kindness. Humility through and through. Discovered first and always in the quietness of prayer. Continuing here and now.

Pray with me.