



Worship Series: “A Prophet’s Witness: From Grief to Hope”

17th Sunday after Pentecost

“High Hopes?”—Sermon Text: Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

11 September 2016

“Never deprive someone of hope; it might be all they have”

--H. Jackson Brown Jr.

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Arlington Police Chief Will Johnson

Police Chief Will Johnson started his law enforcement career in 1994 and promoted through the ranks before being promoted as the Arlington Police Department’s 15th Police Chief in March, 2013. Will has 19 years of law enforcement experience in areas of law enforcement to include field operations, investigations, homeland security, and special events and administration.

Chief Johnson was the lead planner and incident commander for the 2010 NBA All-Star game, 2010 and 2011 World Series, and Super Bowl XLV which was played in 2011. Arlington Texas is the home of the Dallas Cowboys football team and Texas Rangers baseball team.

He is a Police Executive Research Forum Executive Fellow, and published author. During his fellowship he developed a use-of-force accountability model which focused on bridging informational silos within departments to create a culture of integrity. He also conducted research concerning custodial deaths occurring after the use of a conducted energy device (CED), more commonly known as a Taser. Will has published multiple articles related to force accountability and police management and has lectured as a professional expert on both topics. Will is a 2013 recipient of the Gary P. Hayes Award.

Chief Johnson holds a Master’s from TCU in Liberal Arts and a Bachelor of Arts from Texas Tech University in History. He is a graduate of the FBI National Academy 245th Session where he was elected Session President, the Senior Management Institute for Police and the FBI’s Command Institute for Law Enforcement Executives, and the Texas Law Enforcement Management Institute’s 45th Leadership Command College. Chief Johnson is married to his wife Laura and has two daughters.

11 At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem: A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights in the desert toward my poor people, not to winnow or cleanse—
12 a wind too strong for that. Now it is I who speak in judgment against them.

22 “For my people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good.”
23 I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light.

24 I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. 25 I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled.
26 I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger.

27 For thus says the Lord: The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end. 28 Because of this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above grow black; for I have spoken, I have purposed; I have not relented nor will I turn back (Jer. 4:11-12, 22-28).

Jeremiah 4 describes a community of faith lacking sense as well as revealing a nation short on stability, overwhelmed by human evil, and receiving a serious dose of God's anger. We could say that God was not having a good day with God's created humans when God gave Jeremiah this word.

Fifteen years ago today ironically Jeremiah 4 was the lectionary text for that week. Most of us remember where we were on that day and at that hour. I was teaching a Bible study at FUMC, Belton. When my friend Bobby Baggett took his children to school, he left me at his kitchen table watching CNN. I watched the whole sordid business of planes, fire, collapsing buildings, dust, and smoke for three hours. Jeremiah spoke to many that week and Jeremiah speaks to us again today about fear and about consequences of ignoring God and God's message. As Bob Dylan famously wrote and sang: "You don't need a weather man to know which way the wind blows" (*Subterranean Homesick Blues*, January 14, 1965 released by Columbia Records).

Wind beckons readers back to the beginnings of the creations story. The wind reminds us of Genesis' beauty and wonder at creation. That is when we read about wind as a breeze or gentle zephyr it recalls the beauty and wonder of creation. Yet if we recollect our reading's first verse: "A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights in the desert toward my poor people, not to winnow or cleanse—a wind too strong for that." A scary wind—a sirocco—hot, dry, dust-laden wind blowing North from Africa and affecting parts of southern Europe—a wind too strong to be useful!

As I mentioned last week, when Jeremiah uses images like "wind" or "breath" or "spirit"—in Hebrew *ruach*—Jeremiah employs it in the spirit of creation. This wind or spirit will hover

and stir. It blows upon the formless void that God enlivens as that place that we call home—planet earth. This is a place that can and will bless God’s creatures if we let it.

Yet it seems what we have instead of a blessing is a world of not God’s making but rather our own making. As our human substitute for a spirit of divine calmness, we have rather created for ourselves a spirit of panic and high anxiety. All for naught!

David McCullough in his book *Mornings On Horseback* tells a story about young Teddy Roosevelt: Mittie (his mother) had found he was so afraid of the Madison Square Church that he refused to set foot inside if alone. He was terrified, she discovered, of something called the “zeal.” It was crouched in the dark corners of the church ready to jump at him, he said. When she asked what “a zeal” might be, he said he was not sure, but thought it was probably a large animal like an alligator or a dragon. He had heard the minister read about it from the Bible. Using a concordance, she read him those passages containing the word ZEAL until suddenly, very excited, he told her to stop. The line was from the Book of John, 2:17: “And his disciples remembered that it was written, ‘The ZEAL of thine house hath eaten me up’ ” Perhaps we are still justifiably afraid to come near the “zeal” of the Lord, for we are perfectly aware it could “eat us up” (*Mornings On Horseback*, Simon & Schuster; May 12, 1982).

Frank Yamada, currently President at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago and a Cubs fan, shares some of his thoughts about our text when he reminds us that Jeremiah 4 offers much to ponder on the nature of divine judgment.

First, God’s judgment causes us to take a sobering look at the consequences of our failures as human beings, speaking the plain truth about the outcomes of our shortsightedness.

Second, judgment pushes us to take responsibility for these failings, to turn from our destructive ways and make right what we have made wrong. Repentance is simultaneously turning from evil and turning toward good.

Finally, God’s judgment makes us aware of the fact that human sinfulness is not simply about individual morality. God intimately connects our obedience to God’s covenant to our relationship with others and to the created order.

When things are not right among humans, the whole earth groans. We are answerable not just to ourselves, but to all our fellow earthlings. When we inflict violence on each other, we hurt the earth. When we abuse God's creation, we damage ourselves. Knowing God, by the prophetic definition, means that we act justly with each other and live responsibly in relationship to God's creation.

Walter Brueggemann writes that prophecy "is not a blueprint for the future. It is not a prediction. It is not an act of theology that seeks to scare into repentance. It is, rather, a rhetorical attempt to engage this numbed, unaware community in an imaginative embrace of what is happening . . . because . . . evil finally must be answered for" (*Walter Brueggemann, A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, 61*).

9/11 creates fear as does the evil we do and other people as well. Perhaps the only way any of us can overcome fear and evil is to trust that God can walk us all through it. Amen.