ENTERING THE WRECKAGE: GRIEF AND *HOPE IN JEREMIAH*, AND *THE RESCRIPTING* OF THE PASTORAL VOCATION IN A TIME OF GEOPOLITICAL CRISIS

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The pastors I know, including myself, are exhausted. Leadership is taking a high toll on our marriages, our relationships with our children and friends, our bodies, and our beings. More in our bodies than in our brains, we know that the church is living in a state of perpetual white-water, and that the certainties and securities of Christendom's stable past are no more. The problem is that we pastors were not trained for our task today, which is the post-Christendom renegotiation of the church's vocation. Christendom afforded the church and its pastors many advantages, but those advantages of power and prestige blinded the church to the many ways the word of God became compromised to causes subversive and many times antithetical to the reign of God. Nevertheless, so terribly enamoured with those advantages, we pastors are pressured by anxious church folk and our own anxious selves to keep what we have cherished from slipping through our fingers.

The collapse of Christendom is a crisis that can no longer be denied. Nor can highly functioning and competent pastors expertly manage the church's dislocation from its once privileged position in American culture. We are trained in the skill sets of life within a modern world in which technology and technique provide answers to every problem. Those skills are not helpful now, and our over-reliance on them only proves that the assumptions and practices of the dominant culture have co-opted our imaginations to a way of organizing our lives according to technique rather than the Bible.

Hard work and the competent management of our technological resources will not allow us to continue to live in denial; we are standing in the wreckage of our cherished past and unable to engineer the future. Our denial has kept us from grief, and until we learn to grieve we cannot move forward. Any good pastor who cares for the bereaved knows that. Yet, we have not identified ourselves as bereaved persons living amid cultural wreckage.

I think the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 crack wide our denial and force us to grieve, whether we want to or not. This geopolitical crisis, which ended America's naiveté about its life in the world, begs pastors to do more than serve as chaplains to our nation's collective grief. We are called, as Ricoeur has pointed out, to the twin acts of suspicion (asking hard questions about our past compromises) and recovery (re-

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entering strange, neglected biblical texts in order to "rescript" imaginations too long captive to dominant ideologies). This work of suspicion and recovery is precisely the pastoral work the prophet Jeremiah was called to practise in the midst of his nation's wreckage. In and around the decade 598-587 BCE, Jeremiah confronted the pastoral denial and mistaken management strategies of Judah's religious and political leadership.

Current scholarship helps us to see Jeremiah as more than a single, nearly deranged prophet operating on the fringes of Jerusalem society. Jeremiah was a spokesperson for a political movement within the Jerusalem establishment that dared to view the situation from a very different point of view. With strong ties to the Deuteronomic tradition and the *torah* reform movement under Josiah, Jeremiah and the leaders of the movement (which included Baruch and the highly influential and prominent family of Shaphan) critiqued textually, that is, from the vantage point of *torah*, the assumptions of Jerusalem's political and religious establishment.

The book of Jeremiah, including its influence among those living in the wreckage of the exile, plus the birth of new forms of community life exemplified by Ezra in the restoration, testifies that among a society of pastors, who intentionally and regularly enter an alternative reading of our current situation, God is at work bringing to birth enormously potent missional energy. By this action, God converts our exhaustion and rebirths us for ministry among tired and terribly compromised congregations.

The book of Jeremiah seems to swing rhetorically around two major literary sections, and each section is punctuated by particular focus. Death and grief are the major themes that give coherence to chapters 1-25, while hope and new beginnings emerge in chapters 26-52. Several key texts provide prophetic strategies that can help pastors rescript their own ministerial tasks in a time of massive social upheaval.

The pastoral work of "truth-telling": naming deadly compromises (Jeremiah 7:27-8:3)

Few pastors like conflict. While we expect conflict in pastoral ministry, we do not expect it to be the norm. Most of us avoid it, some of us run from it, and few, if any, of us would place the ministry of conflict at the centre of our work.

From the beginning of his call to ministry, Jeremiah knew he was not only called into conflict (the world around him was collapsing into political chaos: 1:14); he was also called to provoke it. By the very act of preaching he would help bring about the collapse of everything his nation held dear (1:10, 19). His ministry of conflict would not only terrify him (1:17); it would endanger his life (1:19; cf. 26:8).

In contrast, it is the stability and "centredness" of the church in Christendom that shape our understanding of ministry today. Our pastoral role has been assigned by a culture that, while it is willing to acknowledge the place of reli-

gion in its public life, relegates religion to the private values and virtues of its people. Pastors serve as priests to society and, apart from a few troublesome fanatics, readily accept the chaplaincy role those in power assign to them. Many of Jeremiah's contemporaries may have envisioned their role in much the same way, in that they were happy to be supportive of the dominant culture.

Jeremiah imagines the pastoral role very differently: his work is the work of "truth-telling". This consists of naming the deadly compromises of a people who think that their way of life is blessed by God and therefore is interminable, e.g. if the market wavers it will rebound, if enemies should look longingly at their resources the people's allies will stare them down (7:10).

To these lies, and against this self-assured ideology of security and certainty, Jeremiah dares to utter a vision of death. God gives him authority "to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow" (1:10) the practices and symbols of a culture propped up by people who stubbornly refuse to order their lives politically, economically and religiously according to the word of God. The Deuteronomic tradition that moulds Jeremiah knows that the failure to listen to and obey Yahweh, which is a failure named four times here in staccato repetition (vv. 7:27-28), renders only one verdict: death (Deut. 8:19-20). The response of the people, says God, should be a frenzied, unrestrained wail of grief (v. 7:29). The land has been defiled and polluted by actions never sanctioned by God, yet practised by the people. We are left feeling that this people never questioned their practices and had no standard by which to judge them as good or bad. They uncritically carried into their communities the practices of the cultures around them, and now sacrifice their beloved children to feed the economy and keep the political machine running (vv. 30-31).

"Therefore!", (v. 31) thunders Jeremiah as he speaks the opening words of Yahweh's sentence against Judah. The pastoral task imagined by Jeremiah is to name, draw conclusions, and help people see connections they could not see before. "Topheth", the technology of the nation's idolatry, and "Hinnom", the industrial valley where Judah's God-deaf autonomy belches out its pollution, are renamed so that the people can no longer deny what is going on around them. The way they have ordered their lives, and the assumptions and symbols that govern the nation, will kill them. Nothing humanly engineered will stand against Yahweh, who will not allow the evil to continue. This ending will be a "slaughter". It will not merely be the sacrificing of the weak in the community to maintain the privilege of the strong, but the silencing of all human voices as the mass graves grow too shallow and the vultures feed on human flesh (vv. 33-34).

Pastors too easily stop short of the needed work of driving people deep into the consequences of their compromises. A husband locked in a titillating affair, or a teenager trapped by an eating disorder can no longer see the truth. The church, too long enamoured with the memory of its cultural and political privilege, will not break its allegiance to old systems without massive resistance. The prophet, therefore, is relentless as he piles up imagery to coax his

hearers into acknowledging the truth that things cannot continue as they are (8:1-2).

Christendom is no more, and the church, like it or not, must go into exile and there find its true missional identity. However, pastors, who are themselves frightened by the chaos, unclear about what it means for the future, and made anxious by the anxious people who listen to their sermons, pay their salaries, and cannot help but define the church and its ministry by the standards of the culture around them, will opt to try to hold the centre and deny the reality of collapse.

The pastoral work we need today begins with this first step toward grief, i.e. the work of telling the truth by daringly naming our deadly compromises.

The pastoral work of "pain-dwelling": being taught to mourn (Jeremiah 9:17-22)

This hard-nosed work of naming will not build big, successful and relevant churches. That is a problem because we cannot imagine church in any other way. It is no secret that doing church like we have done it in the past is extremely difficult for all but a few who are still able to keep the old world going. The work of naming our compromises is aimed at deconstructing all of those illusions. The only possible response is grief. People must grieve when their lives fall apart. People must grieve when their cherished symbols are destroyed. People must grieve when their trusted assumptions and confidences are pulled down and ground into the dust. But Americans have not been particularly good at grieving...until recently.

It is strange to me that in a nation rocked by the challenge September 11, 2001 brings to all our American presumptions of certainty and security, we pastors apparently have so little to offer that differs from the words and actions that fill the media. Our role is tragically reduced to tacking Bible verses on to the larger and more relevant narratives of nationalism and militarism. We feel compelled to do whatever it takes to keep people from coming apart. By the look of things, our flag-draped sanctuaries, patriotic liturgies, and comforting homilies are helping to keep America going about life as normally as possible. In this sense we are doing everything required of us by the White House. But America does not want to go about life as we did before September 11. America knows that our happy American certainties and securities lie in shattered ruins, and we cannot return to the normalcy we once knew. America as we have known it is no more and we instinctively know we need to grieve. The resistance of Americans to an imaginative redefinition of their lives is astonishing low. I wonder if the church's pastors are listening.

At a point of history not dissimilar from our own, Jeremiah was sent to practise the pastoral work of "pain-dwelling" for a people whose cherished symbols were destroyed, whose trusted assumptions and confidences were pulled down, and whose lives were falling apart. 598 BCE was decidedly a life-defin-

ing moment in the history of Israel. As much as King Zedekiah tried to manage the nation's crisis in conventional ways, he could not hold the nation together and could not manipulate his foreign policy to save his skin. A decade of turmoil ended in bitter defeat in 597, and Judah was plunged into exile.

Who is wise enough to make sense of the crisis (7:12)? The politicians and the pundits, for all their lengthy prose, have nothing meaningful to say. The one who pastors God's people in exile knows that only one form of speech is adequate for the task. This pastor utters the strangeness of poetry in order to teach the broken how to mourn.[1] Poetry subverts our resistance, and, through its cadences and imagery, insinuates itself in those deep places where it can begin to dismantle our practised denial of such inexpressible pain and bewilderment.

As opposed to the "wise", whose words are hollow in the face of such chaos, this poem calls out to the skilful mourner who gets to the death-scene first and gets the grieving going (7:29-8:3). These skilled Middle-Eastern women know exactly what to do (9:17-19), for they are the ones who truly know what is *going on. Managing technology and wealth, manipulating the media, and pro*viding comforting prayers in the temple are not competencies needed now. Instead, what we need are eyes that weep, hearts that ache, and mouths that voice the pain.

The ideology of safety and confidence, and the ideologues so captive to their way of organizing life apart from obedience to *torah*, cannot withstand the enacted truth of this dirge-poem. The wise men who think they read the nation's life rightly are outsmarted by the old ladies who are not skilled in domestic policy and foreign diplomacy, but who are the ones who are truly wise. The fools are those with dry eyes, and who try to hold on to the past and their privileged positions of power in the old order. The skilled women know that this past is dead and can only be relinquished by grieving and teaching their daughters the words and actions of lament (v. 20).

Pastors can easily be talked out of the painful work of teaching the broken to grieve. Grieving people do not work well. They do not do their jobs, finish homework, make love to their spouses, or show up for church meetings. Pastors, like Jeremiah, who teach people to go deep into their pain, are threatening to Jerusalem and to Washington, DC; they are also threatening to church governing boards. In order to keep pastors dwelling in exile from knuckling under, this text piles up more metaphors that make "pain-dwelling" inescapable. Bodies pile up in the streets, and press in through windows and *doors. Children are cut off from their playmates. Teenagers are cut off from* their friends. Even the palace cannot avoid the stench (v. 21). And, with eerie echoes of 8:2-3, "corpses fall like dung" cut down with no one to "gather" them.

Those who imagine their work from within this text will let old ladies lead them. Old ladies remind pastors of the deep, protracted, messy and terrifying work necessary to help people dwell in the pain of loss. Those who enter the conditions of exile need pastors who can keep at it for seventy years if neces-

sary. Our compromised lives, ordered neither by *torah* nor by gospel, are neither broken nor relinquished easily.

The pastoral work of "scroll-keeping": building a daring community (Jeremiah 26:1-24)

In 609 BCE, some ten years before the attack that sent shock waves through the nation, it became clear that those who opposed the policies of the Jerusalem establishment might pay for their opposition with their lives. The palace and the temple refused to acknowledge that their policies and assumptions were contrary to the will of Yahweh, and were leading the nation toward ruin.

Pastors must proclaim the word of the Lord in the place where it is often most compromised and, therefore, where it will be most desperately resisted. The house of the Lord is a place of ideological contention, and preaching is the voicing of a claim that subverts the false claims of all its rivals. It seeks and hopes, as it calls the hearers to listen and turn from their evil ways (26:3). If they will not listen, walk in *torah*, and obey, then the house in which they are meeting will be abandoned and would better serve as a museum or office building with "Shiloh" painted across its door (Psalm 78:60).

When sermons strike at the heart of our compromises, those nurtured in the policies and assumptions of the state recognize the danger of God's counter-word. Priests, prophets and all the people who heard Jeremiah knew that what he was saying was subversive. They knew that speaking against their great nation, its greatest city, and its national shrine would not be tolerated by the architects of Judah's national life. Jeremiah was liable to end up dead the moment he walked out of the building (v. 8).

This text is about what happens in the parking lot after the Sunday sermon, and it is about pastoral strategies for surviving the rigors of preaching to people who will not relinquish their captivities. It is a drama enacted every time compromises are exposed. Those nearest the seat of power are most resistant, and if they find themselves implicated by the preaching they will do what it takes to get rid of its voice (v. 11).

Preachers are rarely surprised by the reactions of those they know will not like what they are sent to preach. The reactions that we do not expect are the ones we want to listen to. In the midst of all the brewing trouble caused by Jeremiah's preaching people into the exile comes a surprise reaction that is really gospel. People on the outside will often understand what insiders cannot. Here the text makes a dramatic turn. It is some "elders of the land", i.e. people who do not read the newspaper or watch the evening news, people outside the reach of the establishment's propaganda machine, and who are therefore political outsiders, whose *torah* memories are awakened by Jeremiah's *torah* preaching (vv. 17-19).

There are still people in the land who listen, who walk in *torah*, and who heed the prophets (vv. 4, 5). The text wants us to know that the future hinges on the presence of these people. The fact that Jeremiah was not put to death creates a whole new openness to the future that was not present in Jeremiah up to this point. There comes a point in pastoral ministry when we are privileged to learn that we are not the sole keeper of the scroll. There are others with us in the work. They may be few, but a few is enough.

This is what impresses me about this text. It plants the seeds for what Stulman calls the piety, values, and practices "suitable for the reimagined community that will emerge from the ruins of exile".[2] It is clear that Jeremiah operated within a community of "scroll-keepers". A generation earlier, Shaphan, the secretary to King Josiah, had received from the priest's hand the rediscovered scroll of *torah* (2 Kings 22:8, 10). It may be that the house of Shaphan imagined themselves as keepers of the scroll, and learned ways to nurture a community of faithful adherents that could one day give rise to a prophet like Jeremiah, who was the community's most forceful and influential proponent against the corruption and compromises of Judah's political and religious elite. It is no surprise then that Ahikam, son of Shaphan, is the one who at the end of this drama is credited with guarding the life of Jeremiah.[3] The scroll now has a voice, and the community must also guard its interpreters.

The pastoral work of "scroll-keeping", and building a community around these texts, trusts that after the old order of things is plucked up and pulled down, destroyed and overthrown (Jer. 1:10), God will build and plant (1:10) the future on this alternative community that is daring enough to reimagine the world according to texts very different from those that the rest of the world is reading. While this alternative community knows that its life of reading and voicing these texts will not be without risk (this text may name Uriah as the community's first martyr, with eerie parallels to Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles), it also knows the lyrical promise that "the Lord has created a new thing" (Jer. 31:22).

The pastoral work of "boundary-pressing": declaring God's newness (Jeremiah 31:15-22)

Pastors know that they cannot help people change by pushing harder in the same direction. Pushing people only increases their resistance. When people are terminally trapped in destructive or debilitating habits our approach must be particularly skilful. Ricoeur argued that we need what he called "limit experiences" to push us emotionally past the defences of our resistance and into genuine transformation. Before we can have "limit experiences" our imaginations must be opened by "limit expressions" that make the experiences possible. "Limit expressions" are words, and they are the particular tools of the poet.

The exile seemed impossible to those who let themselves believe that their Jerusalem way of life would never come to an end. Once inside their new cap-

tivity of exile, it seemed just as impossible that they could ever return home. In order to break through a new resistance, just as debilitating as the old, the prophet practised a form of preaching that pressed the boundaries of convention; "limit expressions" had spoken Judah into exile, and "limit expressions" would speak Judah home again.

The rhetoric of this poem presses the boundaries in several ways. (1) The poem begins in grief that is immediately reversed by the Lord's strong command to "keep your voice from weeping" (31:16). (2) The description of missing children is reversed by God's announcement that they will return to the land of mother Rachel (v. 16). (3) Judah's stubborn refusal to listen to *torah*, walk in *torah*, heed the prophets of *torah* (26:4-5), and lament its past wickedness (7:30) is reversed by Ephraim's pleading confession (31:18-19). (4) The surprising reversal of gender roles is used to signal the unimaginable and new things created by Yahweh (v. 22).

This final reversal is particularly important. If the poem draws on creation imagery (Isaiah has a similar phrase in 43:19, but without the explicit language of creation: "I am about to do a new thing."), this announcement is astonishing. It is the use of language packed with missional energy for the "birthing" of God's new community. In the creation, Adam comes first and his life gives life to Eve (Genesis 2:18-23). In this new creation, which will come about through the literal "rebirthing" of a wholly new community, "the Woman is the agent of new life, new hope for a despairing, sorrowing people. [And] in the context of the poem, the Woman is Israel, typified by Rachel who wept for her lost sons and, through a juxtaposition of imagery, by the Virgin/Daughter who is invited to return and, in the grace of God, to rebuild Israel."[4]

This is an astonishing use of metaphor, imagery and pastoral strategy.[5] There will come a time when pastors will need to be equally daring to call people out of our exile and into the newness of God. When that day comes, we pastors, who have used similar strategies for speaking people into exile, will not only be well practised at astonishing speech, but may be so tired of speaking people into the exile they have fought so desperately to avoid, that we will find ourselves infused with fresh missional energy to speak them out of exile and into the new and hopeful way of life imagined in this text.

In his book, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, James C. Scott shows how those who live under oppressive systems can exercise enormous power of resistance to the ideological reformulation of their lives according to the symbols and value systems of those who dominate them. The book of Jeremiah and the pastoral strategies practised by the community that gave it shape, suggest that pastoral ministry in post-Christendom, post-September 11 North America must understand itself from within the world of those who choose to script their lives as a countercultural presence in a world that does not share its perceptions of the world.

George Lindbeck has said that churches must become "communities that socialise their members into coherent and comprehensive religious outlooks

and forms of life", for "the viability of a unified world of the future may well depend on counteracting the acids of modernity."[6] In a similar way, Alastair MacIntyre, at the close of his celebrated and controversial critique of modern moral philosophy, urges that, "What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us...We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St Benedict."[7]

I wager that in Jeremiah, and in the religio-political rebels/subversives who gathered with him around old holy texts, we have a school that can gather pastoral leaders in our day to re-imagine their ministries for new, daring acts of faithfulness.

NOTES

[1] So Paul Ricoeur remarks about the power of poetry, "My deepest conviction is that poetic language alone restores to us that participation in or belonging-to an order of things which precedes our capacity to oppose ourselves to things taken as objects opposed to a subject. Hence the function of poetic discourse is to bring about this emergence of a depth-structure of belonging-to amid the ruins of descriptive discourse." In Lewis S. Mudge, "Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Interpretation," *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1980, p. 25.

[2] Stulman, Louis, *Order Amid Chaos: Jeremiah as Symbolic Tapestry*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, p. 87.

[3] About Ahikam, Holladay writes, "He had been old enough in 622 to serve with his father in the circle of advisors to Josiah (2 Kings 22:12, 14); it is now thirteen years later. It is his brother Gemariah who would be part of the circle of advisors around Jehoiakim when the scroll was burned (36:12, 25), and it will be his son Gedalia to whom the Babylonians will entrust Jeremiah in 587 and whom the Babylonians will appoint to be governor over the province (39:14; 40:7)." William Holladay, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 26-52*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1989, p. 110.

[4] Anderson, Bernhard W., "The Lord has Created Something New", *A Prophet to the Nations: Essays in Jeremiah Studies*, ed. by Leo G. Perdue and Brian W. Kovacs, Winona Lake, In, Eisenbrauns, 1984, p. 380.

[5] Brueggemann, Walter, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming*, Grand Rapids, Mi, Eerdmans, 1998, p. 286.

[6] Lindbeck, George, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, Philadelphia, Westminster, 1984, p. 127.

[7] MacIntyre, Alastair, *After Virtue*, second edition, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame, 1984, p. 263.