

July 18, 2021
Sermon for Every Sunday

It was a humdinger of a homily. It was a sandstorm of a sermon. It was full of passion and prophetic power. It sounded like today's first reading, in which the prophet Jeremiah denounces the leaders of ancient Israel for their faithlessness, their failures and their fears.

Yes, I planned a sermon that would startle my suburban congregation, who rarely hear their pastor say things such as "Woe to you. and woe to you too!"

It would be the kind of preaching that causes members of the congregation to adjust their hearing aids and ask, "Did he really just say that?"

It was the sermon I *planned* to give.

I was going to start by directing my anger toward our president, whose secretary of Health and Human services recently removed a ban on the use of the body parts of aborted children for use in certain medical research. They even shut down the ethics committee that had been formed to review this kind of research.

I planned to describe a video I saw, in which an official from planned parenthood called this renewed commerce in baby parts a "humanitarian activity..." So I was going to observe that we've reached a point in the United States where a company that aborts babies and sells their body parts is now called a "Human Rights organization," but Christian Churches who hold to the traditional definition of marriage are called "hate organizations."

"Woe to you," this angry pastor would say.

And there was going to be fire and brimstone about the police officer killed in the line of duty in what appeared to be an ambush.

And also a declaration of "woe to you" to a pastor who had created a video in which he denounced everyone in Virginia as 'godless' because our Commonwealth recently banned the death penalty. Because, according that pastor – God WANTS criminals put to death. He showed us where in the bible such proof could be found.

I'm sure I had some other things on my list of things to angrily denounce. Cancel culture. Those who deny that racism has been a problem in this country. Those who believe that everything is about racism. Those who think that the poor are poor because it's their own fault. Those who are telling teens that if they say they believe in God they are participating in hate speech.

It was a humdinger of a homily. Some people might have liked it, some might have concluded that I've gone unhinged, some might have called my bishop and suggested that I need a vacation – or therapy.

But as I wrote it, I kept telling myself, “No matter how people react, at least I’ll have unloaded my anger.”

But that... is the problem. Anger. No matter what your political convictions, you can always find a long list of things to be angry about. You can be angry about Biden, Pelosi and court decisions. You can be angry about Ted Cruz, Donald Trump, and university policies about pronouns. You can be angry about Confederate statues, abortion supporters, the green new deal, the death penalty, the lack of public morality, or the ongoing effects of injustice.

And if you’re a pastor, you might be tempted to give a sandstorm of a sermon which vents your anger.

Until... until the Lord invites you to read the Scriptures again. Take, for instance, today’s reading from the Prophet Jeremiah. This is the voice of God speaking through the prophet. And, at first, God sounds angry.

“Woe to you! Woe to you, the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, says the Lord!” God sounds angry about the bad shepherds who have driven away God’s precious flock.

But if you keep reading the prophet Jeremiah, you realize that we don’t stay in the “woe to you” mode very long. Jeremiah continues preaching, and through him God says, “I myself will care for my people, so that they no longer need to fear or tremble. And my people will dwell securely.”

The prophet, whose words sounded so angry at first, concludes with a promise. God’s promise. That God will draw his people to himself, and care for them, and lead them. And they no longer need to fear.

I thought we were going to splash around in the angry "woe to you" mode. But God quickly moved us to promises – HIS promises - and hope.

Saint Paul echoes such promises. This weekend we hear from Saint Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. And, three times in this short passage, Saint Paul promises that Christ has given us peace. Peace. Peace.

Three times, Saint Paul reminds us that, in Christ, we find our peace. In Christ. Nowhere else. No one else. *In Christ.*

We may have felt like strangers and aliens... we may have been told that we were disconnected from God, and far off. But now, through Christ, we are citizens with the saints. Immersed in the Lord’s peace.

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus invites his disciples to come with him, to come *to* him, to *be with* him, to *rest* with him, to be *focused* on him, to find peace in him. The disciples have been busy. They’ve been on the road. They’ve been out there, working hard, fighting evil, doing good even

when doing good wasn't easy.

And did you notice what everyone else in the countryside was doing? They were trying to answer two questions – 1) where is Jesus right now, and 2) how do we get close to him quickly?

All of those people, from the villages and countryside, understood something that I have forgotten this past week as I first wrote my angry sermon ... this past week when I WAS angry and worried and fearful.

These people from ancient Galilee lived in difficult and fearful times too. The Romans had taken over their land. Injustice was everywhere. The future was uncertain. Poverty was always a possibility. So was hunger, and illness and death.

They were afraid. But what did they do when they were angry, or afraid, or worried? Apparently, they asked two questions: 1) where is Jesus, and 2) how to do we get close to him quickly?

They were focused on Jesus, centered on Jesus, bringing all their cares and worries to Jesus. And when they did that, they found... peace. No - their lives did not instantly become perfect. But they always found peace when they brought their concerns, their worries, their joys, their lives, to Jesus.

And this is precisely what I was failing to do this past week. This is precisely what I was failing to do as I wrote my humdinger, angry sermon.

You see, I spent most of this week watching TV news – and I just got angrier and angrier about the things going on in the world. I spent a lot of time fretting and fussing and worrying, stoking my anger.

But I spent very little time bringing all this to Jesus, or focusing on Jesus, or asking Jesus what HE wants me to do about all of this. In other words, I spent lots of time “angering,” and very little time *praying*.

Staying angry takes work. Being angry is exhausting. Ignoring Christ will never bring me peace.

And it dawned on me – when I get into my ‘angry at every politician and every sinner’ mode, I am actually behaving like an atheist. That is, when I am so focused on my anger and my indignation, I have convinced myself that it is up to me, and people *like* me, to save this world.

But it is not up to me. Christ already saved the world. It is not up to me. Christ is bigger than my fears, and stronger than my worries, and more peaceful than my angers, and more just than I can comprehend.

So I've decided: I am not going to spend my time posting angry Facebook messages about every politician who disappoints me, or fretting about people who scare me. Before I do anything else, I need to find out where Jesus is, and how I can quickly get near him.

I need to pray, not pout. I need to listen, to be still, to let God speak first. If I don't ask Christ what I should do, then whatever I DO do will probably be misguided. And if I do not focus on Christ, all I will see is my fears, and my worries and my angers. And none of those will bring me life, or bring me peace.

So, if I may adjust the words of Jeremiah just a bit so that they are addressed directly to me:

Woe to you, Michael, shepherd of your flock. Woe to you if you try to do this alone. Woe to you, Michael, if you only listen to your angers or fears.

Come to Christ, Michael. Come and focus on the one who has already saved the world. Come to Christ who conquered death. Come to Christ, who is justice, and is peace.

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