

Speak This Word
Jeremiah 22:1-5
Matthew 23:23-24
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Once a family sat down at the table for supper. Mother, two kids. As usual, they folded their hands, bowed their heads, and Mom led the prayer. As soon as she finished, a voice piped up: “Scotty didn’t close his eyes during the prayer!” As in, Scotty didn’t follow the rules. And instantly the thought popped into Mom’s head: how do you know that he didn’t close his eyes? Maybe *your* eyes weren’t closed either? And friends, sad to say, that’s the world we live in today. We have rules. We have rule breakers. And we have rule-enforcers who break the rules to find the rule-breakers. But we also have one more player in this mini-drama writ large society-wide. The rule-giver. God.

Well, look around. Especially from late May through June, we’ve seen the mask ripped off our nation’s rules. We’ve seen on video, racism that flaunts the rules. We’ve seen the encounter in Central Park between the White woman Amy Cooper, who was walking her dog without a leash, in an area with signs clearly saying to leash your pets, and the African American man Christian Cooper, who was birdwatching there, and asked her to put her pet on a leash. We saw her say to him on the video, “I’m going to call 911, and I’m going to tell them there’s an African American man threatening my life.” Some of us have seen Trevor Noah’s powerful video essay, in which he said: “Amy Cooper had a distinct understanding. She was like, ‘Oh, I know, I know that you are afraid of interacting with the police, because there is a presumption of your guilt, because of your blackness. I know that as a white woman I can weaponize this tool against you. . . .’” Trevor Noah continued, “It was like the curtain had been pulled back.” You have rules. And you have those who flaunt the rules, and then weaponize the rule-enforcers against someone else. And we were horrified by the video of the murder of George Floyd by a police officer, in which any possible threat by Floyd had been neutralized. The officer pinned Floyd’s neck down with his knee for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. While three other officers did nothing, as Floyd gasped “I can’t breathe.” Trevor Noah commented, “there was a Black man on the ground in handcuffs, and you could take his life, so you did. Almost knowing that there would be no ramifications.”(1) What happens to a society when those charged with enforcing the rules *themselves* flaunt them – with only certain kinds of people? When asked to speak before a white audience on the occasion of an Independence Day celebration in 1852, Frederick Douglass said, “The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.”(2) The coronavirus emergency has ripped the mask away from the inequalities in our nation, for all to see. And the uprisings that we have seen in our streets are a daily reminder of the outrage that rightfully burns in the hearts of those who see the injustices, who must *live* with them every hour of their lives, who have lived with a knee pressed down on their necks day in and day out. It is the same outrage that prompted Jesus’s outburst to the Pharisees in today’s

reading – you who tell others the rules are not living by them. And you are *profiting* from pressing a knee on the necks of others. Yes, He saw the same thing that we've seen. Injustice. Now we've seen it clearly.

So here comes Jeremiah, straight to the king. Go to King Whatshisname, says God, and speak this word! Do not be silent. Do not give in. Do not succumb to despair. Speak up. Speak out. Protest! Jeremiah was among the first, but by no means the last. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” spoke his descendant, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Protests: across the Edmund Pettus bridge in 1963, and in the streets of Minneapolis, Seattle, Washington DC, Phoenix, and Tempe, in 2020. Authorized by the God Who *demands* justice. Here is the fuel for the fire that burns in our bones: “Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.” Spoken directly to the guardian of the rules. Here are the rules, God says through Jeremiah. Apply them equally to *all*. Rule with your eyes open to the inequities, in order to fix them, knowing that *God's* eyes will be open to the plight of the marginalized. Do this, and you will do well. In his powerful book, *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi makes a distinction between demonstrations and protests. “A demonstration,” he says, “is mobilizing people momentarily to publicize a problem.” A protest, on the other hand, “is organizing people for a prolonged campaign that forces racist power to *change a policy*.”(3) Jeremiah was all about protest! He didn't just blow in, blow up, and blow out. He was in it for the long haul, to push that king to change society. *To see* the problems, and *correct* them. And we have put up that Black Lives Matter flag, not as a demonstration to illustrate the problem, but as our joining our efforts in the long tradition of holy protest – in order to change society. To cry out, no more voter suppression by limiting the opportunity to vote to a *single* polling place for the entire 600,000 residents of the city of Louisville.(4) We are in it to speak the Word from God to today's kings: Act with justice! Deliver from the hand of the oppressor those who have been robbed – of their life! This is a struggle for the soul of our nation. Is justice only for the 1%, or for the 100%? We stand in the living force field of the One Who said, when you welcome the stranger, you've done it to Me. When you oppress the poor, you do it to Me. Speak this Word!

And when we do We will discover the amazing liberating promise embedded *within* those laws, beyond their intended use. The notion that “*all* men and women are created equal” invites us to step beyond the constrictions of what has been, into the new territory of what *could be*. Do you not see? In the very crowds swirling in the streets, rowdy as they are, lives an immense pressure, no longer silent, exerted by a new vision upon our spirits. Look deep, and you will see the lure of the promise of *God's* justice, that will outlast, overcome, any restrictions. It is a titanic struggle, but we are called by the “God of our weary years, God of our silent tears.” The God of hope, silently working in the midst of our struggle. Friends, it will be a struggle to *comprehend*, to believe that God is at work, without our spirits getting crushed by the horrors. It will be a struggle to *start* justice work, without getting paralyzed by immensity of the task. It will be a struggle to *continue* our justice work, without getting demoralized by reversals, resistance, paltry gains that those in power permit, so as to prevent deeper access to full participation for all. Don't be fooled. It will be a struggle. Maybe most of all, it will be a struggle to *keep faith* in God's presence in this struggle. Behind the scathing condemnation of Jesus stood the God of justice, unseen but thrumming with power. Behind Jeremiah's protest stood the God Who demands care for every last beloved

child. And so maybe the struggle itself forces us to turn to this God Who called us into the struggle in the first place. God will help us to remember the vision of God’s promise beyond details of our daily struggles, that there *is* a “kingdom” that *is* coming, as we pray every week; that there *is* a “God’s will” that *is* being done, despite all appearances to the contrary. Right now, God *is* making a way out of no way. Look around and you will see: city councils are re-evaluating budget allocations to police departments, reviewing what tasks police are needed for, and what funds and tasks can be better shifted to other departments. Just look at the crowds on the streets: in recent weeks, in this nation alone, over 15 million people of all colors, young and older, are marching in the protests,(5) standing up for racial justice, getting to know each other – and building relationships right now that will bear fruit into the future. The seeds of the future are being planted today!

In his eulogy at the funeral for George Floyd, the Rev. Al Sharpton said, “Years ago [when] I went to march ... I remember a young white lady looked me right in the face and said, ‘N*****, go home.’ But when I was here [in Minneapolis] ... and as I was talking to a reporter, a young white girl, she didn’t look no older than 11 years old, she tagged my suit jacket and I looked around and I braced myself, and she looked at me and said, ‘No justice, no peace.’ It’s a different time. It’s a different season.”(6) Embedded within our struggle is the promise that God will act. That our actions *will* make not just a difference, but a *different world*. Can you not see it? Amen.

Notes

- (1) Trevor Noah, “George Floyd, Minneapolis Protests, Ahmaud Arbery & Amy Cooper,” The Daily Social Distancing Show, 5/29/20; accessed online on 7/2/20 at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4amCfVbA_c
- (2) Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” *Jacobin Magazine*; accessed online on 6/29/20 at <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/07/fourth-of-july-frederick-douglass-address/>
- (3) Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 215.
- (4) “Voters have one polling place in Louisville, Kentucky, for today's election. Jose Andres' chefs plan to feed them all,” by Allison Gordon, CNN, 6/23/20; accessed online on 7/4/20 at <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/23/us/jose-andres-kentucky-primary-trnd/index.html>
- (5) “Black Lives Matter may be the largest protest movement in U.S. history,” by Larry Buchanan, Quoc Trung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, *StarTribune*, 7/3/20; accessed online on 7/4/20 at <https://www.startribune.com/black-lives-matter-may-be-the-largest-movement-in-u-s-history/571619742/>
- (6) “Toward a better patriotism,” by Dane Smith, *StarTribune*, 7/3/20; accessed online on 7/3/20 at <https://www.startribune.com/toward-a-better-patriotism/571620702/>