

**Joy Filled Generosity**  
**Sunday, October 16, 2022, 10:00 a.m.**  
**All Saints Church, Pasadena**  
**The Rev. Mike Kinman**

“The days are surely coming, says our God, when I will sow Israel and Judah with the seed of people and the seed of livestock. And just as I watched over them to uproot, to tear down, and to overthrow, to destroy and to bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build up and to plant, says our God.”

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Now that’s from the prophet Jeremiah. We’ve been hearing from him the past couple weeks.

I LOVE the prophets.

Now, a lot of people get all scared by the prophets. That’s because there’s this image of the prophets that has been shaped by like Charlton Heston and New Yorker cartoons. It’s always this scary looking man with a beard ... always has a beard ... not sure what’s up with that ... and not a beard like my beard, which unless you’re like Idris Elba or John Legend is kind of like a “is that the best you can do” beard? I’m talking like a Tony Gonsolin, James Harden, ZZ Top beard.

And these prophets are always yelling. And they are yelling some of the most depressing scary stuff. Like end of the world stuff. Like plagues of frogs stuff ... and I’m not talking Kermit, not the nice, cute frogs either but mean frogs, frogs with attitudes. Frogs with attitudes falling from the sky.

And these caricature prophets never get listened to and usually get killed because seriously who wants to hear that stuff? I mean most of us are just trying to get by and we don’t want to hear about some category five frognado that’s coming our way if we don’t shape up.

A lot of people get all scared by the prophets. And it is true, the prophets can say some pretty scary things sometimes. But a prophet’s job is not to scare us but to set us free by pointing out the imprisoning truth that is right in front of our eyes.

Let me say that again ... a prophet’s job is not to scare us but to set us free by pointing out the imprisoning truth that is right in front of our eyes.

Now more often than not this is a truth that convicts those of us in power about how we use our power. A truth that not only reveals what will happen if this abuse of power, if this abuse of the people, if this going against God’s dream of love continues ... but offers the hope of liberation. The hope of new life. The hope of joy. The hope rooted in God’s promise to provide.

If we listen to Jeremiah this morning, that is what Jeremiah is talking about. Prophets help us see how unjust things are, so the first thing we naturally say is “yeah ... that IS kinda messed up”

... and the next thing we say is “yeah ... somebody should probably change that”

... and then the next thing we say is “Yeah ... maybe we should change that.”

And the best prophets

... I mean, the absolute best prophets

... do it with humor.

And that’s why some of the best prophets around today are comedians.

It’s actually an ancient thing. Some of the earliest prophets were court jesters. Their job was to use humor to expose the crown but try to do it in a way that didn’t end up getting them killed.

Some of the best prophets around today are comedians. Let me give you an example.

Chris Rock.

Now ... we’re not going to go there ... I am not wading into the Will and Jada waters in this sermon. And Chris Rock is a prophet. He points out the imprisoning truth that is right in front of our eyes.

Take this bit from one of Chris’ routines ... and I’m going to clean it up just a little bit, but you can fill in the blanks.

Chris says:

“Now one thing I don’t like about America is we’ve got a really bad drug policy, horrible drug policy. We got people in jail for getting high. For GETTING high. That’s messed up.

And the government always says drugs are illegal because they’re bad for you, they’re trying to protect society ... the government doesn’t care about your safety ... they sell guns at Wal Mart they don’t care about you!

Nah, the government is like this.

They don’t want you to use YOUR drugs.

They want you to use THEIR drugs.

So, every night on TV, you see a weird drug commercial trying to get you hooked on some legal drugs. And they just keep naming symptoms till they get one that you've got. OK? It's like

Are you sad?  
 Are you lonely?  
 You got athlete's foot?

Are you hot?  
 Are you cold?  
 Whatcha got?

You want this pill, huh?  
 You got to take this pill.

They won't even tell you what the pill does.  
 You see a lady on a horse or a man in a tub, and they just keep naming symptoms

Are you depressed?  
 Are you lonely?  
 Do your teeth hurt?

I saw a commercial the other day that said,  
 "Do you go to bed at night ... and wake up in the morning?"

Oh man, they got one!  
 I got that!  
 I'm sick!  
 I need that pill!"

And then he goes on to talk about the reason some drugs are legal and others are not is about the money .. who the money comes from and, most important, who the money goes to. That we are being manipulated so that people with power and money can have more power and money.

If you read the book of Jeremiah ... it's the exact same thing. Tale as old as time ... God rest your soul, Angela Lansbury.

This is nothing new.

In previous generations it was Dick Gregory or Lenny Bruce.

Today, it's Chris Rock ... or Tig Notaro ... or John Oliver and they help us see just how unjust things are so the first thing we naturally say is "yeah ... that IS messed up"

... and then we move onto is “yeah ... somebody should change that”

... and then the next thing we say is “Yeah ... maybe we should change that.”

Now one of my favorite prophets ... absolute favorites ... is late-stage George Carlin. George Carlin is old school. And some of his best stuff is when he aims his prophecy right at us as the church.  
Right at me.

George Carlin has this bit, and it is just prophecy at its best ... Jeremiah would be proud. He’s talking about the hypocrisy of businesspeople and the things businesspeople say to get that money flowing toward them. But then he pivots, and he sets his sights on the church. And again, I’ll clean it up a little bit, but you can spell out the words. Here’s what he says:

“In the BS department a businessman can’t hold a candle to a clergyman.

Cause I gotta tell you the truth, folks, when it comes to BS,  
big time, major league bs,  
you have to stand in awe,  
in AWE  
of the all-time champion of false promises and exaggerated claims ... religion.  
No contest.  
Religion easily has the greatest bs story ever told.

Think about it.

Religion has actually convinced people...  
That there’s an invisible man  
Living in the sky  
Who watches everything you do every minute of every day  
And the invisible man has a special list of TEN THINGS HE DOES NOT WANT YOU TO DO  
And if you do ANY of these 10 things he has a special place

Full of fire  
And smoke  
And burning  
And torture  
And anguish

Where he will send YOU

To live  
And suffer  
And burn

And choke  
 And scream  
 And cry

For ever and ever  
 Till the END of TIME

But he loves you!

He loves you  
 He loves you and he NEEDS MONEY!  
 He always NEEDS MONEY

He's all powerful, all perfect, all knowing, all wise,  
 Somehow JUST CAN'T HANDLE MONEY!

Religion takes in billions of dollars, they pay no taxes and they always need a little more.  
 Now ... you talk about a good BS story. Wow!"

Now Carlin is using a pretty common debate strategy, and that is called building a straw man.

Building a straw man is when you strip the opposing view of any nuance, display only its most negative characteristics, and then tear it to pieces ... which is usually pretty easy to do by that point.

Any of us can look at what Carlin is saying about religion and object that he is doing this. And ... the thing about Carlin's straw man in this bit is he kind of nails it.

I'm not talking about all religion, and it's clear he isn't either ... but it is safe to say what he is describing is at the very least a recognizable, powerful and prevalent stream of what has become of Christianity.

It is a stream of Christianity that was developed with great intent ... and to great consequence.

And, not surprisingly, it was used to do just what Chris Rock and George Carlin are talking about in their prophetic routines ... sustain an economic system that uses fear to control people and what wealth they have and can generate.

Now following Jesus wasn't always this way ... but it sure got this way in a hurry.

The love of God is a powerful thing and once people realized they could co-opt it to control others and use their bodies to generate wealth, we were off to the races.

Jeremiah shows that's been going on WAAAAAY before Jesus.

Here's one historical example:

In his book, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (<https://www.vromansbookstore.com/book/9780300171365>), Willie Jennings describes the colonization of what became called Latin America and how the first Jesuit theologian in what is now Peru, Jose de Acosta, used this theology to enslave the Incas through conversion. Jennings notes that Christianity is at its heart a teaching faith, from Christ onward. And the original teaching of the faith was about participating in and imitating Christ through identifying with and working to heal the suffering of the world

... through identifying with and standing in solidarity with those who Kelly Brown Douglas calls “the crucified peoples of the world.”

In giving of ourselves to those among us who have nothing worldly to offer in return because we recognize the deep preciousness and gift every single one of us is as human beings.

Acosta and the whole movement of colonialism shifted the idea of following Christ away from an identification with our fellow human beings, which would have led to treating those of different cultures with honor and compassion ... which would have made the Europeans pilgrims instead of colonizers.

Instead, Jennings writes, the enterprise of Christianity became enclosed in “exaggerated judgment, and hyper-evaluation tied to a racial optic.”

“Exaggerated judgment, and hyper-evaluation tied to a racial optic.”

This form of Christianity is inherently transactional. God’s love and favor has to be earned by you following the rules. And God favors some people more than others.

Instead of transforming an enslaving economic system, it actually becomes the theological justification for strengthening it.

Instead of liberating us, God becomes judge, jury and executioner and we become perpetually on trial. Or we anoint ourselves judge, jury and executioner in God’s place.

Even worse, God becomes the judge who will take a bribe!

And so, the increasingly hollow words of “But he loves you!” turn love into one more transaction, just one more way that we believe that love can only be for us if we can either do something or have something to give in return.

Where how we use our money is governed by fear and shame rather than love and joy.

And because this theology has been used to undergird much of what people mean when they talk about America as “a Christian nation,” that “exaggerated judgment and hyper-evaluation tied to a racial optic” inevitably leads to what we have seen unfold on the LA City Council in the past week .. where politics becomes an exercise of manipulation and the worth of one another is not assigned based on the beauty of each of us being created wonderful, powerful and good ... but of perceived utility and where we fall in a racial matrix.

And as much as we cry and wail and rend our garments when things like this happen, the worst part of all of this is that we know the only thing that is unusual about this instance is not that council members Martinez, De Leon and Cedillo had their terrible conversations but that they got caught.

We know that this is far too often normative behavior and their resignations, as much as they must happen, will not do any more to fix the problem and heal these wounds than firing the occasional “bad apple” police officer who gets caught will fix the deep institutional racism and classism in our systems of policing and incarceration.

None of this is new at all.

In fact, if you read the book of Jeremiah cover to cover you will see so much that is familiar.

And Jeremiah talks about the pain and isolation from one another that happens when we live this way.

And we are living that right now.  
We are in exile from each other.  
And we can feel it ... right here ... can't we?

And yet, ironically, for the exact reasons George Carlin expresses in his bit, it has never been more important for us to hear and live the Gospel ... and to be clear about what it is ... and isn't. Carlin's bit is one of the reasons that when people tell me they don't believe in God that I ask them to tell me about the God they don't believe in because I'm figuring chances are I don't believe in that God either.

And the God they describe is usually some version of Carlin's straw man. And among the many things wrong with that God and that religion is that it is graceless and joyless.

Because the word of the prophets Jeremiah and Jesus is not one of exaggerated judgment and hyper-evaluation but “the days are surely coming, says our God, when I will sow you with the seed of people and the seed of livestock. And just as I watched over them to uproot, to tear down, and to overthrow, to destroy and to bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build up and to plant.”

I will provide.

If we are to be the church that not only the world needs but the church that WE need right now we need a season of building and planting.

We need a revival of joy and a revival of hope.

A church where we celebrate and embody the love without judgment of the revolutionary Jesus.

That doesn't mean we don't talk about and work hard to dismantle the oppressive systems of the world ... but it does mean remembering that, as Audre Lorde said, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

Desmond Tutu brought down an Empire with a ferocity that was not rooted in shame and "exaggerated judgment, hyper-evaluation tied to a racial optic" but rooted in joy.

Jesus danced and sang his way into Jerusalem even as he knew he was heading to the cross because he knew what Alice Walker would write thousands of years later and that is hard times require furious dancing!

And because so much of the toxic theology is bound up in our toxic economy there is no better way to start than with our relationship with wealth.

This is the Sunday we start our giving campaign, and I need to say there is no other part of any congregation's life where our best and worst selves come out.

And this is in every congregation I have ever been in.

Our best selves come out because the giving campaign brings out the amazing generosity that is in our hearts ... and I have seen that as much here as I have seen anywhere.

And ,, it also brings out the worst of our fear and anxiety.

We fear what will happen to the church if we don't give enough.

We fear what will happen to us if we give too much.

Sometimes our giving is transactional ... and we have even asked for it to be that ... think about everything that All Saints Church has done for you and then make your gift ... essentially what is the fair market rate for services provided.

Sometimes our giving is out of obligation. Well ... it's really something I should do.



And we have enshrined all of that so much it has become like second nature. And like any system we live in, we can actually think we are doing it right. And yet what can be missing is the joy. And sometimes we are so used to the joy being gone we don't even miss it because it doesn't even feel like it should be there. And we just can't figure out why we feel so empty.

So that's why this year, we are looking at it differently.

Because we don't believe in George Carlin's God ... a God who needs money.  
As Bono says, "Well, the God I believe in isn't short of cash, mister."

The God I believe in wants us to be free and full of joy.  
The God I believe in wants our whole lives to move from fear to joy.

And so, we are calling the spiritual practice of giving this year "joy filled generosity," and I believe it can be liberating for us all. Because what we are asking us to do is not consider how much money it takes to run this place. Not consider what All Saints has done for us and then think about what we can do for All Saints.

This year, we invite us to think about our relationship with money in terms of fear and joy.

And then think about how we can move your money from fear to joy.

What does giving look like for us ... not just to All Saints but in every area of our life ... that comes from a deep desire not to be enslaved anymore by fear ... that comes from a deep desire to rejoice and dance ... a deep desire to be a part of a community that builds up and plants ... a deep desire for a revival of grace and joy not just in this church but in our hearts.

A deep desire to trust that it really is true that God provides.

The dream is that we will not give until it hurts but we will give until we giggle because we will know that we have each other and God has all of us and so there is no lack we need to fear.

The dream is that we will find the cure for what is ailing us not in some pill being shilled to us on late night TV or Instagram feed but in each other's eyes and loving embrace.

In a community that gives love freely and joyfully and lets ourselves be lavishly loved by a God who can't wait to pick you up and spin you around and tell you how proud she is of you just being who you are.

The dream is that we will bring down empires of fear through our furious dancing,  
...that we will be transformed from colonizers into pilgrims,  
...that we will be prophets ... WE will be prophets ... of a new generation, building and planting,  
loving and laughing, moving this world from fear to love. Amen.