

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Jeremiah 1:4-10
SERMON TITLE: The Prophetic Challenge

On January 9, 2001, Bishop Joel Martinez of The United Methodist Church, stood on the front steps of the Texas Capitol building in Austin and addressed an ecumenical prayer service marking the opening of the 77th Texas Legislature. According to a news article in the *United Methodist Witness*, Bishop Martinez “called upon nearly 200 worshipers not only to pray for legislators but also to watch legislative developments and make their voices heard on issues important to them.” The bishop’s call was summarized in the article’s headline: ***Bishop calls Texans to make faith felt at [the] Capitol.***¹

So what do you think? Was this appropriate behavior for a United Methodist bishop? As a spiritual leader, should he have concerned himself with matters of public policy and the actions of political leaders? Should he have exhorted us to make our faith felt at the Capitol, or should he have told us to go on home, keep our noses out of politics, and focus on more “spiritual” things?

Now I must admit that there was a time in my life when I would have considered the Bishop’s remarks suspect. I grew up in the church being taught that the Christian faith had little to do with matters of public policy. I grew up believing that the Christian faith was concerned only with issues of personal morality and narrowly defined “religious matters” like worship attendance and personal devotional practices. I was taught that the church’s mission in the world was to reach others for Christ and to serve the needy through acts of charity. That was it.

I was told that the prophets foretold the coming of Christ, predicted the future, called

¹ "Bishop calls Texans to make faith felt at Capitol." *United Methodist Witness*. The United Methodist Church of Southwest Texas, 24 Jan. 2001. Web. 24 Jan. 2001.
<<http://www.umcswtx.org/news/witness/witHtm0126/capitol.htm>>.

people to account for their individual moral failings, and challenged the unfaithfulness of religious institutions. As far as I knew, God wasn't much concerned about what happened at "the Capitol" with things like politics and economics and foreign policy. I figured that God had just left us alone to use our own best judgment, to follow our own political ideologies—whether liberal or conservative—without having to worry about God's purposes in all of this.

But then, in my mid-twenties, I actually began to study the Bible for myself—and boy was I shocked. I discovered that God's agenda was not nearly as narrow as I had thought. I discovered that God used the Old Testament prophets to address matters of government and politics. The prophets actually spoke the word of God to people of power like kings and rulers. The prophets spoke of unjust laws, the relationship between rich and poor, and the conduct of foreign policy. And the prophets not only addressed the People of God, but also the nations of the world.

This was the case with Jeremiah. The word of God came to him: *Before I formed you in womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.* Jeremiah resisted: *Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.* God would have none of it: *Do not say "I am only a boy"; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.* And then a vision: God put out his hand and touched his mouth, and God said to him: *Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.*

Well, Jeremiah embraced this prophetic challenge. And yes, he did challenge the people of Judah to change their hearts; he did denounce their idolatry; and yes, he did challenge their

empty religious practices.

But Jeremiah didn't stop there. Jeremiah confronted the political rulers of his day. He made his "faith felt at the Capitol". He decried their unjust economic policies; he criticized King Josiah's alliance with Egypt; he went against the popular will and the king's foreign policy when he urged complete submission to the Babylonians; he foresaw both the destruction of Judah and its restoration after exile; and he pronounced oracles of judgment against foreign kingdoms: Egypt, the Philistines, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Damascus, Qedar, Hazor, Elam, and Babylon.

Now as you might imagine, when Jeremiah made his "faith felt at the Capitol" he got into a whole lot of trouble. He was scorned as a traitor and imprisoned on several occasions; he suffered greatly; but he continued to proclaim the word of God no matter how much opposition he met, because this is what he was called to do.

By the way, when I finally started studying the Bible for myself, I finally came to see just how much Jesus had in common with prophets like Jeremiah. The gospels clearly place Jesus within this prophetic tradition. The gospels make it clear that the kingdom of God announced and embodied by Jesus stood in sharp contrast to the ways of earthly rulers like King Herod and the rulers of Rome. In fact, Jesus put the power brokers of every earthly kingdom on notice that the old ways of domination, control, manipulation, violence, greed, prejudice and injustice were on the way out. And he got in trouble.

But even Jesus' death and resurrection were prophetic events that challenged established religious and political power. Remember, Jesus' crucifixion was a politically motivated, state execution. But did Rome and the religious opposition to Jesus have the last word? No! God would not be silenced or thwarted by any rival power—and that's one of the reasons we celebrate Easter Sunday to this very day.

So what do you think? Was Bishop Martinez right? Do we have any business making our “faith felt at the Capitol?” Does the call of Jeremiah and the prophetic ministry of Jesus have anything to do with us?

Well, I think so. God still needs prophets like Jeremiah to speak God’s word to power because the world’s resources are still not allocated justly between the rich and the poor; political power is still too unresponsive to the suffering of people; there is still too much violence and deceit and oppression and bigotry in the world among peoples and between nations.

Now we may not like all of this very much—we may want to make excuses just as Jeremiah did (I’m guilty of that)—all of this prophetic business may scare us so much that we want to keep our mouths shut (I’m guilty of that too)—but do we think any of this is going to let us off the hook with God? I don’t think so. God’s prophetic challenge is still before us.

So what are we going to do about it? Well, let me suggest a modest step that at least moves us in the direction of *making our faith felt at the Capitol*. It seems to me that we could all do some work on deepening our discernment so that we become as astute in perceiving God’s prophetic word as Jeremiah was. We can help one another with this, but we can’t be afraid to take up the issues of our day with openness and humility—to discuss them and pray about them—not with the intent of winning ideological arguments—but as means of seeking God’s word and purpose together. The fact is, this is already happening in some of our small groups and Sunday School classes. And it’s happening through events like the Public Issues Forums our Adult Education Committee has sponsored over the last several years.

But more can be done. For example, I would challenge each of us this morning to hold one another accountable for this deeper discernment in the conversations we have with one another—informal or otherwise—about such things as politics, economics and foreign policy.

Frankly, most of the conversations I hear around these issues among church people don't make much reference to God at all as if God doesn't have anything to do with such matters. We talk to one another out of our ideological and political commitments—liberal, conservative or moderate—Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, Independent or something else—and that's okay because it's good to know where we each stand.

But there are deeper questions: Where is God in all of this? How do we perceive God's word in all of this? How would God have us respond? It seems to me that questions like these are the ones we should be asking one other if we're take God's prophetic challenge seriously as we move toward *making our faith felt at the Capitol*. I, for one, commit myself to asking these kinds of questions when the opportunities arise. What about you? As the heirs of Jeremiah and followers of Jesus, what will you do to *make your faith felt at the Capitol*?