

Jeremiah 36:1-8, 21-23, 27-28; 31:31-34

Jeremiah prophesies during a very difficult and ominous time for Judah. The country is threatened by turmoil between the superpowers of Egypt and Babylonia, and Jeremiah has been pretty sure for a long time that one way or another they're going to lose their country. He sees the king, Zedekiah, playing footsie with Egypt, and Jeremiah says that is not going to work out for us. Jeremiah's interpretation of the danger they're in is, of course, that the nation has been unfaithful to God and so God is allowing their enemies to threaten them. At the time of this reading, God tells Jeremiah to literally write down all his prophecies from the last 25 years and read them at the Temple, as sort of a last chance for everyone to repent.

Jeremiah has been banned from the Temple—he's already been in trouble for a long time—so his secretary Baruch has to do it, and Baruch tries to be strategic. He waits until there's a big fast, so that lots of people will be at the Temple and they'll all be in a contrite frame of mind, and then he goes and reads this long scroll, I can't imagine how long, of Jeremiah's prophecies for the last 25 years predicting slow-rolling disaster for Judah, which has in fact been what's happened. We don't find out how the people reacted, but some courtiers of King Zedekiah also hear it and take the scroll from Baruch, tell him to tell Jeremiah to go hide, and they take it to the king. So we get this vivid scene of the king in his winter palace with the fire blazing, and him languidly cutting off pieces of the scroll as it's read to him and tossing them in the fire. Fake news, is what he's saying, without having to say a word.

To recapitulate: Jeremiah has been prophesying geopolitical doom for 25 years, and hindsight validates what he's said. Jeremiah is profoundly unpopular with the king and the political establishment. He has publicly clashed with prophets who want to uphold the party

line about how everything's going to be fine. Jeremiah believes that if the people heard his prophecies again there'd still be some minuscule chance of heading off disaster. And the king has nothing but contempt for what he says. It is after this episode that Jeremiah is imprisoned in a cistern. And of course, his prophecies are fulfilled and Judah falls to Babylon, and King Zedekiah's eyes are put out and he is imprisoned until his death by the Babylonians.

A lot of Jeremiah's story is about his struggles with competing prophets. He has unpopular things to say, and he's regularly accused of being fake news. He's actually right, but he can never convince anybody. And yet Jeremiah also has useful and maybe comforting information to give his audience, if they would listen. He has told them how to thrive, once they're in exile in Babylon, by building houses and raising their children and following Torah, whose essence is "love God and love neighbor." They just don't want to hear that they'll even ever be in Babylon.

We also live in a world of competing news sources, where our neighbors consume news and analysis that seems to us to be transparently bogus. And we live in a nation whose president and enablers suppress the truth and tell self-serving stories, often as ridiculous as a sharpie-drawn weather map, with absolutely no repercussions. The fact that he's not going to serve another term is a relief, but that propensity to stifle unpleasant truths had traction long before he got into office, and it's going to be a problem for us going forward too. Even the reality of COVID-19, which seems undeniable, has its deniers. Just last week I read the testimony of a nurse who said that with their dying breaths, people will deny that they have COVID or that it's a real virus. So the advice that Jeremiah offers to his compatriots about how to live and thrive in Babylon may be instructive to us too.

In addition to having told them to build houses and go about their lives once they're in exile, he also tells them in today's reading that God will make a new covenant with them that will be written on their hearts, internalized, such that they won't have to teach each other "Know the Lord," because they'll all know God, from the least of them to the greatest. Again, boiled down to its essence, the guidance is "love God, love neighbor."

This penchant for believing made-up narratives about what's happening is most evident in the Q-Anon conspiracy, which originated on an internet message board in 2017. It propounds a theory that Democrats in high places are running a child trafficking ring, sexually assaulting children and killing them in order to extract adrenochrome from their blood, which has psychedelic and anti-aging effects.<sup>i</sup> Donald Trump is carefully putting together a trap for them, and one day very soon we'll see Hillary and Bill Clinton and George Soros and their cabal being arrested and imprisoned for their crimes. It sounds ridiculous, but it's gained a lot of followers and provided people with an alternative narrative about Donald Trump that allows them to support him, believing that he's carrying on a clandestine operation to save the children.

Apparently the Qanon conspiracy has traction in conservative Christian circles. Some pastors are all in, but others see it as an outgrowth of the bruising people took from the press's failure to cover the runup to the Iraq War, and just general suspicion of authorities due to the government's failures to meet the needs of ordinary people over the last several decades. The conspiracy is having real-life effects: It's [hampering](#) the work of anti-sex trafficking organizations. The FBI has [linked](#) it to violence and threats of violence. And its adherents are [downplaying](#) the threat of COVID and thus putting others' lives at risk.<sup>ii</sup> That's the broken and

precarious Judah that we're living in right now.

I read a number of pieces on how to combat Qanon's pernicious influence. It can get a really powerful hold on a person, and they have an answer for everything, much as religious cults have built-in mechanisms for explaining why their realities would be questioned. It also provides a community, just as white nationalist groups do, and especially in this locked-down time, people are hungry to feel like they belong to something large and powerful. I went down a little rabbit hole of my own to learn about what the experts say about combatting Qanon, but I can tell you that their advice meshes well with the advice of an amateur on Reddit who offers a list with four points: be respectful, don't attack weak versions of their arguments, don't try to change their minds on politics in general, and take the time to become knowledgeable about this conspiracy (which he acknowledges "will suck"). There's way more, but that's not why we're here. We're here because I'm seeing a through line between healing the sickness of Qanon and Jeremiah's prescription for surviving the coming disaster.

That through line is to refuse to do what Qanon does, to cast the conflict as good against evil, to depersonalize the adversaries and project all of one's fears and antipathies onto the other. During the 1970s, Portland State University psychology professor Dr. Frank Wesley investigated why some US POWs defected to North Korea during the Korean War. His research showed that virtually all the defectors came from a single US training camp. As part of their training, they had been taught that the North Koreans were cruel, heartless barbarians who despised the US and single-mindedly sought its destruction. But when those POWs were shown kindness by their captors, their initial indoctrination unraveled. They became far more likely to defect than those POWs who either hadn't been told anything about the North Koreans or had

been given more neutral accounts of them.<sup>iii</sup> When Jeremiah says to build houses in Babylon and live in them, he's saying to treat the Babylonians as neighbors. When he says that our covenant with God will be written on our hearts, he's saying that we will make it a rule to love God and love neighbor, and in so doing will find life to be abundant. The ways to combat Qanon, which I'm more than happy to share links to, certainly talk about media literacy and critical thinking, but fundamentally they are about reinforcing human connection and questioning the black-and-white worldview that demonizes adversaries. To be a person who openly seeks a diversity of friends, or who openly speaks of COVID as a virus, or who openly believes in vaccines—and simultaneously to have warmth and respect for the person with the black-and-white worldview—may be the most direct way any single one of us can counteract the pernicious effects of this conspiracy theory. It does not promise us widespread or rapid effects, and we need to also promote media literacy and government transparency and so forth, but on a personal level, I think Jeremiah is still right. God will not guarantee us deliverance from catastrophe, but God *will* build into us the resources for surviving and thriving, and those resources are, as always, love of God and love of neighbor.

Let us pray: God, whose fondness for humanity knows no limit, Write your word upon our hearts, so that we need no scroll, no book, no script to know that you love us. Show us the power of your covenant, that you will be faithful to us, even when we fail to remain faithful to you. Help us to be redemptive forces in our community. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://religionnews.com/2020/10/20/how-qanon-uses-satanic-rhetoric-to-set-up-a-narrative-of-good-vs-evil/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://religionnews.com/2020/08/17/qanon-the-alternative-religion-thats-coming-to-your-church/>

<sup>iii</sup> Boghossian and Lindsay, *How to Have Impossible Conversations*. New York: Hachette Books, 2019.

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