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“Leaders,” Willie Baptist likes to say, “are the first to wake up.”

Willie, who some of you have already been fortunate to meet, has become one of my mentors at Union and with the Poverty Initiative. He is a veteran anti-poverty organizer and a formerly homeless father of three. Currently he coordinates the Poverty Scholars Program at the Poverty Initiative. Willie likes to tell this story to illustrate his point about leadership:

Suppose we are camping together in the woods, and are asleep at night in a tent. Now suppose that a grizzly bear starts charging toward our tent. In that moment, who will be our leader? Not the person who is the best-looking, or the most articulate, or the wealthiest, Willie says. It will be the person who wakes up first and realizes what is happening.

Willie’s definition of a leader could perhaps also describe a prophet. Jeremiah, whom you all have been studying for the last 8 weeks, certainly fits these criteria. He has been woken up, jarred out of a comfortable life to take on the often uncomfortable task of bringing the word of God to the people of Israel.

God is angry with the Israelites. It becomes Jeremiah’s vocation to bring a terrible truth to his people. They have turned away from God. They have worshipped other gods, they have enriched themselves, they have ignored the poor. “This is the city that must be punished,” Jeremiah says to Jerusalem. “There is nothing but oppression within her. ... For from the least to the greatest, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying ‘Peace, peace’ when there is no peace.”

Because of the people's unfaithfulness and injustice, God tells Jeremiah, they will experience great suffering and destruction. In fact, God says, the worst thing imaginable is going to happen. The Israelites will lose Jerusalem and they will be driven out of their land. This is devastating news. The lands of Judah and Israel are at the very heart of the Israelites' covenant with God. But the people have broken this covenant, Jeremiah declares, and the consequences will be severe. Jeremiah's words could not be more harsh. "Both great and small shall die in this land," he says at one point. "They shall not be buried, and no one will lament for them."

What could be worse than this? In ancient Israelite society, nothing. But Jeremiah sees that the consequence of the Israelites' rejection of God's commandments would be violence, destruction, and the dehumanization of even the dead.

For those of us who work on issues of poverty, it is difficult not to see parallels between Jeremiah's description of Israelite society and our own. We are in the midst of an economic crisis that is pulling more and more people into poverty, even as those who already were poor find their situations even more desperate.

Today, there are nearly 1 and a half million homes in foreclosure in the United States. The official unemployment rate is over 9 percent, but it's about twice that if you count people who have given up looking for work, young people who haven't been able to enter the workforce, and those who are working temporary or part-time jobs. That means that in places like Detroit, close to half the population is unemployed or underemployed. In 2010, more than 43 million people in the United States did not have access to sufficient food for at least part of the year. On any given night, between 1 and 2 million people in the United States are homeless. The average age of a homeless person is 9 years old.

Meanwhile, we also live in a time of unprecedented affluence, when CEOs in the United States make over 400 times more than the average worker. The fact is that there is plenty of food and there are plenty of homes, and yet millions are hungry and homeless.

It seems sometimes as though, like in Jeremiah's time, "there is nothing but oppression...everyone is greedy for unjust gain," "everyone deals falsely." And yet we hear from some of our political and business leaders that things are basically ok. In other words, they treat the wounds of the people carelessly, and say 'Peace, peace' when there is no peace.

Yet in the face of all of this, there are prophets and there are leaders. I have seen in this community this weekend some of this vision and clarity that God gave to Jeremiah. YOU are people who are waking up. You have woken up and are waking up to the realities of poverty, hunger and homelessness in Asheville and beyond. And like Jeremiah you have concluded that these realities are not just unfortunate. Poverty is not simply an obstacle or challenge. It is a reflection of a society that has turned away from God and away from our responsibilities to our brothers and sisters.

All of this is what Jeremiah talks about throughout much of the first 29 chapters. It is heavy, difficult stuff. And then we get to today's text, in the 33rd chapter and Jeremiah's tone has shifted. This chapter, and the three chapters preceding it, are often called the "Book of Comfort." After railing against the waywardness of the Israelites and predicting their destruction, Jeremiah offers words of hope and a vision for the future. People will come back to the towns and cities and fields, Jeremiah says. There will once again be laughing and songs of joy and thanksgiving. Righteousness and justice will be done.

One of the interesting things about this shift in Jeremiah's prophecies is when it takes place. At this point in the story, the calamity that Jeremiah is predicting is actually taking place.

Recall in the text it says, “in this place, of which you say it is a waste, without man or beast.” The city of Jerusalem is under siege from the Babylonians, and Jeremiah himself is imprisoned what’s called the court of the guard. This is not the time when we might expect that Jeremiah would suddenly become optimistic. It actually is one of the most desperate moments in Israel’s history. But it is at just this moment that God gives to Jeremiah a vision of restoration. And perhaps that is not a coincidence. It has been our experience at the Poverty Initiative that it is often at moments of crisis when a vision of restoration becomes most clear. It is often those who are most directly impacted by the broken-ness of our society who become the prophets and the leaders and the restorers of their communities.