A Righteous Branch

If you ask most people to describe the job of a prophet,
I would guess that most people, Christian and non-Christian,
Would say something about predicting the future.
In the ancient world, without weather forecasts
Or mass media, the future was the realm of the gods.
The coming of rain or drought, fortune or misfortune,
These were unpredictable events that do not obey human laws,
And so they were considered the act of divine beings.
Some of these divine beings were benevolent,
Aiding humans with luck, harvest, and fertility.
Others were purely evil, seeking to destroy humanity
Or at least cause the suffering of human beings.
But most of all, the gods were unpredictable.
Even the benevolent gods were fickle,
Slow to answer prayers and quick to take offense.
Humans craved a way to communicate, to plead their case,
Or at least to get some advance warning of catastrophe.
In many cultures, people believed that the gods would choose a representative, a human spokesperson for the divine beings, a prophet.
Prophets had many forms and appearances,
As diverse as the cultures they spoke to and participated in.
Some were hermits in the wilderness,
Others were featured in the courts of kings.
But whether they lived in a cave or a castle,
The prophet's job was to deliver messages from the gods to humans.

If crops failed or a child died, people would wonder,
What have I done to anger this god or that goddess?
The prophet provided an answer, and sometimes a remedy.
People would consult the prophet before making important decisions,
To find out which choices the gods would favor.
This is where prophets got a reputation for predicting the future.
While their messages were directed to humans in the present moment,
And usually had to do with immediate concerns,
People's desire to know about the uncertain future let them to seek
Guidance from the spokespeople of the gods.
Of course, predicting the future is dangerous business.
If you're wrong even once, you'd better have a good explanation,
Or else your career as a prophet will be very short and unprofitable.
So predictions about the future were often given in the form of oracles,
Purposefully vague and sometimes confusing messages,
Full of metaphor and imagery, easy to misunderstand in the present,
And easy to re-interpret in the future based on how things turned out.
Imagery and metaphor were also useful for prophets
Whose messages were unfavorable toward powerful people.
They were a way to hide criticism of rulers,
And to either soften or sharpen bad news.
In the Jewish tradition, this role of the prophet as spokesperson
Was mostly similar to the role of prophets in other cultures.
The main difference, however, is that prophets in the Jewish tradition
Could refer to Hebrew scripture as a guide for their messages,
And assumed that their kings were subject to its laws and to God's will.
In other words, prophets in Israel and Judah had a special role

Of calling society into account, holding rulers and peasants alike
To the rigorous moral standards of Yahweh.
So why do we have this idea of prophets mostly predicting the future?
Mainly we can blame Jesus for that.
Or, rather, we can see how Jesus' followers as faithful Jews
Looked to their scriptures to reinforce the idea of Jesus
As the Son of God, the promised Messiah.
In the Hebrew prophets, especially Isaiah, Christians found language
That talked about leaders who would restore their freedom and prosperity.
These predictions of God's anointed leader, or Messiah,
Were a source of hope amid the multiple oppressions and occupations
The Jewish people had suffered over the centuries before Jesus.
Early Christians saw Jesus as the fulfillment of these promises.
Prophecies and oracles that make much more sense
When read as referring to events from their own time and context
Were re-interpreted to be about predicting the life and death of Jesus.
It's not clear with Jesus' first disciples, all Jews,
How familiar they were with the details of Jewish history,
How much they knew about the historical events that prophets
Like Isaiah were speaking about.
But we do know that later Gentile Christians came to see
All of Jewish history and scripture, including the prophets,
As a necessary but ultimately less important preamble to Christianity.
They looked to the Hebrew prophets only for predictions about Jesus,
And ignored the history and context they reflect.
It's not a coincidence, either, that as Christianity rose to power,
As Christians came to dominate the political and economic spheres,

Christians chose to de-emphasize the prophets' criticism
Of the powerful people of their own time.
In seeking proof texts for Jesus, we lost the narrative of justice,
The calling of rulers and rich folks into account for their behavior.
As we look at today's scripture from Jeremiah 23,
I want you to think of Jeremiah not as a fortune teller,
Not as an almanac or forecaster.
In fact, the closest role in today's society to Jeremiah's
Is probably that of the political cartoonist.
A political cartoonist criticizes and holds the powerful accountable
Through the use of imagery and metaphor, much like a prophet.
They aren't spokespeople for a god or goddess,
But cartoonists do speak to our collective understanding,
To a viewpoint or perspective that is, like a God,
Bigger than one person and somewhat hard to define.
Just as there were prophets for many gods,
There are cartoonists that represent many viewpoints.
Instead of Yahweh and Baal, we have donkeys and elephants.
Naturally, the Old Testament is heavily skewed toward Yahweh.
Though it does mention prophets of other gods,
We don't get to read their prophecies.
Much like our own polarized media today, the Old Testament
Is a politically charged document, representing the view
Of those who eventually collected these scriptures in a book,
People who believed in Yahweh as the one true god.
Of all the Hebrew scriptures, the prophets are the most political,
And our scripture today is no different.

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord.

Jeremiah speaks here using the metaphor of the shepherd
To describe the leaders of Israel and Judah.
It's pretty unlikely, anyway, that Jeremiah thought God was angry
About bad sheep herding practices in ancient Israel.
No, Jeremiah's audience heard these words and thought about
The political and military power structure of their culture.
The kings, priests, and generals were making bad decisions
That would eventually result in the destruction of their people
And the catastrophe of defeat and exile.
You can almost see Jeremiah drawing a political cartoon,
Perhaps a picture of careless shepherds leading their sheep
Over a cliff or into the ocean.
We, too, fear that our leaders are bad shepherds.
We worry that the decisions of the powerful will lead to our downfall,
The suffering of the innocent, the destruction of the environment,
The death of democracy.
As it was for the kingdoms of Israel and Judah,
Perhaps destruction is, in fact, our future.
Not even the Roman Empire or the USSR could last forever.
Perhaps history books will chronicle the fall of the United States,
Pointing out where we went wrong, and looking for words
From our own prophets that we should have listened to.

I don’t say this to alarm or scare you.
I am not predicting the imminent collapse of the United States.
But prophets encourage us to take the long view,
As they speak for God, for whom a thousand years is like a day,
Who has seen civilizations rise, and empires fall,
All within the last tiny fraction of this planet’s existence.
Whether in a couple of years or a dozen millenia,
At some point there will be no more United States,
And yet God will remain, loving and caring for God’s creation.
We can look to Jeremiah’s words to see the way in which
God is seeking to restore and re-create in the face of tragedy,
How God shapes new ways for humans to flourish
Even after we muck everything up.
Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.
In Jeremiah’s words we see how the prophet paints a picture,
Continuing the metaphor of sheep and shepherds.
The flock will be re-gathered, guided by good shepherds,
Who bring safety and peace to the sheep.
In this vision for a restored Jewish people, Jeremiah focuses
On the need for God to raise up new leaders.
After the chaos of war and exile, Jeremiah says that God
Will not only restore safety and prosperity to the people,
But that new leaders will emerge who avoid the mistakes of the past.

If our own society collapses sooner rather than later,
Say in the coming decades climate change drives extreme weather,
Causes oceans to rise and crops to fail,
Leading millions of people to be displaced and become refugees.
The political and economic impact of such a disaster
Would surely be enough to cause huge changes in society,
Perhaps even the end or total transformation of the United States.
That's a crazy hypothetical situation that's not at all inevitable.
After all, our shepherds will not lead us over a cliff, will they?
They will probably figure out this climate change thing
Before it turns the world upside down and inside out, right?
In any case, Jeremiah inspires us to think about
The next generation of shepherds.
Out of the chaos of collapse, what will remain?
What remnant of the flock with return and who will lead them?
Perhaps there is nothing to worry about in the near future,
But if there is, the future shepherds of our people are already living.
They are in our schools and daycares, they're in our basement.
What lessons are our children learning to prepare them for the future?
What lessons will they learn from our mistakes?
Perhaps it's the subconscious sense of coming change
That signals to us how important are the lessons we teach our kids.
Perhaps that's why school board meetings have become
A political circus, where parents shout against imagined threats,
And teachers get blamed for every social change
That people are afraid of.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute righteous judgment in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

This Righteous Branch is the spark of hope for Israel and Judah's future.
The Hebrew words for this Righteous Branch are tsemah tsaddiq.
Tsemah meaning something that grows, a sprout or shoot,
Life emerging from lifelessness.
Tsaddiq is perhaps the most important word in the Hebrew Bible,
Translated in English as either righteousness or justice,
It means a state in which humans are in right relationship
With God and with each other.
Injustice has been rectified, fairness is the norm, and peace reigns.
Tsaddiq is the way things are supposed to be,
The way God created us to be.
Jeremiah was probably imagining a literal king or ruler,
Someone to replace the bad shepherds and lead the flock.
Instead of corruption and injustice, their judgments and decisions
Will reflect God's Tsaddiq, God's righteousness, God's justice.
We don't know exactly what Jeremiah thought such a ruler might look like.
For us, it's hard to imagine a king ruling justly over a just society.
We have too much experience with monarchs and autocrats
To trust one person alone to be our shepherd.
Like sheep, humans have often sought safety and protection
In the fold of strong, but evil shepherds, despots and dictators.
We have seen the way that power corrupts,

And absolute power corrupts absolutely.
But for Jeremiah a good king was as good a political outcome
As his people could hope for.
In the same way we show up and vote for our leaders,
Hoping to choose at least a decent shepherd to lead us,
Sometimes our vision is limited to what we know.
The death of democracy seems as horrible to us
As the collapse of a kingdom was in Jeremiah's day.
We hope to elect good legislators and presidents,
But just as we now doubt the ability of a king to rule justly,
Perhaps future generations will find it obvious
That our current system, no matter who leads us,
Makes it impossible for us to truly experience God's Tsaddiq,
God's righteousness, God's justice.
Perhaps our children and grandchildren will laugh at the idea
That peace could be bought with violence,
That justice could be served by incarceration,
That our lives should be governed by capital,
That whoever raises the most money to buy the most ads
To get the most votes should be our leader.
Perhaps it's up to us to start teaching those lessons now.
Perhaps it's time to start listening for prophecy in our streets
And on our airwaves and screens, to listen for the voices
Calling us to Tsaddiq, to seek justice in collapse,
To seek righteous ways of dealing with disaster.
One way or another, new growth will occur.
God will continue to love and bless humanity,

To point us in the direction of God's justice and peace,
Tsaddiq and Shalom.
We may not be able to make these concepts a reality
In this corrupt system, in this generation.
But we can teach the next generation their meaning,
So that they can be that Righteous Branch,
And grow in new and beautiful ways we have yet to imagine.
Amen.