

Prophet with a Punch Line (Jer. 4.11-12, 22-28)
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I wasn't looking for anything in particular when I walked into the shop. I had just finished my morning coffee and copy of the *Post* and felt like a stroll in the crisp autumn air. So I was making my way along the sidewalk when I paused at the window full of books. The door creaked as I turned the knob and went inside, where a friendly older man said "Good Morning," and the wonderful smell of dusty old volumes overtook me. I asked him where the literature section might be and he motioned toward a narrow stairwell in the back. I climbed the steps to find myself in a room stuffed with mountains of books. They were on shelves and in stacks, in corners and on the windowsill. I poked through the rows of titles, leafing through who knows how many volumes, until my eye was drawn to the pale spine of a 1963 trade paperback edition of *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut. I had always meant to read Vonnegut but somehow never had, so I pulled the book from the shelf and began to pore over it. The pages were yellowed and a few of them had come loose. The cover was creased and faded. It bore a number of strange images—a happy-faced cartoon sun, an idyllic castle, a mushroom cloud—and a quotation from the *Saturday Review* that promised reading the book would be like "getting socked in the nose." I headed for the cash register.

Out on the sidewalk again, I opened the book. It began on an unnumbered page with the following epigraph: "Nothing in this book is true. 'Live by the **foma* (harmless untruths) that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy.'"¹ I chuckled a bit at the disclaimer and kept reading. By mid-morning I was sitting outside in the park, halfway

¹ Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* (New York: Delta Books, 1963).

through *Cat's Cradle*, laughing at the absurdity of it all. Perhaps I should mention that the book deals with some of the most difficult subjects I can think of in a not so serious way, and so I was laughing about the misuse of religion, the cynicism of politics, the insanity of the nuclear arms race, and the basic folly of humanity. I would later hear Vonnegut say that he had conceived of each of the book's 127 short chapters as a kind of joke.² Reading through it, one feels the staccato pace of the punch lines one after the other, but many of the jokes are quite gut-wrenching. Because how funny is what we've done to ourselves and the planet, really? How funny is life in a world filled with weapons of mass destruction? How funny is a country where the rich get richer, the poor get poorer and the sun rises and sets and we act like everything's fine? Vonnegut would say that it's actually very funny. But he manages to say it in such a way that you really can't tell if he's serious. I have since read an awful lot of Vonnegut, but none of his books have affected me the way *Cat's Cradle* did when I read it that glorious fall morning in the park. I still keep my worn, 44-year old copy of the book nearby for the moments I most need a bittersweet laugh. Some days I even imagine the weathered pages of the book as if they are the cracked parchment of a prophet's scroll. Because hidden within all of Kurt Vonnegut's jokes is one of the deepest laments I've ever read, a lament for all that humanity could be and has not yet realized. This prophet laughs to keep from crying.

I sometimes wonder if the biblical writers and characters weren't funnier than we know. I suspect that they were, though, as Vonnegut himself once noted from the pulpit of St. Vincent's Church in New York, "Perhaps a little something has been lost in

² Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 128.

translation...in translations jokes are commonly the first things to go.”³ I suppose this is nowhere more evident than in this morning’s lectionary reading from the Book of Jeremiah. That prophetic book is noteworthy for its lengthy oracles of worry and woe. Indeed, when I read the lectionary text out loud this morning you may have tempted to laugh. And not because it is funny, but rather because it is so unfunny, so difficult to hear, so rough around its edges and bleak in its imagery. Indeed, it is no coincidence that our word *jeremiad*, meaning, “a list of woes or complaints; a woeful tirade” descends directly from the name Jeremiah.⁴ Talk about a prophet without a punch line. This guy could really empty a room. Even so, I can’t help but wonder if the irascible old Jeremiah wasn’t on to something.

In the verses we’ve heard today, the ancient Hebrew prophet, not unlike the modern American novelist, writes primarily of human folly. Our biblical translations don’t offer us a tone, so we can’t know if he bellowed the words as an insecure preacher might, if he grouched them in a curmudgeonly style, or if he mumbled them more wryly, sighing through the lines and raising a sarcastic eyebrow. If there is a joke here it is of a salty, world-weary sort, long lost in pious translation as the prophet levels his divine critique of the human. “[Oh]...My people are stupid,” his God is said to say. “They give Me no heed; They are foolish [ones], They are not intelligent. They are clever at doing wrong, But unable to do right.”⁵ The words are harsh and awkward, but so is the truth they contain. What Jeremiah is in touch with is the reality of our most dangerous and

³ Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage* (New York: Dial Press, 2006), 298.

⁴ *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: Fourth Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁵ *The Jewish Study Bible: Featuring the Jewish Publication Society TANAKH Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 931.

destructive shortcomings. We are capable of so much harm, he warns, and we are sleeping through the days without knowing what we do. This is, in many ways, the role of a prophet. To raise a rather unpleasant voice. To play with difficult truths. To remind us that we each contain both the divine light and the demonic dark. This is something we must know about ourselves. The evidence is all around. Referring to the same human capacity, Vonnegut wrote, "If you ever doubt [our destructive capability], read your morning newspaper. Never mind what paper. Never mind what date."⁶ To be sure, this is seriously not funny. But since it is so true and so necessary to hear, I think we rely on the prophets who can offer it to us in a way that at least gives us the chance to smile, however strangely.

I have done a bit of work with the Book of Jeremiah and can't seem to make it very funny. Sometimes the texts don't bend to our jokes or submit to our schemes. But I'm still not convinced that the prophet himself, or most of the biblical characters for that matter, didn't have healthy senses of humor. Because laughter is a mark of freedom and it is a sign of life, two things that I think are characteristic of the prophets. For if the prophets were anything, they were free and alive, rather enflamed with passion for the possible and unwilling to settle for the status quo. So I still suspect that Jeremiah might have been a funnier guy than our translations would indicate. I'm not sure he was funny in a trivial way, but perhaps in a more principled fashion. Perhaps he was funny like a political satirist who really loves his country is funny. Perhaps he was funny like a humanist who chooses to dwell on human folly is funny. Perhaps he was funny like the

⁶ Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country*, 112.

rabbi who invited us to leave the institution of religion in order to find its itinerant heart is funny. Who can say, really?

What can be said is that in the lines we've read this morning, Jeremiah does something prophets often do and links human action to the whole of creation. He frets not just for us, but for the entire earth. Hebrew scholar Patrick Miller puts it this way, "[In Jeremiah,] creation and divine providence are intertwined...covenant and creation are so connected that the dissolution of one threatens the other."⁷ So the prophet worries that to break one covenant is to break them all. As we fail to honor the divine in our midst, then we will also fail to honor the human, and then the animal, plant, mineral, and so on. "[Oh,] My people are not intelligent," Jeremiah's God laments, the implied whisper, "If only they would learn..." And it is with this "If only they would learn..." in mind that prophets have always written their bittersweet jokes and oracles. Because deep down prophets have always believed in that other capacity of ours, the divine that mirrors the demonic, in our ability to create, to love, to protect, to care for, to learn and grow and become. Prophets are really much better at humanism than they are at fatalism. Because their words, written to their human sisters and brothers, urge us to do what we are capable of doing. It's funny how serious they are. Which brings us back to that American man of letters and all of his punch lines.

In Kurt Vonnegut's stories, the characters come off as flawed, hapless, slightly confused and potentially dangerous. But many of them also exude a certain sweetness, as if they possess it within themselves to accidentally salvage the world. This doesn't usually happen in a Vonnegut book, however, and I have found myself laughing more

⁷ Patrick Miller, "Jeremiah 4: 5-31 Commentary" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Vol. VI*.

than once at an absurd world-ending conclusion of one of his novels. But his joke always seems to be that the world didn't have to end, that maybe the characters could have saved it, or that maybe we who are reading the book, when we stop giggling, have a lot still to do. These ideas are eerily reminiscent of Jeremiah's writings from the lectionary where we can't help but think that the desolation he describes shouldn't be necessary. It sounds ridiculous, like something that ought to be stopped. And therein lies the message of the prophetic imagination. Picture how it could be in the worst-case scenario. Picture how it could be in the best. Picture the way to get from here to there. Picture yourself. Picture the first step.

Strangely enough, while Kurt Vonnegut would have been the first to tell you that he was not a Christian, in one of his final interviews he offered some of the most beautiful words from our tradition. The interview was given to the PBS program *NOW*, and it was a half-hour that sounded more like Jeremiah than perhaps anything I've ever seen on television.⁸ On the program, Kurt Vonnegut sat at a small table across from his host. He was wearing what looked to be a tan and white striped seersucker jacket over a plain shirt. His hair was curly and unkempt, the way he has worn it for decades, his moustache a soft white. His face appeared long and tired and the bags beneath his watery eyes had a permanent look. Vonnegut began the interview by rambling on rather angrily about Democrats and Republicans, the absurdity of war, the state of the environment and his worry that perhaps it was all too late. The diatribe had some wonderful punch lines, but it was clear that what he was saying wasn't very funny. He was laughing, again, to keep the tears away. As I watched the interview, I myself became very sad, thinking that the

⁸ *NOW on PBS, Vol. 4, Interview: Kurt Vonnegut, October 7, 2005.*

old man had finally been defeated and would go grumpily to his grave, having lost his saving sense of humor once and for all. In fact, I was about ready to turn the thing off when Vonnegut pulled something of a prophetic masterstroke. He informed the interviewer that he had something he'd like to read the television audience.

Reaching into the pocket of his jacket, Kurt Vonnegut produced a sheet of white paper, which he slowly unfolded. Then, with a distinct gleam in his eye, that old sense of playfulness, he began to read from the paper very slowly. "These are words I never hear," he said. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. This isn't original. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." And then he paused for just a moment, the paper crinkled in his old hands, and Vonnegut looked right into the camera. "Blessed are the peacemakers," he said, "for they shall be called the children of God.

Afterwards, Vonnegut continued the interview for another ten minutes or so, but I'm not sure I can tell you what he said. Because I was haunted by his joke. The tender, bittersweet reading of the words of Jesus and all the hope those words still hold. It's the same hope that the prophets have always had, and, whether we choose to laugh or cry about the state of things, when we give them the chance, the prophets will always ask us to join them in saving the world we have and creating the world we want. Perhaps on this day, then, we can take our own page from these different prophets—the prophet Jeremiah who urged the people to recognize the human folly capable of such destruction,

the prophet Vonnegut who pointed out so many absurdities and helped us to laugh so that we might keep going somehow, and, perhaps most importantly, the prophetic rabbi Jesus, whose words can still stop us in our tracks with the power of their yearning. “Blessed are the peacemakers,” he said. And here we need not look for any joke lost in translation. Here we need only make our answer.

May it be so.