The Continuing Subversion of Alternative Possibility:

From Sinai to Current Covenanting

There is a contest of narratives going on in our society that is urgent, passionate, and sometimes mean-spirited. In this contest the world can be rendered in very different ways that yield very different assurances and very different requirements. It is a very old contest, already formed and articulated in ancient Israel, a contest in which that ancient community found no settled resolution. As ancient as it is, it is also a quite contemporary contest, one in which the shape of our society is at stake, one in which the character and the conduct of the church is at stake. And because we tend to be preoccupied with immediately pressing issues, we tend not to notice or linger over the narrative milieu in which immediate issues are situated and by which they are defined. In what follows I propose to trace this contest of narratives through the Old Testament, and then to reflect on the demanding contemporaneity of that ancient exercise.

I.

The ancient narrative account of reality that Israel prized and that it continued to relate for the sake of the grandchildren (Exod 10:1-2) is that YHWH, the creator of heaven and earth, had rescued slaves and overthrown oppressive economics in the regime of Pharaoh. Israel made a break from Pharaoh's system of despair, a break through which YHWH was glorified and enhanced. It is clear in the Jewish practice of Passover that the exodus memory, whatever may be its historical rootage, became a paradigmatic narrative through which all social reality is described and re-experienced. That is, the narrative pertains to a one-time remembered social upheaval caused by God's holiness; but the narrative looks beyond that one-time memory to see that the same transactions of
oppression and emancipation continue everywhere to evoke holy power. The exodus narrative concerns the passion of holy power in response to human cry. Israel is always in the context of cry; and Israel is always departing from such context. The narrative moves out beyond Israel to see that this is the narrative quality of the entire human historical process.

II.

In the Old Testament, it remained for the tradition of Deuteronomy to codify and institutionalize that narrative memory of the exodus in order to make it a charter for ordering society. It is the Book of Deuteronomy that classically re-imagines life in the world as a neighborly passing for the common good. The particular memory in the narrative is transposed in Deuteronomy into a set of commandments that provide the first move toward “a social safety net” in the history of the world.

The Exodus-Sinai memory produces an uncommon social ethic:

- Debts owed by the poor are to be canceled after seven years, so that there is no permanent underclass (Deut 15:1-18): “Remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you” (v. 15).
- No interest is to be charged on loans to members of the community (Deut 23:19-20).
- Permanent hospitality is to be extended to runaway slaves (Deut 23:15-16).
- No collateral is to be required on loans made to poor people (Deut 24:10-13).
- No withholding of wages that is due to the poor (Deut 24:14-15).
- No injustice toward a resident alien or an orphan (Deut 24:17-18): “Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there” (v. 18).

- And perhaps most remarkable of all, the economy is to make regular provision for the needy and the marginalized:

  When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this. (Deut 24:19-22)

The commandment names the money crops—_grain, olives, and grapes_—a triad that in other places is expressed as _grain, oil, and wine_, the central produce of a market economy. That triad, in the imagination of the Exodus-Sinai narrative, is juxtaposed to a second triad, _widow, orphan, and immigrant_, the ones who have no power to gain access to such valuable commodities. They have no power to gain access to such commodities because the economy is defined by the categories of Pharaoh that endlessly constructs barriers between _valuable commodity_ and _needy consumer_. But that wall of separation is removed by this primal exodus narrative and by the covenantal commandments that are extrapolated from it. The tradition of Deuteronomy intends to resituate the economy of
Israel into the fabric of the neighborhood. In this tradition, it is not true that the economy is a freestanding autonomous system; it is, rather, checked and measured at every turn by the reality of the neighborhood.

That vision of a neighborhood is a given in ancient Israel that continued to refer back to the exodus-Sinai narrative. But it is also recognized, in the tradition itself, that in deep ways the children of the narrative resist this vision. And so Moses chides his resistant listeners:

Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, “The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,” and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.

Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.” (Deut 15:7-11)

The propensity to hard-heartedness is countered in the tradition by the memory that this economy-with-neighborhood is not just a good “liberal” idea. It is, rather, the intention of the God of the exodus:
Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today. (Deut 15:15)

* * *

Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and diligently observe these statutes. (Deut 16:12)

* * *

Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. (Deut 24:18)

* * *

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this. (Deut 24:22)

The tradition, by way of the exodus, makes a connection between YHWH, the Lord of the exodus, and the neighbor. Love of God comes as love of neighbor with an immediate concrete economic dimension.6

It is no wonder that the key question of this tradition of commandment, rooted in a memory of emancipation, is the question of the neighbor: "Who is my neighbor?" It is a question about which Israel quarreled and about which we continue to quarrel. Indeed the neighbor question lingers in the narrative so powerfully that Michael Walzer, noted Jewish political philosopher, can conclude that the exodus narrative is the taproot of all revolutions in the modern world. The Lord of Sinai intends that all economies should be renovated for the common good:
So pharaonic oppression, deliverance, Sinai, and Canaan are still with us, powerful memories shaping our perceptions of the political world. The “door of hope” is still open; things are not what they might be—even when what they might be isn’t totally different from what they are. This is a central theme in Western thought, always present though elaborated in many different ways. We still believe, or many of us do, what the Exodus first taught, or what it has commonly been taken to teach, about the meaning and possibility of politics and about its proper form:

- first, that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt;
- second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land;
- and third, that “the way to the land is through the wilderness.”

There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching."

So chant the children of justice:

“We are marching, we are marching, we are marching.”

III.

But there is a powerful counter-narrative in the biblical tradition that resists the claims of Exodus-Sinai-Deuteronomy. It is a counter-narrative that resists the neighbor question, because the draw back into the fearful, anxious world of Pharaoh is enormously compelling for almost all of us. Our memory fades, and we imagine the security that Pharaoh’s system offered and yearned for an imagined well-being back there.
1. The travel out of Egypt into the alternative narrative immediately produces an attack of nostalgia for the imagined good days of Pharaoh. In Exodus 16, Israel is on its way out of Egypt into the wilderness toward the promised land. They are not into chapter 16 more than three verses when they yearn to go backward:

The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” (Exod 16:3)

The point is echoed, yet again, in the severity of the wilderness, in the Book of Numbers:

The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” (Num 11:4-6)

Israel had found the new narrative too demanding and too precarious, and failed in their feeble remembering.

2. Once they had arrived at Sinai, we can see a much more sustained effort to resist the emancipatory narrative of neighborliness as the tradition is shaped from Mount Sinai, the purity trajectory began to tone things down. It may be that the purity traditions come late, but for our purposes they are lodged right in the midst of the Sinai corpus itself (Exod 25-31; 35-40; Leviticus; Num 10:11-36:13). In the development of holiness as a “qualification” for access to God’s gifts for life, there came the notion of “graded holiness,” that is, that there are degrees of eligibility so that some are more eligible for
access than others. Israel appropriates from its cultural environment a pattern of organizing holy space with three “chambers of qualification,” so that there will be an outer court, a holy place, and a most holy place—holy of holies—where there is an intensity of divine presence and divine power. The chambers are ordered so that some are admitted only at the edge, some are permitted to enter mid-way, and some are given access clear to the center. The process is to make differentiation between neighbors, some better than others.

As close as we can come to such a notion of three “chambers of qualification” is a commercial airline with tourist class and business class, and the “holy of holies” where none may go that more recently is protected by a very strong door. But, of course, every social organization, perhaps even among Unitarian Universalists, has differentiations among neighbors, sometimes regional, sometimes educational, sometimes race, class and gender, and sometimes ideological. At Sinai some imagined the regimentation of holiness:

- That regimentation concerned cultic access—which is like healthcare policy—since the priests were the doctors of that time, administrators of healthcare.
- It concerned moral ratings, good people and bad people, clean people and unclean people, a Manichean perspective that continues to vex communities, liberal and conservative, the rational and the passionate.
- It concerns economic possibility concerning those who have access to resources and opportunity in the neighborhood. The gradations of holiness concerning economic possibility tend to turn on connectedness, being at the right place at the
right time, and productivity. Consequently those who are not productive are increasingly banished from access to the goodies.

The resistance to the common good has cultic, moral, and economic dimensions. As a consequence, we can, in broad outline, see a collision course between the neighborly possibilities mandated by the tradition of Deuteronomy and the regimentations of holiness in the Priestly traditions. Both are in the Bible; both are at Sinai. We may imagine, moreover, that this ancient folk, like us, are of a double mind about it. They knew better, but when it came down to cases they could not help making distinctions. Thus we may imagine that even given the Exodus-Sinai narrative of an alternative to Pharaoh’s system, there was a struggle for the neighborly good. That struggle eventuated in an interpretive contest, a contest kept alive among Jews in the Rabbinic traditions of Hillel and Gamaliel, and on into our own time. Contestation for the common good is an endless project. That contest is a summons and a vexation in the church, because of our own double-mindedness.

IV.

The Exodus-Sinai narrative for neighborliness holds center stage in the Old Testament. It is with King Solomon, however, that this narrative faces its most serious challenge within the Old Testament. In Solomon, there is (a) a fresh enthrallment with Egypt and (b) a passion for graded holiness. And there is, moreover, a deep connection between the enthrallment with Egypt and the passion for graded holiness, for Pharaoh’s Egyptian society did indeed practice graded holiness with its cultic moral and economic dimensions. (See Gen 43:32 on discriminating “lunch-counter” practices.) Had Israel remembered better, they would have remembered more clearly what it was like back in
Egypt to be graded at the lowest level and therefore denied access to economic benefit.

There is something ironic about this most prominent king in ancient Israel; his name “Solomon” means *shalom*, but his sponsorship of a skewed *shalom* that contradicts the common good:⁹

- The echoes of Pharaoh’s exploitative system are everywhere evident in what we know about Solomon. For starters he is married to Pharaoh’s daughter and surely wanted to borrow from and emulate his father-in-law (see 1 Kgs 3:1; 7:8; 9:16; 24). It is most plausible that there were important imports from Egypt by Solomon, not least his policy of “forced labor” that inscripted people to support the aggrandizing projects of the government. That conscription we now call “the draft,” but in ancient days and in ancient texts it is termed “forced labor” (1 Sam 8; 1 Kgs 5, 9). It is evident that Pharaoh’s notion of the common good—a hierarchical ordering shaped like an Egyptian pyramid—reappeared in Jerusalem.

- The echoes of Pharaoh are matched by a graded holiness and by and its consequent of a hierarchical ordering of society. Solomon, of course, is the great temple builder in ancient Israel. We have, in the text, what amounts to a blueprint for his temple that was an imitation of a generic type of building from his culture:
  - The “outer court,” in NRSV, is called “the vestibule”:
    
    The vestibule in front of the nave of the house was twenty cubits wide, across the width of the house. Its depth was ten cubits in front of the house. (1 Kgs 6:3)
  - The “holy court,” in NRSV, is called “the nave”:
He also built a structure against the wall of the house, running around the walls of the house, both the nave and the inner sanctuary; and he made side chambers all around. The lowest story was five cubits wide, the middle one was six cubits wide, and the third was seven cubits wide; for around the outside of the house he made offsets on the wall in order that the supporting beams should not be inserted into the walls of the house.

The house, that is, the nave in front of the inner sanctuary, was forty cubits long. The cedar within the house had carvings of gourds and open flowers; all was cedar, no stone was seen. (1 Kgs 6:5-6, 17-18)

- The “holy of holies,” in NRSV, is called “the most holy place”:

He built twenty cubits of the rear of the house with boards of cedar from the floor to the rafters, and he built this within as an inner sanctuary, as the most holy place.... The inner sanctuary he prepared in the innermost part of the house, to set there the ark of the covenant of the Lord. The interior of the inner sanctuary was twenty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and twenty cubits high; he overlaid it with pure gold. He also overlaid the altar with cedar. Solomon overlaid the inside of the house with pure gold, then he drew chains of gold across, in front of the inner sanctuary, and overlaid it with gold. Next he overlaid the whole house with gold, in order that the whole house might be perfect; even the whole altar that belonged to the inner sanctuary he overlaid with gold. (1 Kgs 6:16, 19-22)

I take so long with this matter because the shape of the temple wrought by Solomon is not an accidental architectural detail. It is, rather, a replica of an imagined social order.
The fact that the description of the temple ends with the term “gold” used six times indicates a fascination with precious commodity, and by extrapolation we may conclude that Solomon’s temple was committed to the commoditization of all social relationship so that we are able to see what is valued and, consequently, who is valued. (It is the shape and arrangement of airplanes, school systems, healthcare delivery, housing patterns and all the rest.)

I submit that the pro-Egypt temple-passion data of the Solomon narrative invites us to look closely at the royal report from which we can determine a great deal about the socioeconomic claims of this narrative that stands in deep tension with the neighborly narrative of Sinai.

I will identify three aspects of this narrative of royal regime that are important for the long-term claims of faith:

1. It is clear that Solomon is committed to an accumulation of wealth, that everything in his hand turned commodity. The temple reeks with gold and after his summit meeting with the Queen of Sheba, we are told:

   Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom.... Every one of them brought a present, objects of silver and gold, garments, weaponry, spices, horses, and mules, so much year by year. (1 Kgs 10:23, 25; see vv. 14-20)

It may well be that the acquisitiveness and commoditization are also reflected in the report that Solomon had three hundred wives and seven hundred concubines (1 Kgs 11:3). The numbers might suggest that this throng of women were “used,” if not for sexual purposes, then for political purposes through a network of alliances.
2. It is clear that Solomon is committed to power. It is evident that his power was linked to his wealth. His enormous power is expressed in the fact that he was an arms dealer, a middleman passing horses and chariots between North and South:

Solomon’s import of horses was from Egypt and Kue, and the king’s traders received them from Kue at a price. A chariot could be imported from Egypt for six hundred shekels of silver, and a horse for one hundred fifty; so through the king’s traders they were exported to all the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Aram. (1 Kgs 10:28-29)

It is astonishing that much arms traffic, then and now, is not in the service of any policy; it is, rather, simply a way of leverage. Alongside Solomon’s traffic in armaments, he had immense commercial interest (1 Kgs 9:26-28), plus a system of collecting “protection money” from a variety of sources:

Solomon was sovereign over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines, even to the border of Egypt; they brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life. (1 Kgs 4:21)

His commercial power was matched and reinforced by his military power, as he kept a standing army of chariots and cavalry, and built immense fortresses at the key locations of Hazor, Gezer, and Megiddo:

This is the account of the forced labor that King Solomon conscripted to build the house of the Lord and his own house, the Millo and the wall of Jerusalem, Hazor, Megiddo, Gezer.... so Solomon rebuilt Gezer, Lower Bethhoron, Baalath, Tamar in the wilderness, within the land, as well as all of Solomon’s storage cities, the cities for his chariots, the cities for his
cavalry, and whatever Solomon desired to build, in Jerusalem, in Lebanon, and in all the land of his dominion. (1 Kgs 9:15, 17-19)

The practice of forced labor, commoditization, traffic in arms, and commerce through trade agreements all converged to make Solomon a major political force in his world, a fact attested by his summit meeting with the Queen of Sheba that was surely a summit concerning trade agreements (1 Kgs 10:1-10). Solomon did indeed fashion a national security state!

3. Solomon is a great practitioner of wisdom. It is reported that he comprised three hundred proverbs and one hundred and five songs:

He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish. People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom. (1 Kgs 4:33-34)

We may take this as his personal achievement. But more likely it is a celebration of Solomon as a patron of the arts, not unlike having Isaac Stern at the White House. Solomon’s artists consisted in the poets of wisdom who began to codify what became scientific data concerning “creation.” The quest for “wisdom” may have been (a) in order to appear as champion of the arts that would enhance the regime, (b) the development of the arts and skills of governance that depended on a practice of discernment, and (c) the accumulation of data so that the elite had a monopoly on “intelligence.” All of these interests in art, governance, and intelligence converge in “wisdom” for which Solomon is noted. While such wisdom may have a theological component, given Solomon’s pursuit
of wealth and power, we may take wisdom here in a more cynical sense as a practice of control. Solomon is celebrated for his worldly awareness, perhaps in the same way that the “wise men” that clustered around Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, of whom Henry Kissinger is the last prominent survivor. These are the ones, then and now, who knew everything but in the end failed to understand anything:

The whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind. (1 Kgs 10:24)

Solomon understood how the world worked, probed the mysteries, and kept on his payroll the academics who could advance his control, his prestige, and his security.

There is a reason that Solomon is so celebrated and so widely admired. He is, as remembered in the narrative, the prominent man, “the man,” who embodies the best control of the world, for what is better than a collage of wealth, power, and wisdom! The consequence is that one can have the world on one’s own terms.

Now having summarized all of that as a counter-narrative that by design and in effect resisted the Exodus-Sinai narrative, I conclude my comment on Solomon with an astounding footnote. At the beginning of the Solomon narrative there is an ironic report on the handover of power from the father David to son Solomon. In 1 Kings 2:2-4, David soberly admonishes Solomon to keep the Torah as the basis of the throne. This advice from David is followed immediately with David’s urging to Solomon that he immediately and systematically execute his enemies in the government, Joab and Shimei (1 Kgs 2:5-8). It is reported, moreover, that Solomon palpably did so, eliminating not only Joab and Shimei, as David had urged (1 Kgs 2:28-46), but also his brother Adonijah (1 Kgs 2:13-25), a rival for the family throne. What interests us is that in the midst of these
assassinations that serve to secure the throne, there is a brief paragraph about Abiathar, the priest who had opposed Solomon’s kingship (see 1 Kgs 1:7). He is a dangerous opponent of Solomon, but you cannot kill a priest...yet! Instead of a death sentence, Abiathar is banished by Solomon away from the capitol city to his home village where he cannot do any harm to the regime:

The king said to the priest Abiathar, “Go to Anathoth, to your estate; for you deserve death. But I will not at this time put you to death, because you carried the ark of the Lord God before my father David, and because you shared in all the hardships my father endured.” So Solomon banished Abiathar from being priest to the Lord, thus fulfilling the word of the Lord that he had spoken concerning the house of Eli in Shiloh. (1 Kgs 2:26-27)

Abiathar departs the regime of wealth, power and wisdom and is left in his innocent, remote village, there to watch the regime and to brood about its commitments to distortion. He will have a very long time to brood...but I will leave that for now.

V.

Solomon is the model in the Bible for a global perspective of the common good, a perspective that smacks of privilege, entitlement, and exploitation, all in the name of the God of the three-chambered temple, the three chambers that partition social life and social resources into the qualified, the partially qualified, and the disqualified. It takes little critical imagination to see that Solomon’s perspective that came to dominate Israel’s imagination is an act of resistance against the neighborly demands of Sinai, and an alternative to the possibilities of Mount Sinai. It is as though Pharaoh, through his son-in-law, has come to rule in Israel as in Egypt. Jerusalem becomes a place that re-enacts
Pharaoh's acquisitiveness that is rooted in Pharaoh's anxieties. That perspective of Pharaoh-via-Solomon takes on a powerful life, largely nullifying the vision of Sinai. In the end it is as though the exodus had never happened. Or as Moses says, at the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, it is as though the alternative possibility for God's people is to end, yet again, in Egypt:

The Lord will bring you back in ships to Egypt, by a route that I promised you would never see again; and there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female salves, but there will be no buyer. (Deut 28:68)

Pharaoh always prevails! Except that Sinai continues to have its advocates. The advocates in ancient Israel are not shrill administrators. They are, rather, poets who imagine outside the box who, by their very lives, attest that the world can be organized differently. You know the roll call of those poets who did not give in to Pharaoh. The list is short!

The role call includes:

- **Elijah** who is reckoned as “troubler” and “enemy” in Israel (1 Kgs 18:17; 1 Kgs 21:20); Elijah dealt with Solomonic, pharaonic Ahab;

- **Amos** who grieved a failed society in his confrontation with Solomonic, pharaonic Amaziah (Amos 7:10-17);

- **Nathan** who by way of parable faced Solomonic, pharaonic king David (2 Sam 12:1-5).

The prophets were not great “liberals.” They were, rather, poets outside the box who were rooted in Sinai, who were gifted with uncommon imagination, and who operated on
the astonishing notion that the claims of the exodus God who had created heaven and
earth were not easily overcome. They were, each in a distinct style, convinced that the
common good was ill served by Solomon’s “chambers of qualification” or by pharaonic
notions of cheap labor in the interest of a centralized economy.

VI.

If one studies the Old Testament, one can see a collision course in ancient Israel,
long in coming but certainly not to be escaped. The Jerusalem enterprise was increasingly
narcoticized by its sense of entitlement; it imagined itself exempt from the starchy
requirements of the historical process, and so delivered to its beneficiaries a wondrous
entitlement of privilege and security under the aegis of a patron God.

But the poets notice! And if you draw the Old Testament down toward its 9/11
crisis of the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E., you eventually will come to the
prophet Jeremiah who, in his poetic daring, had to preside over his 9/11...for it takes a
poet to comprehend such loss! Imagine, it is not the managers, not the ideologues, not the
social activists, not the shrill moralists, right or left, but the poets who are able (and
compelled!) to go to the depth of the crisis and to reach deep into God’s own conflicted
heart.

Jeremiah is a village guy with not very impressive credentials. The Book of
Jeremiah begins with his pedigree:

The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth
in the land of Benjamin. (Jer 1:1)

He is the son of Hilkiah, a priest. He was from the land of Benjamin, just across the
northern border from Judah and Jerusalem, close enough to see, far enough to be
unencumbered. Hilkiah, his father, we know only from one other text. Benjamin we know in ancient geography. But in that opening line, between Hilkiah and Benjamin stands...wait for it...”Anathoth!” The utterance of the word “Anathoth” sets off among us an exegetical alarm system. We know of this village hometown; we reel through our exegetical memory bank and push back to the verses concerning Solomon’s seizure of power. The verdict of the aggressive new king to the honored old priest Abiathar:

Go to Anathoth, to your estate,

for you deserve death. (1 Kgs 2:26)

Abiathar went to Anathoth, defrocked from Jerusalem, still a rural priest acting as a village pastor. He had sons, and sons of sons. They were, like him, priests. They did that for four hundred years. Every day, for four hundred years, they looked to the southern horizon of the village. They could see traces of Jerusalem and they heard the reports. They heard reports of forced labor and armaments and political marriages and exploitation and foolishness of a hundred kinds. Coming from the city were the mantras that mingled exclusive religion and patriotic exceptionalism, affirmations about unconditional promise, and an uninterrupted divine presence.... and “bombs bursting in air and rockets’ red glare,” and abusive labor policy and despair and anxiety and self-sufficiency and amnesia and, finally, an illusion. It took four hundred years to gather together a sinking sense of an ending.

At the end of four hundred years, this son of exiled Abiathar—many generations later—this son of exiles from Jerusalem, this Jeremiah, showed up in Jerusalem yet again. He showed up there with words:

The words of Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah of the
priests over in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin (1:1).

The man from Anathoth has his own words: “Jeremiah, to whom the word of the Lord came” (1:2). He has spent four hundred years transposing the word of the Lord into the words of Jeremiah. It was a word evoked exactly for this moment. He addresses the kings who managed the establishment:

In the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month. (Jer 1:2, 3)

It was a word to the establishment that could see beyond the kings, so that his opener ended this way:

...until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month. (Jer 1:3)

This is a word from the banished poet... to the kings... until their royal displacement. The poet brings only words. But what else will matter when the city crackles in flames and the leadership is seized by an ending that they did not see coming? This Jeremiah had watched—for four hundred years—and had long since seen a trajectory of death. That trajectory was marked by,

- Solomonic wealth... “gold, gold, gold”;
- Solomonic power... so that there was no one like him, before or since (1 Kgs 3:12);
- Solomonic wisdom, ample proverbs and files of intelligence.
It was a trajectory to death. It was a long-term practice of the lethal. And the lethal does not require more technology or more advocacy or more activism. It simply evokes words of a special sort:

The words of Jeremiah... to whom

the word of the Lord came.

VII.

Jeremiah, with a deep breath, all at once counters the primal commitments of the Jerusalem establishment. We can see in one poetic-prophetic utterance the collision of these two perceptions of reality. Here is the poem:

Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this; that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord. (Jer 9:23-24)

The poem is in five parts. I spend time on it because I have come to think that these are the verses that provide the clue to the ancient 9/11 in Jeremiah’s time, and perhaps to our own time and place as God’s people:

1. Jeremiah lines out the lethal commitments that are at work in the Jerusalem establishment:

   Do not praise wealth,

   Do not praise might,

   Do not praise wisdom.
The term “boast”—“do not let the wise boast”—is the Hebrew term hallel, as in hallelujah, “praise.” Do not commend or celebrate these qualities of life.

It is as though, in this triad of wealth, might and wisdom, the poet has simply taken a page from Solomon’s playbook. You will remember Solomon’s inventory of achievements:

- enough wisdom to control the mystery and to reduce it to a technical operation;
- enough might to build a national security state in the middle of the fertile crescent;
- enough wealth to satisfy every acquisitive appetite.

Enough of wisdom, might, and wealth, and says Jeremiah, “Don’t brag on it!”

2. There is, says the village poet, an alternative:

...but let those who boast boast in this; that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord. (Jer 9:24)

Now the term hallel might be “praise” rather than “boast.” The big issue in the “boast” that is now recommended is that it refers to YHWH, the God of the exodus. The double list of “boasts” is an either/or in ancient Jerusalem, mutually exclusive, YHWH or the Solomonic triad. But this alternative is more than a claim for YHWH; it is also a claim for Israel. Israel is the community that “knows YHWH,” that is privy to YHWH’s purpose in the world and has committed to YHWH. As a result Israel “understands” YHWH, reflects deeply upon who YHWH is. The “or” of the “either/or” is to meditate on the Torah that constitutes the ground of knowledge and discernment concerning YHWH. Imagine that...something Pharaoh never thought about and over which Solomon never lingered, access to YHWH’s own life in the world.
3. The end of the sentence is “I am YHWH.” In the world of wealth, might, and wisdom, everyone is an object or a commodity that occurs at the end of the sentence. But when YHWH occurs at the end of a sentence in that frame of reference, YHWH is transposed into a lifeless idol. That is what Solomon sought and finally accomplished in his third chamber... a God settled, under control, tamed to a favorite ideology, echo of a preferred social passion. But not here in Jeremiah. Here YHWH is the subject and not the object, an agent not a commodity, a force of will and not an idol. Thus the text has YHWH say, “I am a YHWH who...” I am YHWH who creates heaven and earth; I am YHWH who brought you out of the land of Egypt. I am YHWH who heals all your diseases and forgives all your sins. I am YHWH who creates and recreates. Such a God cannot function easily in a world of three-chambered qualification, of systemic and absolute control. Such a God lives in tension with the royal triad and with pet projects of any sort.

4. YHWH is the one with active verbs. YHWH is the one with remarkable adjectives:

I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord. (Jer 9:24)

So here is YHWH’s triad which we first might state in Hebrew: ḥesed, miṣpaṭ, šeḏeqah.

- **steadfast love (ḥesed)** is to stand in solidarity, to honor commitments, to be reliable toward all the partners.

- **justice (miṣpaṭ)** in the Old Testament concerns distribution in order to make sure that all members of the community have access to resources and good for the sake of a viable life of dignity. In covenantal tradition the particular subject of
YHWH’s justice is the triad, “widow, orphan, immigrant,” those without leverage or muscle to sustain their own legitimate place in society.

- **righteousness** (ṣedeqah) concerns active intervention in social affairs, taking an initiative to intervene effectively in order to rehabilitate society, to respond to social grievance, and to correct every humanity-diminishing activity.

This triad, ḥesed, miṣpat, and ṣedeqah is everywhere present in Old Testament talk about divine purpose and about Israel’s covenantal life in the world. The terms, moreover, overlap and cover for each other, so that when any one of them occurs in the text, we may extrapolate to the others. The God of Israel, unlike the gods of Egypt, is committed to the covenantal project of each in solidarity for all. And Israel, pledged to YHWH, is committed to the same project.

5. And finally, Jeremiah has God say at the end of the passage,

   In these things—in ḥesed, in miṣpat, in ṣedeqah—I delight.

The term “delight” is a word used in prophetic poetry to describe the kinds of offerings and sacrifices that are offered in worship that will please YHWH. Indeed, it is the same term used in Hosea 6:6 where the prophet prioritizes covenantal solidarity over cultic activity:

   For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
   
   the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hos 6:6)

This text, moreover, is reiterated twice by Jesus:

- In Matthew 9:13, in the debate over eating with tax collectors and sinners:
  
  Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners. (Matt 9:13)
In Matthew 12:7, with the debate over healing on the sabbath:

But if you had known what this means, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice,” you would not have condemned the guiltless. (Matt 12:7)

In Jeremiah 9, in Hosea 6, and twice in the teaching of Jesus according to Matthew, it is the faithful well-being of the human community that is well pleasing to YHWH:

- YHWH loves steadfast covenantal solidarity;
- YHWH loves justice that gives access and viability to the weak;
- YHWH loves righteousness as intervention for social well-being.

And, says the prophet, you in covenant are the ones who can brag on this, that you have been given the secret of God’s primal impulse.

VIII.

Now it will occur to you, will it not, that the two triads offered by Jeremiah constitute the decisive either/or of faith in ancient Israel and of faith in the derivative story of humanity:

- Either: wisdom, might and wealth;
- Or: steadfast love, justice, righteousness.

One is a triad of death because it violates neighborliness. The other is a triad of life because it coheres with YHWH’s best intention for all of creation. In prophetic discourse, there is no compromise on this either/or, no middle ground. It is a contestation that is designed to place all serious persons, liberal and conservative, in profound crisis. It is the purpose of the poetry to invite the listener into serious contestation where we may, always again, re-decide about our common life in the world.
In that ancient moment of Jeremiah, it is clear that his poetry is vindicated by the course of events. This village voice from Anathoth was able to trace, right from Solomon down to the end, the way in which the Jerusalem commitment to an economy based on fear, anxiety, scarcity, acquisitiveness, and control had fated Israel to social, political failure. Of course it is a daring poetic inference that such a failure about the economy produced the end of Jerusalem at the hands of Babylon. But so the argument goes in a world where YHWH is said to be Lord of the public process. In the grief of YHWH and in the pathos of Jeremiah, it is clear that the royal, priestly apparatus never gave the time of day to economic possibilities based in social solidarity. As the poet lived through Israel’s dreaded 9/11 of destruction, termination, and displacement, Jeremiah knew that the collision course rooted in Solomon had now come to fruition. He was left to do the poetry, the grief, the dread and, eventually, the hope.

IX.

Now it remains for me to extrapolate from this narrative account of social collision to our own time and place. I will do so with four extrapolations:

1. This summary of matters in these two verses from Jeremiah exhibit Sinai and Solomon as major alternatives. In a move to the memory of the church, we may read this either/or toward the New Testament. In his opening assertions in 1 Corinthians 1, Paul ends his argument in 1:31 this way:

   In order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

   (1 Cor 1:31)

These words are an exact quote from our verses in Jeremiah, a quotation that indicates that Paul understands his own argument and the condition of the church in Corinth as
parallel to that of ancient Israel in Jeremiah’s time. In his first chapter of 1 Corinthians, we can see how the same contestation works. It is a statement of Paul’s theology of the cross in which he concludes:

For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor 1:25)

Paul celebrates God’s foolishness in the cross that is wiser than human wisdom; he celebrates God’s weakness on the cross that is stronger than human might. In his argument Paul picks up two of Jeremiah’s three terms, “wisdom and might.” Jeremiah’s third term, “wealth,” is not given here. It is, however, easy enough to turn to 2 Corinthians 8 where Paul discusses the church offering and the issue of poverty and wealth. In that discourse he issues a stunning assertion of Jesus’ poverty against human wealth:

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Cor 8:9)

If we take the poverty/wealth assertion of this chapter and align it with the other two in 1 Corinthians 1, we get the same triad for Jesus, foolishness, weakness, and poverty, that are offered as contradictions to the world’s overvaluing of wisdom, might, and wealth. Thus Paul instructs the church on the proper matters about which to boast and then he writes:

Consider your own call (1 Cor 1:26)

It is not a call to worldly wisdom, worldly wealth, or worldly power. For it is the alternative remembered in Israel exhibited in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection that
constitutes a summons to the church and a clue to the future of the world. Paul is able to reiterate the poetry of Jeremiah as it is enacted in the body of Jesus. He bids that it be reenacted in the body of Christ.

2. The radical either/or,
   - of Sinai and Solomon,
   - of Jeremiah 9:23-24,
   - of Paul in 1 & 2 Corinthians,

positions the church vis-à-vis the political economy of the United States. It is clear that we have been on our way, since Teddy Roosevelt, in the formation of a National Security State that now postures as an empire. It is clear that the U.S. National Security State thrives on wisdom, might, and wealth. That triad of commitments, moreover, gets articulated among us not as savage militarism, but as consumer entitlement in which liberals and conservatives together take for granted our privileged status in the world as God’s most recently chosen people.

In that context that is defining for all of us who are liberals and conservatives, there is implicit a clear summons to the covenanted people of God to be in acute tension with the theological trajectory of a National Security State. We are commonly against the war, of course. We do a lesser job on the sense of consumer entitlement that we and our children inhale daily which we take thoughtlessly as our birthright. If this analysis and this extrapolation are in any way correct, then the coming troubles of our society call us to address these great public missional issues of critical alternative to the National Security State that is itself a path to death. The critical edge of faith requires us to ask if a
National Security State can be impinged upon and transformed by strands of neighborly commitment that lie deep in our national history.  

3. I am obligated before I finish to ask how this summons to alternative might impact your particular theological tradition and your particular context of ministry. And of course I do not know, for one cannot easily jump into the theological tradition of anyone else. But for what it is worth, I had these four thoughts:

- The “or” of ḥesed, mispat, and sedeqah is an invitation to allow for God’s holiness as an active, transformative, dynamic agency in the world. Your tradition strikes an outsider as such a cool one that the agency of YHWH has all but been sidelined. If, however, this text as a summons to contest is to be seriously entertained, then the impulse toward covenantal fidelity is an enormously active one that cannot be relegated to irrelevance. The claim is that being out of sync with the Agency is lethal.

- Our rational capacity to understand, explain, and thereby control is broken by the concrete bodily reality of embraced pain. The fact is that no theological tradition has a reliable resolution to the questions of theodicy and the force of unmerited pain. Such pain is dealt with only by embrace as body touches body in compassion. The testimony of this textual tradition is that God’s holiness embraces pain, and that God’s holiness forms an alliance with pain that cuts underneath every explanation we may offer. There is a theological tradition of a-patheia in which God does not suffer. But the entire biblical tradition dissents from such cleanness; from the earliest response of YHWH to the cry of the Egyptian slaves, it is clear that the Holy One can say:
I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians (Exod 3:7-8).

Such an alliance requires us to re-imagine pain in completely new ways as the central marking of the world; and it requires us to re-imagine the Holy One as the one decisively impinged upon by the pain of the world.

- More than the alliance of holiness with pain...the alliance of holiness with pain generates reliable truthfulness. This disturbing claim flies in the face of much of our intellectual history in the West that imagines that truth is set out beyond the embarrassment of pain as a foolproof system of control. But in the rendezvous of God's holiness with worldly pain, this truthfulness becomes a dissent from our controlling knowledge. Indeed in his familiar lyric, Paul is highly suspicious of the claims of knowledge:

  If I understand all mysteries and all knowledge...but have not love... (1 Cor 13:2).

This truth will be insistent upon us,

as long as too many people compete for too few resources;
as long as we ingest and defecate and get bowel blockages;
as long as we copulate and have failed erections;
as long as we die and kill and suffer and wait.

The truth wrought by holiness-\textit{cum}-pain is a truthfulness that hopes, knowing that new gifts are yet to be given that will transform. This is a truthfulness that always again must be \textit{performed} in public.
And that leads to my final attempt to engage your theological tradition. The strange matrix of holiness, pain, and truthfulness insists upon concrete bodily practice...not thought, not reason, not cool control. Truth given in this holiness is to take the plunge into the neighborhood, the neighborhood of violence and rapacious policy and denial and despair. It is precisely in the neighborly engagement that the God of ḫesed, mispat, and sedeqah shows up as transformative.

I may misread your theological tradition or misconstrue your context of ministry. But these claims pertain to all of our theological traditions:

- God’s holiness as active, transformative agent;
- The power of bodily pain allied with active holiness;
- The truth that is generated by holiness-cum-pain;
- The reality of bodily performance of the truth entrusted to us.

It is for such a believing body that the world waits.

4. Finally, as I have pondered Sinai and Solomon and the two great triads, I have thought about Jesus’s words to his disciples about anxiety and not having it both ways:

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? (Matt 6:24-25)
Jesus understands that his disciples were a lot like the world in their several anxieties. He urges them to be different, to be more like trustful creatures (lilies and birds) and less like acquisitive operators. He observes the easy trust and the daily responsiveness of lilies and birds and then he says, in one of his most remarkable utterances:

Yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. (Matt 6:29)

Solomon! Solomon of the great triad of wisdom, might and wealth! Be unlike Solomon in pursuit of control and domination and safety. Be unlike the triad of Pharaoh, unlike the triad of the National Security State, unlike the triad of old certitudes:

For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matt 6:32-33)

The cadences of hesed, mišpaḥ and ṣedeqah continue to sound. They are a minority voice of subversion and alternative, and they have been entrusted to such as us.

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1 The term “paradigmatic” is used by Erich Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation: Order and History I* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956) as a contrast to positivistic, “critical” history. For the same quality of Israel’s tradition, David Weiss Halivni uses the term “pragmatic;” on his work, see Peter Ochs, “Talmudic scholarship as textual reasoning: Halivni’s pragmatic historiography,” *Textual Reasoning:*
Jewish Philosophy and Text Study at the End of the Twentieth Century, ed. by Peter Ochs and Nancy Levene (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 120-143. For a broader consideration of these same issues, see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).


3 Jon D. Levenson, The Hebrew Bible, The Old Testament, and Historical Criticism (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 127-159, has warned against taking the exodus narrative beyond the claims of Israel and thereby dissolving its particularity. Levenson himself, however, acknowledges its legitimate usage in some derivative ways in other contexts.


5 It is most likely that “grain, wine, and oil” were the normal commercial produce of agriculture in which the peasants produced for commerce; through a system of economic power that flowed to the urban center, however, the peasants themselves did not benefit from the production of the money crops.

6 The transposition of love of God into love of neighbor is, of course, articulated in 1 John 4:20-21. That transposition is anticipated, however, in Jeremiah 22:15-16 wherein “knowing YHWH” is equated with justice for the poor and needy. Same difference!


9 For what follows on Solomon, see Walter Brueggemann, Solomon: Israel’s Ironic Icon of Human Achievement (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005).
