

Of all the prophets in the Old Testament, I think I would have liked Jeremiah the best. I’m not talking about liking him by clicking an icon on social media. I’m talking about liking the fact that Jeremiah lets us in on his feelings in a way the other prophets do not. Jeremiah not only tells us his personal experiences, he shares his innermost feelings as well. He is not simply a detached observer of what is happening to his people. He is physically, emotionally, and spiritually involved in everything that happens to them, perhaps in a way the other prophets are not.

I’m certain that Isaiah is the most famous of all the prophets. Maybe that’s because his is the first of the books of prophecy found in the Old Testament. Or it could be that so much of what he had to say is connected with the Advent and Christmas seasons. So we tend to associate him with the birth of Christ and the joy of Christmas. After all, the name *Immanuel*, “God With Us,” is found in Isaiah’s prophecy. His suffering servant imagery in the fifty-third chapter could have something to do with it as well. Whether he intended it to describe the coming Messiah, we can’t be sure, but we who believe in Christ as the fulfillment of God’s purpose have taken it to mean just that. Yet, we have to admit, Isaiah doesn’t let us inside emotionally, doesn’t share the deepest feelings of his heart. At least not the way Jeremiah does.

Ezekiel, in many ways, is not all that likable. I would dare say that apart from his image of the valley of dry bones there’s very little of his life and prophecy we remember. Is it because he’s third in the lineup of major prophets? Or is it because there seems to be a bitterness in his heart that doesn’t exactly convey to us an endearing personality?

Even Hosea, whose personal story we know from his prophecy, gives little to us in terms of his inner thoughts. Remember that he is the prophet who, under God’s direction, takes to himself an unfaithful wife; seemingly, for the sole purpose of illustrating the unfaithfulness of Israel. He is required to give his children some unfortunate names as well, names that depict the estrangement of God from his children Israel. Yet, we aren’t told how Hosea himself feels about all this. We get the picture of a guy who gets dumped on by God and just takes it. Sort of a wimpy character, if you know what I mean.

And Amos seems more than willing to announce judgment upon his people without a shred of personal remorse whatsoever. But Jeremiah is different. We feel his pain because he experiences so intensely and personally the pain of his people. When they hurt, he hurts. When they are devastated, he is devastated. And he brings us in on every thought, every feeling, he endures. Jeremiah’s nickname is “the weeping prophet” because he has a lot to weep over. But I think it’s also because he is so willing to reveal his innermost thoughts. And he does it in such a way that sometimes it is difficult to determine if his thoughts are truly his or if they belong to God.

That’s true of our passage today. We see in it, not only Jeremiah’s deepest thoughts, but those of God as well. And I think that is probably the point. We don’t know where the words of Jeremiah end and the words of God begin, and that’s the way the prophet wants it.

“*My heart is faint within me,*” (v. 18) he says, in case you wondered where the idea of a faint heart comes from. Whatever God decides to do to Judah, as retribution for their sins, it is done to Jeremiah. He takes it all very personally, which is why even though I like him I don’t think I would have wanted to spend much time with him. There’s just too much pain and hurt involved. And if we spend too much time in his company, it becomes our pain as well.

Some biblical scholars believe this wasn’t the case at all; that Jeremiah simply writes all this stuff as material to be used later in worship. In other words, Jeremiah is less a prophet than he is a *priest*. The problems of Israel simply provide *liturgical literature* that has been passed down in what we call the Old Testament. I don’t know if I really buy that, but I think some people—even smart people like biblical scholars—have too much time on their hands.

I think Jeremiah was right there in the trenches with his people. Despite the fact that they did not listen to his warnings, he suffered right along with them. It takes a great physical and emotional toll, but he knew from the outset that this whole enterprise of prophecy was not exactly going to be a cakewalk. He would stand among them to the bitter end.

I hope you don’t mind me using myself as an example. But then again, Jeremiah didn’t hesitate to do that. When someone in our church dies, just about everything else, by the very nature of the situation, has to take a back seat. Responding to the situation appropriately takes over my mind and heart. When someone in our church dies, that death becomes my number one priority. The family has to be comforted. Preparations have to be made. Thoughts about the deceased have to be put together and the service planned. Whatever it takes, that is my job.

I often reason with myself that the person who has died has lived only one life, at least on this side of the kingdom. The least they deserve is to have a word of thanks spoken when they depart from this life. Many of you know what I mean. We’ve been through it together, haven’t we?

Very often, when it’s all over—when the funeral or memorial service has been completed, the burial has taken place, the last goodbye has been shared with the family—the only thing left is exhaustion. I have officiated at more than 400 funerals since coming to Ken Mawr. Yet, every time, when it’s all over, I am surprised at how draining the whole process has been. I don’t realize it until it’s over, which has to be a gift from God. It’s like not recognizing the gas tank is empty until the orange warning light flashes on the dashboard.

I don’t know how else to do it. I cannot do what I do as a detached observer. I have to try and feel their pain, and in most cases it doesn’t take much trying. My main task is to be a messenger of faith and hope in Christ’s resurrection to the family of the person who has died. In the context of a painful loss, it’s not very often an easy thing to do.

So, if anyone is tempted to think that Jeremiah was just an unattached observer to all that is going on with his people, well, I would say, they just have too much time on their hands. He feels their pain intensely. What the people of Israel suffer, Jeremiah suffers. What they experience, he experiences. What they feel,

Jeremiah feels. He is one of them. The prophet says it himself: “*O that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people*” (9:1).

It’s a picture of a man who has wept all his tears and is now drained of all emotion. He can think no thoughts, feel no feelings at all. He is completely spent and has nothing left but the sorrow of an empty heart. Many of you have been there. You know how he feels. Except that Jeremiah’s anguish is not over the death of a loved one. It is over the death of a relationship that God had once established with his chosen people.

The prophet chooses to illustrate this estrangement with the analogy of the farming season. The people of Israel, for the most part, are farming folk. At the least, their economy is driven by the agrarian life. We here in Pennsylvania ought to understand that. Agriculture is the number one industry in the commonwealth. We’ve been fortunate to evade the ravages of hurricanes, flooding and tornadoes, unlike our friends and neighbors elsewhere.

For the Israelites, their summers were generally quite dry, followed by the harvest season. The grapes, olives, and other fruit were to be gleaned by late September or October, and the Festival of Booths and the observance of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, would follow. Then the rains would come just in time for the newly-sown cereal crops to be harvested in the spring. It was the usual year-round cycle of things for the people of Judah. But this year things have gone wrong. “*The harvest is past,*” Jeremiah says, “*the summer is ended, and we are not saved*” (v. 20). “*Since my people are crushed, I am crushed*” (v. 21).

You mean the prophet is this torn up over a lost crop? Most farmers know that the only other profession as uncertain as theirs is that of a gambler. In fact, that’s another word for a farmer—a gambler. You win some, you lose some. No need to get all that worked up about losing a crop. You have to know that some seasons are not going to be so good.

But there’s more to it than that. Jeremiah is using the drought as a metaphor for the *emptiness* of his people when it comes to their devotion to the Lord. Not only have they sinned against God, but generally when people come to realize they have done wrong, they turn away from the wrong and repent, and things are made right again. Instead, Jeremiah’s people have stiffened their already stiff necks. They will not say they are sorry; they will not return to the Lord. They will be defiant until the day of desolation comes. There will be no harvest this season. The only thing that will come over the ground of Israel this year is the thundering of the enemy’s armies. The only harvest of this season will be death and destruction. That’s Jeremiah’s message.

As I think about the message of Jeremiah, I remember my great aunt from Andover, Ohio who lived to be 105. She was a die-hard Cleveland Indians fan. So she went to as many baseball games at the old Memorial stadium as she could, often taking my brother and me with her. But she also had an old radio at home, the console type, that looked like a piece of furniture in her sitting room. She would sit in front of it with her ear close to the speaker, and through the static, she would hear bits and pieces of the broadcast; sometimes keeping score of the game...trying to hear if the Tribe was winning or losing.

To me, it's a picture of hope. That in all the static of our lives, so filled with uncertainty, there is *no circumstance* so desperate God is not willing to redeem it. There is *no situation* so dark that God is not willing to shine his light in it. There is *no life* so worthless that God is not willing to save it. Do you believe that? If so, you will find a balm in Gilead, you will find a Physician there. His name is Jesus, and he's ready to show you the way home. Amen.

(Much of this sermon is taken from a sermon by Randy L. Hyde © 2004)