

“Do Things Look Bleak?”

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

A minister and a priest from neighboring churches were standing on the side of the road, pounding a sign into the ground that reads: **“The End is Near. Turn Around Now—Before It’s Too Late!”** A car speeds past them and the driver yells out the window, **“Leave me alone—you religious nuts!”** From the curve in the road ahead they hear screeching tires, gravel flying, and then a huge splash. The priest turns to the minister and asks, “Do you suppose the sign should have said, **“Bridge Out?”**”

This silly story begs the question: “What road are you on today?” Well, after three Sundays of sermons from Jeremiah this month you might be ready to take an exit ramp off the Jeremiah road. Truth be told, I may be tiring of Jeremiah’s road too. I mean, it’s one message of darkness after another, sorrow upon sorrow—with little or no hope. And now, in Jeremiah 8 we witness deep sorrow that causes the hearts of Jeremiah’s hearers to faint because of all that has befallen Judah. **Our brief passage reads like a gigantic teardrop!**

If we follow the prophecy of Jeremiah, it seems like we’re walking a trail of tears that begins with Jeremiah going to the potter’s house and moves through sin and judgment and sorrow to the possibility of redemption, if Israel repents and turns to the Lord. The first verse of our reading today however strikes a hopeful note: *“You are my Comforter in sorrow.”* Rather than asking the question, *“Do Things Look Bleak?”* as the sermon title suggests, perhaps I should have instead titled today’s message, *“Through the Valley of the Shadow of Death.”* Yet, the words that follow are, *“for you are with me.”* That’s a reason to stick with these dark readings from Jeremiah. Because they describe reality not merely in 6<sup>th</sup> century BC Judah, but also in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. My intention is that eventually these prophecies will take us somewhere helpful.

Honestly, that “somewhere” is a place none of us wants to be, but it’s a place all of us land at some point in life. We’ve been to this place all too often. We were there after the disaster of 9/11. We go there in mass shootings that are in our communities, in pictures of endless car crashes, in homes and businesses

engulfed in flames, in the incomprehensible suffering of victims of hurricanes. That is, we visit that place wherever people's lives have been totally upended and they sit stunned in the wreckage of their lives. All they can do is weep and weep inconsolably because what has happened to them makes no sense.

That was most certainly the case for ancient Israel when they were dragged into Exile, leaving behind a land that was devastated in every way. They always believed, or presumed, that such a thing could never happen to them, because their covenant God was with them. Why, he was right over there in Jerusalem, particularly present in the temple. That place gave them assurance that no one could conquer them. Now, here they sit in the ruins, in a foreign land, stunned that this could happen to them, weeping inconsolably "*a fountain of tears.*"

It's a place none of us wants to be, but all of us will be at some point, because this world is "a vale of tears," which is a metaphor for this world as a place of suffering and hardship, that we leave behind when we die to enter the glory of heaven. So, hearing this Scripture gives us an opportunity to bring the gospel into all those very dark places. As happens in real life, catastrophes raise a list of questions. And that's what we have in today's reading: "*Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her king no longer there? Why have they aroused my anger with their images, with their worthless foreign idols? Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?*" A myriad of voices also rings through this sad Scripture and sorting them out is no easy task.

Verse 18 seems to be Jeremiah calling for "*my Comforter in sorrow,*" because his heart is faint and it is sick. The announcer of doom is heartsick with sorrow over the doom that is surely coming. Is he calling out to the Lord to comfort him? That's a strange turn, given that the Lord is the one who brings the sorrow. But all of us who have grieved deeply know this strange turn. Verse 19 puts the questions of all the exiled Jews in the mouth of Jeremiah. Or is this the Lord listening to the cries of his sinful people? That is the key question in these verses, and I'll return to it once we've considered a few individual verses. Let's

assume it is Jeremiah giving voice to the heartbroken questions of God's people "*from a land far away,*" that is, their place of exile, Babylon. **Where is our God?** We always believed that his presence at the temple in Zion made us impervious to attack. That old temple tradition was proven to be mistaken. And now that we've been conquered, we simply don't know where God is.

In verse 19, God responds with his own question, a repeated question in Jeremiah, expressing God's confusion and disbelief over Israel's idolatry: "*Why have they aroused my anger with their images, their worthless foreign idols?*" That's quite a picture of God, isn't it? God is indeed in Zion, but his people have left him by pursuing foreign gods in spite of all he did for them over the centuries. Yahweh cannot understand it. And he is deeply angry.

After years of denying God's anger, ignoring the prophets' warnings, and continuing their sinful ways, Israel has finally gotten the message. **But it's too late. It's over. They put it poetically in verse 20:** "*The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved.*" **They are crushed!**

Knowing that they are crushed, crushes Jeremiah. Or is it the Lord himself speaking in verses 21 and following? It seems to be Jeremiah speaking, expressing complete identification with his compatriots. He is not the detached prophet Amos seems to be, announcing doom with no emotional involvement. Jeremiah is a model messenger, speaking faithfully for God and identifying compassionately with God's unholy people.

John Holbert, a preacher and writer, uses this passage to speak a hard word to modern preachers. "No preacher has the right to assault the people he or she has been called to serve, forgetting that he or she is one of them...The preacher is also *in the audience of every sermon*...and Jeremiah is a model for any modern preacher who would speak the hard truths of the gospel." That is very true, and very important, but that is not the message of Jeremiah 8 and 9. It's important not to psychologize the message of this weeping and working prophet. However much I may identify with the deep passion of the prophet, the focus must be on the deep passion of God. Yes, Jeremiah wept inconsolably

for God's people, as expressed so painfully in 9:1. But, taking a step backwards, we might ask "Was he doing that for himself, or for God?"

That gets to the question I've hinted at. **Who is the subject of the pronouns in this passage?** We can easily identify Israel in verses 19 and 20 and God in the last half of verse 19. But could it be the pronouns "my" and "I" in the other verses are actually God? **Could this be a picture of God weeping over his sinful people?** Is God heartsick over their sin and the punishment he will visit on them? Does God "*weep day and night for the slain of my people?*" (9:1). Can we even imagine the just, holy, eternal, sovereign God weeping his eyes out for his people's sins and suffering, even as he inflicts the punishment for their sins? It's very hard to imagine, but it's comforting, too. Even a punishing God is not a hard-hearted God. Even when he punishes, it breaks his heart. Is our heavenly Father saying, "This hurts me a lot more than it hurts you?"

This gives a whole new depth to those famous words quoted before: "*Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*" **The Lord is "with me" even to the depths of my sorrow, not just spiritually with me, but emotionally and psychologically and existentially with me.** Indeed, God is even physically with me, as God incarnate. Even if my reading of who the pronouns are pointing to is wrong, and if we cannot say for sure that God in heaven weeps, **we can surely say that God in the flesh weeps** (who is now in heaven, taken up into heaven following his resurrection). God incarnate, our Lord, was called by Isaiah the prophet a "*man of sorrows*" acquainted with grief, because of his identification with our sinfulness and our suffering.

**We saw this from time to time as he walked the earth, such as, at the tomb of Lazarus in John 11:35.** And on the hillside overlooking Jerusalem in Luke 13:34-35, a gospel account that has deep ties to Jeremiah's hard words directed at Jerusalem. And recall how the NT writer to the suffering Hebrews spoke about the one who is greater than all their faith heroes and all the practices of their Jewish faith. "*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to*

*empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (Hebrews 4:15). “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Hebrews 2:18). What an immensely comforting word to people who are sitting stunned by their loss and sorrow! When we can’t find God anywhere, the good news of Jesus our Lord tells us that he is right beside us weeping with us. When there is no “balm in Gilead...no physician...no healing” (v. 22), and the pain will not stop, “You who are my Comforter in sorrow” (v. 18) will be with us.*

It seems I have been leading more and more funeral services lately. At the graveside, when we commend a loved one or a friend to God, I regularly share these words that I’ve been saying to grieving families for decades: AS SURE AS THE DARKNESS OF NIGHT TURNS TO THE BRIGHTNESS OF A NEW DAY, ONE SEASON FOLLOWS ANOTHER. The writer of Ecclesiastes says, *“For everything there is a season.”* All of us have known the four seasons of winter, spring, summer, and fall throughout our lives. And we know what to expect in every season; that in the season of winter, the ground is cold and hard, and the earth is barren. But when the season of spring arrives, the earth comes to life; the grass grows, the trees bud, the flowers bloom, and the birds sing. This is the season in which we celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

We find hope in Christ that death is not the end, but the passing to yet another season, the “fifth season” of life. Through our faith in Jesus, we believe that all who put their trust in him will live with him in this 5<sup>th</sup> season that never ends. This 5<sup>th</sup> season Jesus calls “the Father’s house, or the kingdom of heaven, or eternal life” and was made possible by Christ’s rising from the dead. Let us rejoice in this good news and give thanks to God for the season that has no end!

**Do things look bleak? Do things look hopeless?** Yes, they do and they always have. Even so, let’s say with the writer of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: *“May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you.”* Amen.

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