

Is There No Balm in Gilead?

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

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The struggle for action will no doubt be difficult and hard-fought... But I would like to believe that out of this struggle will be born a generation that will be able to look upon the world with clearer eyes than those that preceded it; that they will be able to transcend the isolation in which humanity was entrapped in the time of its derangement; that they will rediscover their kinship with other beings; and that this vision, at once new and ancient, will find expression in a transformed and renewed art and literature.

- the last paragraph of Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*

George Carlin once said, "I don't believe there's any problem in this country, no matter how tough it is, that Americans, when they roll up their sleeves, can't completely ignore" (*Rooted and Rising: Voices of Courage in a Time of Climate Crisis*, ed. Leah D. Schade and Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, p. xx-xxi).

These days we're ignoring the biggest problem facing the entire planet: global climate change. And if we can't ignore it, we deny it, minimize it and distract from it. This week 40 inches of rain were dropped south of here (Nick McCown's parents received 20 inches), heat, drought, more and more monster storms (we've had six storms in the Atlantic this week – and currently, we've Tropical Storms Jerry and Karen out in the mid-Atlantic, with a yet unnamed storm off the coast of Africa given a 90% chance of becoming a hurricane within the next four days.). Atmospheric scientists at M.I.T. say that because of the warming ocean, the rain

from Imelda is seven times more likely now than 30 years ago, and 20 times more likely than 100 years ago (source, CBS News, Sept. 21, 2019). Besides that, we have species extinction, coral reef destruction, melting ice, salinization of the oceans, rising tides, and on and on and on, with a feedback loop so that when one thing in the climate changes it effects the next and the next until there is a cascading of change and disruption. It's getting harder to ignore.

The prophet Hosea said, "For the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land... Therefore, the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing" (Hosea 4:1b-3).

The old-time prophets spoke a hard word because the people refused to see what was going on. They ignored it, denied it, blamed someone else for it, or were distracted from it. The prophets said God's judgment is coming and God's judgment is often that God gives us what we want. We reap what we sow. So if we exploit the Earth, destroy Creation, burn up fossil fuels and mistreat others in our greed, as well as willfully ignore the repercussions for future generations, sooner or later, one way or another, that lifestyle will come back and haunt us.

To ignore or deny what's happening, people in the time of the Old Testament prophets, just like today tend to follow predictable patterns: a hardening of religious and political views, increased hostility and suspicion toward anyone considered "different," and raging anger. People in the Bible and people today, fear change, fear loss, fear not getting what we think we deserve. Furthermore, fear blinds us.

The gospel is that sometimes God's word breaks through our fear and blindness and we begin to see. We wake up. We woke. One of the most difficult moments in any of our lives is when we woke to climate disruption. Perhaps it was a gradual opening of our eyes, or maybe it was what journalist Mark Hertsgaard called an “oh s**t” [“oh no!”] moment, when we are like Adam and Eve, having just taken a bite from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and as the fruit falls to the ground, our eyes are opened and we realize what we have done (Schade and Bullitt-Jonas, p. xxi).

Which brings us to Jeremiah. Known as the weeping prophet, Jeremiah spoke a hard word to a people who ignored what he had to say and who were in denial about what was about to happen. Zedekiah was king of Judah. He was perhaps the most inept king Judah ever had, always changing his mind from supporting Egypt to supporting Babylon and then rebelling against Babylon. Zedekiah's religious advisors kept telling him and preaching to the people that Babylon wasn't really a threat. God would save them just like God had saved them countless times before. They could continue their lavish lifestyles and keep on ignoring the poor and needy. They believed they could count on God to be a ready answer to their every whim. They didn't need to repent; they didn't need to wake up and change their ways.

Jeremiah had an alternative word. “No,” he said, “Babylon is coming unless we change our ways. We must return to worshiping the true God and caring for the poor and needy. The two go together. If you mistreat the poor you are not worshiping the true God no matter how loud you sing or how much you pray or how often you show up at church.”

While everyone else, especially the big-time religious leaders, kept telling King Zedikiah and the elite what they wanted to hear in order to stay in denial, Jeremiah had a different word. The great biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann says the key in Jeremiah is found in chapter 32:25, which we read this morning: “Yet you, O Lord God, have said to me...” No matter what everyone else is saying and believing, “You have said something different to me.” “Yet you.” Remember always with Jeremiah – it’s about God. Always (Brueggemann, *Like Fire in the Bones*, p. 183ff).

But this is not the God of triumphalism and glory, the God at the massive Temple in the middle of the City, next door to the Palace. The God Jeremiah listens to is the God who loves God’s people deeply and profoundly and suffers alongside of them. God grieves and is in anguish over their – and our – disobedience. And Jeremiah walks with this God so intimately that he too, grieves and is in anguish. Jeremiah says, “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick... The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved. For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead” (Jer. 8:22)?

When Jeremiah asks is there no balm in Gilead, his meaning is different from the hymn we sang a few minutes ago. He is saying things are so bad with the people of Jerusalem that no balm in Gilead can help. Gilead was the land across the Jordan River, which had balsam trees that produced a balm, an ointment that was famous for its healing qualities. In other words, when you’re diagnosed with cancer, prescribing the ointment of Gilead won’t suffice.

God grieves. Jeremiah grieves. Both God and Jeremiah can see what's coming. The people of Judah's whole world is going to end: the Temple where everyone believed God dwelled and therefore they believed that the nation and the king would live forever and ever, amen. Their entire sense of an order of the world operating according to understandable laws is what Peter Berger called a "nomos." "Nomos," is a Greek word translated as "law" or "order" (see Peter Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, p.23).

This orderly world was ending. Everything that made sense, and gave them routines and habits and assumptions was about to be turned upside-down. This is what Berger called anomie. We know this anti-nomos when we lose someone we love deeply. Or when the doctor walks in and says the word, "cancer." Or when we have our first sense that climate change is real. Everything we've ever known as orderly suddenly becomes disorderly. Everything we thought was oriented becomes disoriented.

So Jeremiah weeps. He cries. And there is nothing he can do. He laments.

In Jane's favorite movie *Ordinary People* (1980), there is a scene in which the teenaged boy, Conrad (played by Timothy Hutton), is grieving with his therapist, played by Jud Hirsch, over the suicide of the boy's friend. The therapist is going back and forth with him and finally, Conrad blurts out, "I feel bad! I just want to feel bad about this. Just let me feel bad."

There are times when we just want to feel bad. We cry. We grieve. We lament. We see what is going on around us and we cry. No more denial. No more distraction and no more ignoring it. We see it for real. And we grieve.

And we grieve because the God with whom we walk and who is with us, also cries, grieves, and laments. God too, just wants to feel bad about this – about Jerusalem falling into destruction, about cancer, about our world coming apart, about immigrants mistreated, about people impoverished while the rich get richer, about gun violence, about racism, and about what we're doing to our Earth.

Jeremiah has worked too hard, preached too passionately, risked too greatly, and organized too long, “The summer is over and still we are not saved” (8:20). “Tomorrow is the first day of fall and we’re still doing this, nothing has changed. God, I’ve been working on this stuff for 30 years and things look worse than ever!” He is in despair and his despair reaches all the way to heaven. At the same time, God has worked too hard, loved too passionately, and tried to intervene for too long. God too grieves and God’s grief reaches down to Jeremiah. Together they weep (Brueggemann, p. 185).

But when we’re with God, this is not the last word. This is where the key verse of 32:25 comes back into our lives, “Yet you, O Lord God, have said to me...” “Yet you, O Lord God have said to me, ‘Buy the field...’”

God told Jeremiah to go buy a piece of land near Anathoth. When God told him to do this, the city of Jerusalem was surrounded and under siege and there was no more hope. But God said, “I want you to invest in real estate. Buy this place because someday the people will return to it.” Someday there will be a new beginning. Someday there will be new creation. It was an unbelievable word of hope from God to the prophet and in an unbelievable act of hope Jeremiah went and bought it.

Our fall theme: *Rooted in Christ, Grounded in community* is about deepening our lives in the “Yet you, O Lord God” so we might hear what God has in store for us. It’s why we’re reading together Bill McKibben’s *Deep Economy*, and why we work on growing, building, and nurturing local connections. Indeed, it’s why we’ve been doing this for a long time. It’s why we’re learning to live into the new creation now.

We have long talked about resilience, that ability to withstand, absorb, and live through difficult change, specifically global climate change. We’re here to deepen our spiritual resilience as we face dramatic upheaval. We seek to deepen our root system in Christ and build the spiritual soil of community so we can flourish and grow when hard times come.

Jeremiah was called by God to take an action of incredible hope and courage – buy a piece of land that someday would be inhabited by someone he’d never know, long after Jeremiah was dead and gone.

Part of our calling is to take actions of incredible hope and courage for a future that some of us will never see. Who knows what is in front of us? Part of the power of the Climate Strike on Friday is the leadership of children and young people. Together with our children and youth, looking through our tear-blurred eyes we might begin to see glimpses of what we need to do, holding together grief and hope, we work toward a future that is not yet clear.

We usually think that we have to be clear-eyed to see the truth. But the biblical way is different. Sometimes it is only looking through tears can we see the real truth. Broken hearts and dis-illusion allows us to see the illusions for what they are,

and allows us to see without illusion – allows us to see what God might be doing that we would otherwise miss and be blind to.

So hear me on this: Early one morning in the dark, after spending two days crying, some women set out for the cemetery to care for their dead friend. Everyone else was afraid and was in hiding but these women went out anyway. Surrounded by fear, weeping as they went, not knowing what they were going to do when they got there... God surprised them.

We grieve. But then we set to work to make changes – in our personal lives and in the world around us. We step out – together – on the journey, even though we're surrounded by fear and everything is dark. And we're open – because God might yet surprise us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.