
“Good Grief”

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 22, 2013 by the Rev. Luke A. Powery

I once heard it said that “Jeremiah was a bullfrog...[and he] always had a mighty fine time...singing joy to the world.” But that must be a different Jeremiah from the one we meet this morning. That Jeremiah talks about joy, but this Jeremiah says, “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.” He voices this trilogy of agony and some even suggest those words might actually be God speaking because you do know that God suffers, right? I know that within the romanticized and traditional notions of masculinity we hear that real men don’t cry. Some endorse a machismo mentality. Well, God suffers and God weeps, even as we hear the shortest verse of the Bible—“Jesus wept” at the tomb of Lazarus. What we have this morning is a prophet who weeps. Don’t underestimate tears. They may not mean what you think and they may come without warning.

Saint Augustine, in his *Confessions*, recounts when his mother died at the age of 56 when he was 33 years old. He was by her side when she expired her last breath. He closed her eyes and said “a great wave of sorrow surged into [his] heart.” Tears started to come but he “stemmed the flow” and the tears dried up. He thought it was more mature to put his “sobs in check” and not to mark his mother’s death in that way because it was not total extinction or misery since she was a woman of faith. He fought against the wave of emotional sorrow and did not even shed a tear at the burial ground. It wasn’t until he woke up the next morning that he wept for her and himself and writes, “The tears which I have been holding back streamed down, and I let them flow as freely as they would, making of them a pillow for my heart. On them it rested...” His heart rests on a pillow of tears. His heart rests on grief. That same morning he was comforted by Saint Ambrose’s “Evening Hymn,” which declares that God will “gently soothe the careworn breast, and lull our anxious griefs to rest.” There’s something about a mother’s death that grieves the human heart, perhaps because it is the loss of our first home in the womb. In the end, Augustine could not stop his grief or his tears, though he seems to still struggle with its role in the spiritual life.

Groaning grief seems to be the ongoing theme in our sin-sick world. Just this week—deadly shootings at the Navy Yard in Washington, DC. A man waving a gun recklessly in downtown Durham is shot by police. There’s good reason for much weeping and-a wailing. We’ve seen the choreography of grief on display at vigils for those who have been killed by gun violence and even at funerals of loved ones, especially of children. Some faint in overwhelming sorrow for a young life cut too short. Others bawl like the Old Testament figure “Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more” (Jer 31:15). Some swallow their tears in silent numbness at what appears to be the death of humanity’s future. Some may want to jump into the casket of the child, who is no more, as an attempt to reverse life’s inhumane joke that has gone sorely wrong. This grief is oral and aural and visual choreographed by the spirit of a broken world.

We observe and hear the grief of Jeremiah. It is not a pretty sight. The pages of scripture are soaked with sorrow and lament. He is moaning his mourning this morning. “O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!” It is embodied grief. A grief that terrorizes the body and reshapes the contour of one’s life like when a Philadelphia mother discovered two children locked in a car trunk, suffocated by mistake while playing an innocent game. The choreography of grief at that moment was unforgettable! Joy was gone and her heart was sick. The terror of grief irrupted the fountain of tears from her heart. It was an observable and obvious grief.

In his personal journal, published as *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis pens the shape of his grief in the wake of the death of his wife, Joy Davidman. Again it was that c-word. Not cuss word, but cancer. “Cancer and cancer and cancer,” he writes. “My mother, my father, my wife. I wonder who is next in the queue.” The presence of the absence was so poignant that Lewis writes, “Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything.” Grief takes over his life to such an extent that he declares, “I am a death’s head.” Somatic grief, just like Jeremiah.

Publishers Weekly notes that sales for books on grief do pretty well. There are some classics in religious circles like *A Grief Observed* or *Lament for a Son* by Nicholas Wolterstorff. Grief sells well as people try to discover how to deal best with it. But I’m not sure the book of Jeremiah has sold as well, especially his lamentations that are found in chapters 11-20. Everybody wants to rush to prooftext Jeremiah 29:11—“For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.” Yet, I don’t know of anyone who tries to memorize at bedtime “we look for peace, but find no good, for a time of healing, but there is terror instead”(8:15). That was the state of the people in Jerusalem. I don’t hear anyone quoting the lament of the people, “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.” Jeremiah is a weeping prophet who does not make financial profits. He does not have a bright smile or slick hair or tell funny stories. Tears are his food day and night but his tears may not be what you think. There’s something compelling, something honest, something real and raw about Jeremiah’s descent into the shadow of a people’s darkness. Far too long certain sectors of religion have attempted to avoid the abyss but Jeremiah reveals the truthful necessity of facing the abyss along a trail of tears.

The prophet’s oracles “*indict* Jerusalem for its disobedience to [God’s] Torah and. . . *sentence* Jerusalem to the punishments that follow upon Torah disobedience”(Walter Brueggemann). His speeches anticipate the destruction of Jerusalem in an enemy assault that is the enactment of the will of God who will not be mocked or disobeyed. It is clearly a domain of doom and destruction. This is the reason for Jeremiah’s grief, joylessness, heart-sickness, and mourning. The people experience a sense of abandonment and loneliness; God seems to be *in absentia*. “Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?” (Cf. Ps 48:3) Or in the words of C.S. Lewis, “Why is [God] so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?” It is the piercing question of lamentation that God even asks God, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It is the interrogation of the biblical blues. Where is God? Old Testament scholar, Stephen Breck Reid, writes, “The crucible of laments is to trust in God even in the face of the apparent absence of God and the presence of the enemies.” Funny enough, the people of God are not the only ones questioning. God raises his voice, “Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?” The irony is that the Lord is in Zion and has his own questions for the people. Based on what God says, this is actually a situation of self-imposed exile and hurt based on the choices of people. I know none of us know about that.

The situation is so grim that Jeremiah sings his own blues note, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” We know Jeremiah is not at Duke Chapel because this is medical doctor mecca! There are many physicians here. Later in the book of Jeremiah, there is restoration, but in this specific moment he doesn’t distance himself from the hurt and sorrow of his people. He is not afraid to cry. “Men don’t cry,” they say. But prophets do. “For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.” His tears form a path of solidarity in suffering. Don’t underestimate tears. They may not mean what you think.

The challenge is to see hope while traveling on the trail of tears. Jeremiah reveals the gift of tears, affirming what UCLA clinical professor of psychiatry, Dr. Judith Orloff, teaches. Professor Orloff gets excited about people crying because she has witnessed the healing power of tears. Tears are a release valve for stress and grief and anxiety and frustration and joy. Tears are a way to purge pent up emotions so that they do not remain in the body as stress symptoms. Tears lubricate and cleanse our eyes so that they do not get irritated or infected. After crying many times, our heart rate can decrease and we enter a

calmer state. Reflex, continuous, and emotional tears make us feel better, physically and emotionally. Crying can be thought of as physiological and emotional detox through which one can be healed. Thus, Dr. Orloff warns not to hold back the tears because it is healthy to cry. A Yiddish proverb says, "What soap is for the baby, tears are for the soul." Don't underestimate tears. They may not mean what you think.

There's much fruit from tears. Jeremiah reveals that they are a gift as tears embody the prophetic ministry of grief. Tears have a ministry, a prophetic ministry. It's important to remember that the office of the prophet was to ultimately be a "gift for the welfare and wellbeing of the nation as a whole"(RE Clements). When Jeremiah cries he yearns for the restoration of his people, which is why he asks, "Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?" As a prophet, he not only stands over against them as a mouthpiece of God, he stands with them in mourning and grief at their impending funeral. He sheds a fountain of tears as an aspect of his prophetic work.

His grief is prophetic because he refuses to be silent in the face of horror and terror and injustice. Elsewhere he says the word is like "fire shut up in [his] bones"(20:9). He does not shrink back from voicing the raw grief of life. There is a "candor born of anguish and passion"(Brueggemann). Prophetic grief is a form of lament that boldly proclaims, "Life is not right!" Tears can represent a torn heart, but this type of tear-filled grief and "crying in pathos is the ultimate form of criticism," according to Walter Brueggemann. One may shed tears because one refuses to shrink back from struggle and pain. Joy is gone but hope is not! Prophetic grief tells it like it is and acknowledges that "life for [us] ain't been no crystal stair"(Langston Hughes). This ministry of grief is the embrace of weeping and lamentation as part of our spiritual repertoire and in the process helps others engage their experiences of suffering honestly, rather than respond with numbness, fear, self-deception and denial of reality. Prophetic grief is poetic and can be a theological chronicle of communal catastrophe expressed lyrically. In many ways, Jeremiah realized these words of a hymn—"we have come over a way that with tears has been watered." He is not afraid to name his and his people's sorrows. Every teardrop is a prophetic act of resistance against the way life is and a prayer for something better because of his faith in God. Is there no balm in Gilead?

Prophetic grief does not leave God off the hook. It does interrogate the goodness of God. Is there no physician there? Questioning God is a part of a Christian spirituality in which we recognize that many times there are more questions than answers and it takes courage to ask God anything, especially when we may not receive the answer we want or any answer at all. But prophet Jeremiah still courageously asks questions because he believes so deeply in the loving reality of God. He doesn't ask in unbelief; he asks because he believes with deep abiding faith. He asks, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" because he does believe God is present, though he experiences theological dissonance in that he can't make sense of the hurt of his people. Yet, he hopes because there is a sense that catastrophic events do not undermine the credibility of God.

Prophets are prisoners of hope, not just bearers of bad news. Their jeers and tears are rooted in a hope in God. When Jeremiah is called (1:4-10), he's called to pluck up and pull down and to build and to plant. Judgment and restoration. Warnings of doom but always followed by promises of hope. The prophetic ministry of grief is hopeful. Those who do not grieve cannot truly hope because "weeping permits newness"(Brueggemann), healing and hope. The tears flowing from Jeremiah's head are not a sign of weakness but strength of spirit in the Spirit. All of this weeping and lamentation does not represent an erosion of hope but necessary elements of hope. If one does not experience some form of grief or suffering, hope is not necessary because what are you hoping for then? In Augustinian fashion, tears form a pillow and on them, hope rests. Tears are a part of the texture of hope.

Earlier in the book of Jeremiah, we hear that God refers to himself as a "fountain of living water" (2:13) and the people use "cracked cisterns that can hold no water." Thus, this suggests that God is our living water source and apart from him, we will be dry and thirsty. Interestingly however, Jeremiah is full of water as his head is a spring of water, his eyes a fountain of tears. His weeping then suggests the presence of God, that God is in his tears, in the water of holy weeping. According to Alan Jones, Dean Emeritus of

Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, the gift of tears is “like the breaking of the waters of the womb before the birth of a child.” Hope is tear-stained. If not, it is not real hope. Tears sow the seeds of hope. These tears are sacramental not only as a sign of divine presence but as a sign of our own baptism, the waters of the Spirit’s washing. God is in the tears.

The Rev. Peter Gomes, the former Minister at Harvard’s Memorial Church and a beloved guest preacher at Duke Chapel for many years, always had something interesting to say and his way of saying it was definitely distinct. When I first met him in the spring of 2010, after sharing a few things about myself over lunch, he leaned back and looked at me while saying, “Where have you been hiding?” Gomes had some interesting things to say about hope. In what became his last book, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, which was dedicated to Pelham and Sterly Wilder who were stalwarts of Duke University, he reminds us that “Hope...is not the opposite of suffering; suffering is the necessary antecedent of hope” because in and through suffering, hope manifests. “A hope worth having, is forged upon the anvil of adversity...Hope is the stuff that gets us through and beyond when the worst that can happen happens.” “Hope,” he writes, is not merely the optimistic view that somehow everything will turn out all right in the end if everyone just does as we do. Hope is the more rugged, the more muscular view that even if things don’t turn out all right and aren’t all right, we endure through and beyond the times that disappoint or threaten or destroy us.”

In other words, as Durham’s own Pauli Murray has said, “Hope is a song in a weary throat.” Or, as Pastor Emeritus of Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland, CA, J. Alfred Smith has proclaimed, “hope is a tiny sprout growing in cracked concrete.” That means the tears, the suffering, the cracked concrete, is the setting out of which hope is born. Hope comes amid our grief, despite our grief, but not without it. Hope is tinged with the ashes of despair and hope resides in the ruins, even in the demonic milieu of historical human slavery.

It is still so mind-boggling to me that the gift of the spirituals was given in the bosom of inhumane slavery. That, as James Weldon Johnson pens, “The fiery spirit of the seer should call these simple children of the sun and soil.” That though these black slave singers were “gone, forgot, unfamed, untaught, unknown, unnamed,” their songs “still live” and touch the chords of our human hearts today. That when we find ourselves in the home of grief and declare “my heart is sick,” at such times as the Newtown elementary school massacre, we turn to a spiritual like “Balm in Gilead” to grieve and hope at the same time. This music created in the womb of melancholic misery straightens out Jeremiah’s question and turns it into an exclamation point. There is a balm in Gilead! A “creative note of triumph” in the midst of any type of terror (Howard Thurman). Not happiness. Not joy. But hope.

Someone has commented that Jeremiah was like a “wounded animal”(Thurman). But his wounds did not win nor did the wounds of God destroy God. Rather, his cruciform wounds, his tear drops of blood, were the balm for the healing of the world, including our own. There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.

The balm in Gilead may be the Spirit(ual) itself (Thomas Troeger). A song. A melody. A tear. Don’t underestimate tears because they may not mean what you think—they may reveal that you are actually a prophet and those who sow in tears will reap in hope. According to poet Emily Dickinson:

*Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops at all.*