

Jeremiah 8:18 - 9:1

My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land:

'Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?'

('Why have they provoked me to anger with their images,  
with their foreign idols?')

'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? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?

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!

Cleansing the Wound

*September 18, 2022*

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Did you ever get a scratch or a scrape when you were a kid? My mother swore I walked on my knees because I had so many scabs and scars on them. The worst scrape came one Sunday morning in March. I was late for Sunday School and had gone running down the hill toward the church. There were sand encrusted ice on the side of the road. I slipped and down I went—hard! I may have missed our opening song but didn't want to miss my Sunday School class. Even though the scrape stung and was beginning to show blood on my dress, I continued running down the street to church.

Mrs. Ratzell, my Sunday School teacher took one look and brought me into the bathroom. She explained that she needed to clean the wound so it wouldn't get infected. I started to cry. As she prepared to cleanse the wound, she explained it would sting. It did. First she gently washed it with soap and water to make sure no salt or sand crystals were imbedded. Then she coated it with mercurochrome. My mother used dreaded iodine that smelled bad, really stung and colored my skin an ugly brown.

Mercurochrome also stung a bit but it was a beautiful color. I stopped crying

—I wanted to show Mrs. Ratzell that I was brave. In truth, I was proud of the rather large bandage that covered my thigh.

It wasn't the first nor would it be the last time that I received a wound that needed cleansing; some physical, some emotional. What I remember most about that day was how gentle and kind Mrs. Ratzell was. She didn't scold and lecture; she didn't tell me to be brave and stop crying. She simply did what was necessary to cleanse the wound. In the process her caring made me feel better and the tears stopped on their own.

We live in a time when so many are suffering wounds—some inflicted by others, many self inflicted. Compassion seems in short supply. There's even a perception that showing compassion makes one weak. Over the years I have heard many people apologize for their tears as if tears are something to be ashamed of. It makes me sad to see the late Queen Elizabeth's family holding back their tears. Years of keeping a "stiff upper lip" takes a toll. There is no need for apology—for me, tears are what help cleanse those deep wounds of the soul. Lamentations are found everywhere in the Bible—even one of the books in the Hebrew Scripture is named Lamentations, a reflection on the deep sorrow of the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah has been called, "The Weeping Prophet." He didn't shy away from preaching bad news to the people but he didn't didn't take pleasure in being right. He could see clearly what would happen to the people he loved if they turned away from the religious reforms that had begun during the reign of King Josiah. Josiah had ordered all the shrines to Ba'al and Asherah to be destroyed. Once Josiah died, the people slipped back into their old ways of hedging their bets with the foreign gods. It was and is an old story.

When the Israelites crossed into what they believed was the Promised Land of Canaan, they were amazed at the lush farmland of the country. They had been shepherds, nomadic people who depended on their flocks for their well being. Green meadows don't grow in a wilderness. The idea of settling on the land in one place seemed pretty risky to them. They knew YHWH, their God was with them but in this new land they began to believe they needed the Canaanite gods as insurance. Bit by bit, this duality became normalized. They worshipped YHWH in remembrance of their long journey through the desert and the promised covenant with Abraham and

Sarah, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel and finally with Moses. They also worshiped the Storm God, Ba-al to ensure they had plentiful water and the Fertility God, Asherah to guarantee their crops would come into harvest.

King Josiah's father and grandfather were responsible for introducing Ba'al and Ba'al's need for human sacrifice, especially that of children. When he ascended to the throne King Josiah began the time of reformation. There's some disagreement about whether his advisor and scribe found long buried scrolls that purported to be from Moses or whether the scrolls had been planted by Temple priests in an attempt to return the Israelites to the worship of YHWH alone. Regardless of the circumstance, the Deuteronomistic Codes were reintroduced. A period of stability took hold during Josiah's reign, people were content to worship YHWH alone. But Josiah died and the Assyrian Empire which had served as protector for the Northern Kingdom of Israel was on the verge of collapsing. Other nations, especially Babylon saw an opportunity to invade.

Jeremiah saw the inevitability of what was going to happen not only to Israel but the Southern Kingdom of Judah, Jerusalem and the Temple. His heart was broken. The passage we heard earlier reflects both his own grief and that of God. Jeremiah sees a great wound, one that can't be healed. His response is overwhelming grief and sorrow. It afflicts his body at the core of his being. He listens to then repeats the testimony of people from across the nation. Not all have the same testimony. Some are searching for God and not finding her. Some cry out about their hopelessness and frustration. Sound familiar? Like Jeremiah, all of them are asking questions: Don't we have resources? Don't we have medicine? Is there no balm in Gilead, no physicians?

We know that the people didn't listen, that first the Syrians then the Babylonians invaded, destroyed Solomon's great Temple and carried off countless prisoners to Babylon. Josiah's successor, King Zedekiah was furious with Jeremiah because his words of prophecy had been fulfilled. He had Jeremiah imprisoned then tried to starve him to death. Fortunately he was found by a friendly Ethiopian and rescued. Jeremiah never returned to Judah.

I can't help but see the parallel between Jeremiah's time and our own. People are worshipping false gods that they believe will bring happiness. On my way here this morning I saw that hundreds were worshipping at the "Temple of Wal-mart." Even with material wellbeing many feel hopeless and depressed. Others live paycheck to paycheck with little hope of a more comfortable life. Still others are imprisoned in a web of substance abuse and addiction. There is great conflict between ideologies with no one seeming to listen to the other. We have become siloed in our beliefs, willing to demonize people who disagree with us without taking the time to listen to their testimony about their fears.

The more I read about our history as a nation the more I'm convinced we have never addressed fully the deep psychic wound to our nation that is slavery. We in the North have felt superior to other parts of the country since we were not slave holding states that morphed into Jim Crow bastions of segregation. I don't argue with that if we also acknowledge how the industrial North benefitted from the South's slave labor. How *our* system of segregation came through "redlining" of real estate and subtle prejudice.

Too often our national sin of racism has been buried or brushed aside as ancient history that doesn't concern us. The Apostle Paul reminds us, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it. . . ." Fortunately we are slowly beginning to do so. Sure it stings to acknowledge the truth of our past. There may be and should be tears. Tears that help wash away particles of hatred that have been left to fester for centuries. For far too long we have slapped a bandaid on the wound so that now we see that infection has set it in. It threatens the whole body.

If we are willing to cleanse that deep and festering wound of racism we must wash away any residual crystals of bigotry and hatred left to fester even when it hurts, We might be tempted as those before us to slap a bandaid on it, convinced our work is done. If my years have taught me anything, recent events show the work is never done. We, as individuals, as churches, as a nation of many faiths in a world of many faiths, will need to be ever vigilant. We must not succumb to "what-aboutism," that temptation to deflect from the issue at hand. We must be wary of prophets that tell us what makes us feel better about ourselves. The prophet, the Reverend

Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. awakened us to the plight of men, women and children who suffered through our nation's systemic racism. We listened to his words, not because he made us feel good but because we sensed he was speaking for God. He preached about living into the promise of liberty and justice for all. They weren't just words spoken as crowd pleasers—it was obvious that many were not pleased. Assassination will silence the voice of one person. Justice can't be denied forever. It is a reflection of God's love for all God's people. Jeremiah ranted against the stubbornness of the people in their refusal to turn back to God. He also wept, so did Jesus, so did Martin, so should we all even as we pray, "Thy will be done. . . ." Amen.