

Sermon: Is There No Balm in Gilead?

September 18, 2022

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

Psalm 79:1-9

by Eric Anderson

Jeremiah – the prophet, not the bullfrog – has a reputation among readers of the Bible. Gloomy. Angry. Paranoid. Complaining. There’s even a book in the Bible called the Lamentations of Jeremiah, in which later poets seem to express the prophet’s grief.

That’s a gloomy person, when later writers decide that you haven’t lamented enough.

Jeremiah had plenty of reason to lament. He worked as a professional prophet for decades in a fractured and contentious Jerusalem. In his day, the dominant theology of the civil and religious leadership could be briefly summarized as: “God will protect us. No matter what. God will protect us.”

I suppose the Australian summary would add, “No worries.”

There was a lot going on in the world around them to worry about, however. Jerusalem was the capital of the nation of Judah. It had survived a number of attempts to conquer them and add them to the empires of the day. 150 years before, that had literally been due to a miracle. The Assyrian army had besieged the city and withdrew because illness had incapacitated the soldiers. Before this happened, they’d conquered the other Jewish kingdom, Israel, and scattered its population. Judah was the only Hebrew nation remaining.

The Assyrian Empire was crumbling. The Egyptian Empire was always a danger. New powers were taking shape north of Mesopotamia to challenge the Assyrians.

The international situation was tense.

The domestic situation had its problems as well. Jeremiah had lots of complaints about the conduct of Judah’s monarch, nobles, priests, and prophets. Earlier in this chapter Jeremiah wrote:

“Why then has this people[a] turned away
in perpetual faithlessness?

They have held fast to deceit;
they have refused to return.

6 I have given heed and listened,
but they do not speak honestly;
no one repents of wickedness,
saying, "What have I done!"
All of them turn to their own course
like a horse plunging headlong into battle."

Or Jeremiah's contemporary Habakkuk in chapter 2:

"Alas for you who heap up what is not your own!
How long will you load yourselves with goods taken in pledge?
Will not your own creditors suddenly rise
and those who make you tremble wake up?
Then you will be plunder for them."

When Jeremiah sent words of warning to King Jehoiakim, saying that God insisted upon faithful keeping of the covenant, the king literally burned the scroll himself. Book burning is not an invention of modern times. It seems to have persuaded Jeremiah that the nation's direction would not change, and his words of warning became expressions of divine judgment.

It may be out of such a conviction that Jeremiah wrote the words of today's Scripture: "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick." He might also have written this in warning – these are the potential consequences of continuing on our present course. Or he might have written them as description of what had already occurred. In Jeremiah's lifetime, his city was conquered not once but twice by the Babylonian Empire. His predictions of disaster came true. As Steed Davidson writes at Working Preacher, "No delight comes from seeing those who get their just desserts. Even more, the grief that washes over the body overtakes life with a deadening sickness. Internalized trauma requires suitable outlets. Therefore, the prophetic voice cries out to become simply a fountain of tears (9:1)."

So it's difficult to know whether Jeremiah wrote these words from warning, from despair, or from direct experience of catastrophe. What is certain is that he was familiar with grief and with lament in all those circumstances. Anthea Portier-Young writes at Working Preacher, "Earlier in chapter 8, Jeremiah demands that the people of Judah behold the mortal wound that afflicts their entire nation. They must stop pretending that nothing is wrong, stop turning away from the blood and the stench, stop ignoring the voices of the wounded and oppressed, stop silencing those who testify to the wrongs that have been done them. And to political and religious leaders, Jeremiah tells them to stop claiming they have the magic words or the special liturgies that will make everything better. They do not (Jeremiah 8:11)."

Lament comes from people with a connection to reality. Lament comes from people who are aware. Lament comes from people who want to make things better. Lament comes from people who are capable of creating change.

Lament comes from people who care.

Americans are notoriously bad at lament. Some of it comes from Puritan stoicism and from that strange idea that hard work will make everything better. Spoiler alert: Working hard at the wrong thing doesn't make everything better. Some of it comes from that great myth of the Western prairie featuring the lone cowboy on his lone horse. The great myth ignores the presence of lots of hands working a cattle drive and the presence of several horses to allow them to rest. It also ignores the existence of lots of lament songs among the genre of Western music.

Lament isn't a lot easier here in Hawai'i. Japan has its own version of a non-demonstrative approach to grief and mourning, one which has had great impact on Hawaiian culture. Hawaiian grief over the overthrow was actively discouraged for decades to the point where it was hidden from Hawaiians themselves. Lack of lament puts us in a lamentable situation.

Especially when we have to confront a world in which lament is not merely appropriate but necessary. COVID-19 has taken more American lives than the 1918 influenza epidemic did. It has been monumentally more deadly than the 9/11 attacks or Pearl Harbor. In fact, COVID-19 took more American lives than World War II.

At the same time, COVID impaired our ability to commemorate those we lost, both the ones lost to the pandemic and the many others who died from other causes over the last two and a half years. Some families held small funerals. Some waited until they could hold larger gatherings. Some are still waiting. We have not had the opportunity to lament together for far too many people we've loved.

At the end of October we will hold our annual recognition of All Saints. I don't know at this moment precisely what we will do to remember, to honor, and to lament, but I do think we need to look beyond just the last year, and go back further. I think we'll need to acknowledge that we had problems with our live stream both years and make space to honor those we hoped to recognize on those occasions. I think we will need to raise up these loved ones because grief is an ongoing process, not something you do and finish and end.

I think we will need to lament because we care.

We also face our need to lament for the changing circumstances of the Church of Jesus Christ and Church of the Holy Cross. As Cheryl Lindsay writes at ucc.org:

"As a society, our affinity for 'rugged individualism' does not facilitate a collective, healing response to trauma. We're told to get over what truly must be gone through. Processing grief is not a choice; it's a journey that takes as long as it takes to get there. We travel at our pace; we don't get to flip a switch to turn it off.

“The church has been grieving far longer than we have been in a pandemic. Membership and affiliation have been in decline for decades even if accelerated during this period. Nearly every congregation I encounter describes themselves as aging, which is another way of lamenting generational disconnection in terms of faith expression and belonging as well as a way to not quite confront the inevitable repercussions of a church that long refused to make space for the very people whose presence it now seeks.”

Lament seeks to understand the reality before it. Lament seeks to deal with the emotions while moving toward the responses. Lament cares enough to wrestle with what is in order to transform it to what might be.

May that be true of the Church as well.

Friends, I have no intention of telling you how to feel – feelings happen. They’re not under our immediate control. I am saying that bottling up those feelings of grief and loss doesn’t help, at least not for long. Sometimes we step back from them to get something done, but you’ve got to step forward again, feel what you feel and express it, before you can deal with the realities at your full capabilities.

Is there no balm in Gilead? Jeremiah asked. He knew there was. You’ll find that he wrote that, too, elsewhere in the book. There is comfort and support in God – comfort and support that Jeremiah found and that we may find as we come to God in lament.

Amen.