

The God Who Grieves

September 21, 2025

Purpose: To work with the prophetic witness of God's way with the people of God

Message: Even in the toughness of Prophetic critique, God's mercy remains present to us.

Scripture: Jeremiah 8:18 – 9:1 (I will read); Psalm 113 (Please read)

Synopsis: Jerimiah is not the prophet that you want to turn to for a hopeful view of the future. Spare several chapters, the whole of the text tells the unvarnished, raw prediction of doom time and again. So much so he is often called the prophet of tears. It is easy to hear only the gloom and doom throughout.

Yet even here we have God speaking of consequences, yes, but also of grief for the people of God. This is a helpful expansion of our notion of God's will and way as it reminds us that mercy persists in the whole of God's dealings with God's people.

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

¹⁸ No healing,
only grief;
my heart is broken.

¹⁹ Listen to the weeping of my people
all across the land:
“Isn’t the Lord in Zion?
Is her king no longer there?”

Why then did they anger me
with their images,
with pointless foreign gods?

²⁰ “The harvest is past,
the summer has ended,
yet we aren’t saved.”

²¹ Because my people are crushed,
I am crushed;
darkness and despair overwhelm me.

²² Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then have my people
not been restored to health?

9 If only my head were a spring of water
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
I would weep day and night
for the wounds of my people.

Reading the Biblical prophets is like having the inside track on the story of “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” You know the story where the king is hoodwinked into the notion that his new clothes are so fine that they defy normal sight, only to have the spell broken by the brash youngster on the parade who speaks the truth everyone sees but no one says. The prophetic mindset places us within the inner workings of the one who gets to see the truth of how things really are and who know the burden of speaking it all the same. Prophets know the enormity of speaking the truth—the whole truth—and find the courage to say it all the same. Perhaps because it is who and what they are and can they do no other. Perhaps when the Spirit dwells upon you speech is not reserved to the polite and politic.

That reaches well beyond the opinion based commentary that we have all grown accustomed to in so much of our daily lives. It also reaches into the basic ways and means of how the world is. Speaking uncomfortable and discomfiting truth is a demanding occupation, even if that truth is saying out loud that which can be obvious. Like we are sad. Like we grieve the losses we hold, whether they are personal or cultural. Like there is that which brings us to the brink of tears just in the way things are. Grief, it turns out, is not a particularly popular emotion. It is acknowledged, sure, but it is also a privatized thing. We would much rather celebrate life than to grieve loss together. Writer Joan Didion observed that this has been a long historical trend as she wrote reflecting on her particular walk with grief. As far back as the 1930’s there was a trend away from shown grief. By the middle of the century, Geoffrey Gorer observed that people were starting to think that they had an ethical duty to enjoy themselves and offer social admiration to those who carry their grief as though nothing has happened. All this to say this: in big and small ways we carry grief, and there is something of the prophetic imagination at work when we allow ourselves to acknowledge that out loud.

But that is what Jeremiah does so well. Jeremiah is not where you want to turn for the hopeful side of dislocation and transition in light of the Lord’s word. We have a short play list from Jeremiah—mostly chapter 29 where he speaks of the consolation, if briefly that is to come. “I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper and not to harm you” plays a whole lot better than the prophet who earns himself the nickname “the prophet of Woe” for all of his pronouncement of hard truth. To be sure we far prefer the sunnier side of the prophetic But we must ask ourselves, where is God in the midst of the sorrow? What do we do when we do carry grief in ourselves? Do we have a place to go with the grief if all we hear, or wish to hear from

God is promises for welfare and goodness without much mention of where we might be sitting in the meantime? Where do we go when the sorrows of a world come apart?

When we venture into the arena of the prophets, we need to keep our wits about us. Speaking as they do with different images and metaphors, recording the back and forth of conversation between the human and the divine it can all get rather confusing. Our text for today is certainly no exception. Short as it is there is a lot of content within it. It comes at the end of the pronouncement of the fate of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Their hopes of military rescue have come to nothing, their enemies were swirling around them, and Jeremiaiah's job was to endorse what was to be: they would be conquered, exiled and isolated by those who were coming to get them. The fact that this was an understandably rather unpopular message especially among those trying to wield power at the time. These verses are most easily understood as being voiced by the community expressing their distress about the fate that was being spoken to them.

But read it closer. Our lectionary selection drops us right in the middle of the discussion. You actually have to go backwards on the playback to catch what's going on, and more to the point, who it is who is expressing this litany of grief. You have to go well back into chapter 8 to catch it. At the very beginning of the chapter, you have a recounting of what is about to happen in graphic detail saying that even the bones of the king will be scattered. And then the prophet drops into the divine voice again, and he does not stop all the way through. The verse that we so jarringly began with is not the voice of the people in shock and awe; it is the voice of a shaken YHWH who, yes, declares and endorses this disaster, and explains the ill faith and bad practice that brings it about, but is utterly and completely heartbroken all the same. Thus says the Lord: No Healing, only grief; my heart is broken."

God's voice may be that of judgement, but it is also the voice of lament here as well. What a wonderful challenge to the view of the wrathful God of which we are all so aware and fond to also have a God who grieves as well? That's why we try and avoid the Old Testament and give it the wide berth it so often merits, so much so we often would rather ignore it entirely. We find there a voice of judgement and condemnation, a voice not unlike the voice that dwells so easily and neatly within our heads speaking misadventure and misappreciation to us, and calling that God's voice. Does God convict us toward change: yes—early and often. But we are also given a God who knows us so utterly and completely, including our pain, that God can also grieve that conviction and its consequence with us all the same. It doesn't make for a good medieval sculpture, but it does make for a far more accurate and conclusive image of God.

Among the earliest thing we do as care takers of small children is mirroring. Babies love to watch faces and to respond smile for smile, coo for coo. Even when they are crying uncontrollably for no adult-discernable reason as babies, responding with our own sympathetic if more mellowed tone is soothing. Later, when we are in the hard times we can spend time naming that which we are walking through: you feel sad; I am frustrating you right now, aren't I? or naming the anger that they can and rightly feel. The point here isn't for more arm-chair psychology or analyzing them out of what they are feeling. Instead it is mirroring, reflecting back what they themselves are feeling to allow to know that they are not alone in the feeling and that they are seen and heard along the way. Among the most sacred gifts that we can give each other in times of tenderness is a sense of identification and understanding of the feelings that are being felt without shame or judgement in the process. Just knowing that we are known in our anger, our hurt, our sorrow, our grief, our fear, can be indescribably freeing in knowing the work of healing along the way.

We are known in our grief of every shape and size. The prophetic imagination speaks the truth both in that which will be, and that which can be when we accept it as coming beyond ourselves not being particularly what we are expecting from God, but also what we most need from God. We have the identification of and with that which we might feel as being part of what is real and to know, fully that is acceptable to God.

Walter Bruggeman connects Jeremiah with Jesus in this way: like the weeping prophet, Jesus also wept. This is far more than just the simple matter of being able to emote. Instead, Bruggeman writes: "Jesus knew what we numb ones must always learn again: (a) weeping must be real because endings are real; and (b) that weeping permits newness. His weeping permits the kingdom to come. Such weeping is a radical criticism, a fearful dismantling because it means the end of all machismo; weeping is something kings rarely do without losing their thrones." Jesus' tears were born of the awful knowledge of the fullness of the what is possible up against the unwillingness for us to accept it, knowing all of heavens promise and earth's sorrows in one moment. But then Jesus goes on in his mission to fulfill the promise that there will be a day where every tear will be dried because in its time, heaven and earth will be one.

We are permitted to grieve all that does grieve us deeply. We are welcomed in our tears to see the world as it is: replete with God's good gifts promising the two things we most need: that we are not alone in our grief and that the day will come that even this shall come to fullness. May it be Lord, and soon. Amen.