**The Book of Jeremiah: *To Tear Down, To Build Up***

**Sunday June 4, 2021**

**“Is There no Balm in Gilead?” (Jeremiah 8:18-9:3)**

The 2014 motion picture *Selma* chronicles the tense three-month period in 1965 when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led a campaign to secure equal voting rights for African Americans. The film depicts a number of marches held to gain these important civil rights. But the peaceful protesters frequently encountered violent resistance from politicians and law enforcement officials. During one peaceful march, a national guardsman killed a young protester named Jimmie Lee Jackson. In a very moving scene from the movie, Dr. King speaks with the young man’s grieving grandfather as he views his grandson’s body in the morgue. At first, King is at a loss for words, wondering what he could say to acknowledge this great loss. Finally, he looks into the eyes of this sorrowful man and says, “*I am certain of one thing; God was the first to cry. … God was the first to cry for your boy.*”

For all who are experiencing the heartbreaking and soul-crushing effects of pain, suffering, and loss, the comforting truth is that our God weeps with you and for you. Weighed down by the terrible grief of our neighborhoods, our country, our world, and our own lives, we can take comfort in the fact that *God is the first to cry!* This morning’s Scripture lesson from Jeremiah reveals that our God shares the plight of his people. God is deeply distraught by the suffering of his creation, and he truly grieves over its distressing woundedness. Our God is not cold or impassive like some aloof deity who is completely uninvolved with people’s lives. Our God is empathetic and passionate. *God weeps!* This passage teaches us that God is “*filled with pathos*” and is “*emotionally engaged in the life of his people*” (Kathleen O’Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise,* p. 65).

Prior to the sorrowful words of this passage, the prophet predicts the momentous devastation that will come upon the people of Judah as a result of their rebelliousness (8: 4-17). Using a very striking metaphor, the prophet likens the coming judgment upon them to a snake bite that cannot be healed (8:17). These prophecies refer to the many calamities that befell Judah during the Babylonian invasion in the sixth century B.C. The various traumas that the people experienced, such as military invasion, destruction, death, displacement and deportation, are likened to a poisonous wound that cannot be cured. Snake-bitten and poisoned, the health of the nation would ebb away, and God anticipates their pain and suffering with a combination of sorrow, frustration, and anger. The passage begins with a sobering confession, “*My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick*” (8:18). The question that most readers ask is, “Who’s talking here? Is it God or the prophet?” Only a few scholars think that it’s God speaking and most assume that the prophet. But a careful reading of Jeremiah soon reveals that discerning the speaker of a passage is not an easy task since the prophet’s words often contain a mix of voices that glide in and out without announcing who they are. Here, the sorrow of God and the prophet are indistinguishable. Since Jeremiah attributes these sorrowful words to the Lord, they cannot be assigned to the prophet alone. So, the passage reveals the heart of God. A heart that is marked by deep grief.

As the passage continues, there is a back-and-forth dialogue between God and his people. God begins the conversation by expressing his overwhelming sorrow at the dire situation of his people. His joy is absent, his grief is never-ending, and his heart is sick. God is sickened over the terminal illness of his beloved people. So far in our journey through Jeremiah, we have witnessed God’s tireless efforts to bring his wayward people back to a safe path. God’s heartsickness is that of a faithful spouse attempting to reconcile with his unfaithful partner or a loving parent reaching out to their rebellious children. But God’s overtures of love and mercy were futile. No matter what God did, his people failed to listen to him as they continued down this disastrous path.

The passage shifts to the voice of the people as God hears their mournful cries from the land of exile. How ironic are their words! For even in the face of death and destruction, they clung to their failed ideology that insisted that God would always be in the Temple, keeping Jerusalem secure. Placing the blame upon God for their misfortune, they asked in disbelief, “*Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?”* (8:19). They concluded that it was God who had forsaken them, but they were the ones who had abandoned God. They were the unfaithful spouse and the wayward child. They were the ones who had forsaken God by worshipping idols and other gods.

Still, they expected God to act according to *their* schedule. The people cried out, “*The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved* (8:20). The community expected to be liberated by a certain point in the calendar, and so they reminded God that saving season was almost over, and he’d better take action soon! But God is not limited by *our* timetable or plans. All too often we treat God as our heavenly benefactor, whose sole task is to swoop in and solve our problems according to our schedule.

Once again, God speaks, and his words are a mixture of anger, frustration and sorrow. The sad fact was that the people really didn’t want God’s presence with them. They merely wanted God to get them out of the jam that they were in. They were quite content to practice religion on their own terms and continue to worship “*their carved images*” and “*their worthless foreign gods*” (8:19). Their idolatry was an insult to God and their unfaithfulness deeply hurt and angered him. He genuinely loved and cared for them, yet they responded by giving their devotion to other things. Yet even though they ignored God, his love for them was unwavering. The Lord declared, “*For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me”* (8:21). God recognizes and embraces the hurt of his people. He is in pain because they are in pain; he weeps because they are weeping. Yet the people were oblivious to the severity of their sickness, which made God’s pain even more intense.

God’s hurt is like that of a parent’s hurt when their children are in pain. When people become parents, they become vulnerable in a whole new way. Most of us find it difficult to cope in times of pain, stress, and sadness, but oftentimes we discover ways to push through the tough times and to carry on. The wounds don’t go away but we’re a little bit stronger in the end. But when our children, even our adult children, go through difficult times, we feel helpless. Sometimes our kids make mistakes, which lead to painful consequences, and there is little we can do to ease their pain. We know from our life experiences, that things do get better, but when we tell our kids that, it sounds rather hollow to them. We want to remove their hurt or to give them the strength and the wisdom to endure the pain, but they must walk this path on their own. We can love and support them, but they must find their own ways to endure life’s problems. Yet our children’s pain becomes our pain, and as bystanders, it makes it an even worse pain for us. I think this is what God means when he says, “*For the brokenness of my people, I am broken*” (8:21).

Overcome by grief for his dear children, God cries out, “*Is there no balm in Gilead?  Isn’t there a doctor in the house? Why can’t something be done to heal and save my dear, dear people?* (8:22). Gilead was famous for its healing ointments, but it’s apparent that no amount of medicine could heal the sickness of the nation. All along, God has offered a healing solution to his people – *turn from your wayward ways and return to me*. But the people refused to repent and so they continued down a dangerous path. Like drug addicts or alcoholics refusing to get help, they spiraled deeper and deeper into the sickness of their addiction.

Finally, the floodgates of God’s grief were on the verge of opening and a cascade of divine tears was about to flow. God announces, “*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 wounds of my poor people!*” (9:1). God longs to weep, but there’s not enough water in all creation to produce enough tears for the pain of his children. What a beautiful image of our God! Even though his children had forsaken him, he still longed to weep for them day and night. This image of weeping reminds me of a time in my life when I cried and cried. Many years ago, Sherri and I lost a dear baby girl. I remember when I was in the hospital room, struggling to hold back the tears, trying to stay strong. The nurse quietly said to me, “It’s okay to let it go.” So, I let it go and I wept like I’ve never wept before or since. I felt that there would never be enough tears to cry for my little girl.

A weeping God may seem too vulnerable to us. Yet as we walk through life with wounds that never seem to heal, we can take comfort in the knowledge that our God weeps with us and for us. This is an invitation for us to weep as well and to grieve the losses that we have experienced. Amidst the messiness of this life, God is with us, and he feels our pain. Whatever sorrows you have faced or continue to face, know that *God is the first to weep*!