

Word of Grief, Word of Hope

Jeremiah 1:4-10, 17-19

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My sisters, my brothers:

When I was in seminary, way back in the last millennium, I served a wonderful church in Bluff City, Kansas, a little two-by-four wide spot in the road eighteen miles from anywhere. It was a one-room church with hand-me-down flip-up theater seats in the sanctuary and open windows during those Kansas blast-furnace summers. One of the mainstays of First Christian Church, Bluff City, Kansas, was a Sunday School teacher, Bill. One day, as I was making my visitation rounds, he eyed me over his iced tea glass and just came out and said, “Y’know, Bob, I really believe I’ve been called to be a prophet.” Of course, he meant the whole future-prediction, Armageddon style of prophecy. I gulped, hiding behind my own iced tea. I mumbled some educated inanity better left forgotten. But I think that if I had a chance to do it all over again, if I could have another go at it, I might want to say something like this: “Do you really know what you’re getting into? I’ve looked into it. Those prophets were not especially happy campers. And you can bet the *targets* of their prophetic javelins weren’t either!” I think I’d ask him, “Bill, do you really know what you’re getting into? Before you jump off into the deep end, maybe you’d better take a gander at, say, Jeremiah, the one most likely to be voted out of Judah.”

Well, from day one, God stacked the deck against Jeremiah: “Come on down!” Naturally, Jeremiah seeks to decline this honor; he’d just as soon skip this dance. “Thanks, but no thanks, God.”

And like a wise, nondirective, Rogerian counselor, God says, “Tough noogies—you can’t dodge this assignment!” “Gird up your loins!” (v. 17), and “roll up your sleeves. You’ve got work to do!”

Whenever Jeremiah zigs, God zags: “I’m too young! I’m only a boy,” (v. 7) protests Jeremiah.

“Too late, Buckaroo. You were fingered before you were ever born,” (v. 5) responds God.

“Look, I wouldn’t know what to say!” (v. 6).

“Look, I just put words into your mouth!” (v. 9).

For anybody who has felt that Divine tap on the shoulder, here is the terrifying side of that “Love that Wilt not Let Me Go.” Oh, some of us try to scoot away like Jonah. Or we’ll mumble some excuse like Moses. Or the day will come when all you want to do is just fold your hand of cards and give in and give up, because you are all but given out. Count on it. But God’s iron grip will not let us go—away. Like an unrelenting curse, this “shadow side” of faith *forces* us to hold on to God in the darkest of hours, when everything within cries out to just relax and slide into the blessed refuge of agnosticism. God will—not—let—us—go.

So Jeremiah can do nothing but surrender: “You have overpowered me” (20:7). And then God stretches out God’s hand and—“touches” his mouth? No, God literally *smacks* the Word into him (v. 9). In Georgetown, Texas, just a few miles up the road

from Austin Seminary, there is a taco stand that has three levels of hot sauce: mild, hot, and “el scorcho.” For Jeremiah, the Word that God smacked into him was *precisely* “el scorcho”—as if he had swallowed a lit road flare whole. Oh, he tried to clamp down on it — and who can blame him. But all he got for his troubles was one monster case of divine heartburn. “If I say ‘I won’t open my mouth any more, if I clench my teeth until my jaws ache, there is ‘el scorcho’ sizzling in my bones, and I am just too weary to hold it in anymore” (20:9). The white-hot Word of God had taken up residence inside his very being. There was nothing he could do. For all those who would be prophets, the awful truth is this: if God will not let us *go*, neither will God let us—stop: “Look, I just smacked My Word in your mouth. I’ll tell you what to say. So roll up your sleeves; you’ve got work to do.”

And what is this work? What is a prophet’s vocation? Throw the searchlight of righteousness into the dark corners and watch the sinners flee? Lob a “thus says the Lord” like some holy hand-grenade? No. First of all, to be a prophet is to be cursed with *clear vision*, to see clearly, without illusion. Jeremiah, you see, cannot squeeze his eyes shut; he cannot turn away. He is *condemned* to behold reality as it is, in all of its jagged-edged tragedy. He watches the “false pens” of the scribes twist the good law of the Lord into a lie (8:8), he sees the greedy robbing the poor (8:10), he witnesses the political leaders scurrying from conqueror to conqueror currying favor, promising peace, peace, peace, when there is none (8:11)—and he notices their sheer effrontery when they bat their eyes and innocently cry, “Why, whatever have I done?” (8:6). He sees it all. And he cries out, with poet William Cowper, “My soul is sick with every day’s report/ Of wrong and outrage with which Earth is filled.”¹

The prophetic life, you see, comes at an agonizing cost: God does not permit Jeremiah to turn his eyes away. He sees reality with a terrible clarity; he sees through the pretensions, the lies, the deceptions, the whitewashing royal commissions; he beholds what all too often passes for truth in this world — and it makes him weep. For even while he burns with indignation at these outrages, his heart breaks. Even while his soul burns with fire, his eyes burn with tears. Jeremiah *grieves* over the sin of his people. He is a man utterly consumed by grief. The colossal weight of it bows his body down, slows his steps, and tinges even his harshest word.

He grieves, you see, because he *sees* truly what is happening, and he knows, he *knows*, the fate that is surely coming to the nation he loves. He wraps his grief around him like a cloak, because the people are blissfully marching to their own destruction. But there is more. The deepest horror of Jeremiah’s existence is that he *feels*, with terrible precision, the immensity of God’s own grief. He feels agony of the spirit because they simply *will not change*. He feels the monstrous inevitability of Judah’s fate.

“I have forsaken my house,” whispers God, eyes squeezed shut. “I have given the beloved of my heart into the hands of her enemies” (12:7). This is grief: raw-edged, undiluted, bleeding grief, a sorrow too great for words. “My poor people,” is almost all he can manage to gasp out (8:19, 21; 9:1). Jeremiah arrows straight into the “Ground Zero” of God’s anguish at the inevitability of Judah’s destruction. True prophets always denounce with tears in their eyes. Yes, Jeremiah knows the prophet’s curse: to *see* what is and *know* what is coming as a result, to *feel* the heart of God. And it crushes him.

But the prophet *cannot* keep silent. Jeremiah couldn’t, and neither can we. The

Word God planted within us will *shove* itself out of our mouths, fueled by our broken hearts. It will pry our unwilling jaws apart for one last try. “Turn back, before it’s too late!” cries Jeremiah, knowing his effort is doomed but hollering it out anyway (4:1-4). We speak a Word from God, hoping against hope that this time, *this* time, they might *listen*. We speak the Word of truth in an era of falsehood, when political campaigns slump into mere horse races on the nightly news, with the anchors keeping score and the talk shows weighing the handicaps.

Like Jeremiah, we demand justice from an entrenched political power, the sum total of whose moral discernment could fit comfortably on a postage stamp. In our churches we proclaim an “El Scorcho” Word to those riders of the padded pew who have successfully transmogrified the Word of God from “sharper than a two-edged sword” into smiley-faced band-aids and the church militant into the church disarmed. We speak a living and active Word of God, erupting from our lips like a fiery volcano, set free from its typographical captivity, leaping off the printed page and set loose to prowl the world. We dare to tell all who are careless with God’s beloved people that *God takes it personally*.

One of your parishioners lost his job? The God of all comfort takes it personally. He lost his job because a corporation shut down a factory to move it to the cheaper labor of Mexico? God takes it personally! Another of your parishioners is despairing because the child of her womb runs with a gang? God takes her broken heart personally! Is her son in a gang because he dropped out of school, because he couldn’t keep up, because Congress sliced out funds for early reading programs, for infant food programs, for health care for the uninsured, for education? God takes it personally! In a day when “budgetary priorities” pile billions at the Pentagon’s front door, stolen from education, veterans’ care, environmental protection, healthcare for the poor, drug rehabilitation, when those handed the impossible task of rebuilding Iraq have somehow misplaced 28 *billion* dollars, and when our nation is actively building a defensive stockade by dismantling the house inside it—God takes it *personally*! With Jeremiah, we declare that whenever *any* beloved child made in God’s image is threatened or put down or wounded or neglected in *any way*, God—takes—it—*personally*! God calls it “child abuse,” *won’t* put up with it, won’t excuse “I don’t care.” We dare to speak of the power of love to those drunk on the love of power. We speak a hard Word, so that they will avoid an even *harder* fate. We dare to catapult the living and active Word of God from our lips into our world. We *cannot* keep silent. Like a volcano, the Word *shoves* itself out of our mouths.

And when trouble does come, God *will* be with us. Count on it. Oh, troublemakers *will* reap trouble, make no mistake! Jeremiah knew that cold. “Look,” he cried. “See what a delightful gift you’ve given me, God? The politicians hate me, the priests curse my name, the people want to run me out of town on a rail — *everybody’s* against me!” Jeremiah was called a traitor for having the temerity to suggest that Babylon was *God’s instrument* to punish a people who put more stock in military *technology* than faithful *theology*. They beat him up, flung him in jail, burned his books, and tossed him down into a dank cistern. “That’s what we do with troublemakers,” they said. But God stood by him. With Jerusalem surrounded by bristling armies, God whispered, “Psst. Invest in real estate while you can get it for a song. I believe someday there might be a shopping mall on that little plot of land.” Centuries later, in Fred Craddock’s words, they hammered the nails into the Cross with the backs of their Bibles,² dusted off their

hands, and said, "That'll fix him." But God didn't leave him moldering in that tomb. Closer to home, Lexington's Civil Rights activist Audrey Grevious has worn a crisscross network of scars on her legs for forty years, from standing her ground in the McCrory's department store while being whipped with chains. But today this African American woman can eat wherever she wants and vote in every election. God stood with her.

And in December 2003, New Mexico's Jesuit priest and peace activist John Dear was astonished one morning to find 75 National Guard soldiers with orders to be deployed to Iraq, gathered on the street in front of his house, shouting at the top of their lungs, "Kill! Kill! Kill!" while their commanders egged them on. They knew who he was, and they were clearly trying to intimidate him. So he put on his coat and walked out his door right into the middle of the street. And then he opened his mouth and began to speak God's Word to *them*: "In the name of God I order you to stop all this nonsense and not to go to Iraq," he said. "I want all of you to quit the military, disobey your orders to kill, and not to kill anyone. I do not want you to get killed. I want you to practice the love and righteousness of Jesus. God does not bless war. God does not want you to kill so Bush and Cheney can get more oil. God does not support war. Stop all this and go home. God bless you." After a moment of shock and silence, they burst out laughing and left.³ Yes, prophets risk being wounded. There is every danger. But as Father Dear knew, we will *never* be alone. Shoulder to shoulder with us stands the silent presence of God Almighty, working *with* us, working *through* us, strengthening our heart, giving us the words to speak. And in the force field of God's power, our wounds will become our union cards.

In Alan Paton's novel, *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful*, black South African Emmanuel Nene is about to join a political party, a move which will brand him as an enemy of the state. He admits, "I am going to get wounded also. Not only by the government, but by my own people as well." But he adds, "I don't worry about the wounds. When I go up there, which is my intention, the Big Judge will say to me, 'Where are your wounds?' And if I say I haven't any, he will say, 'Was there nothing to fight for?' I couldn't face that question."⁴

Well, with Jeremiah, we *know* what is worth fighting for. We've seen the end of this movie. "You will build once again," says God. "You will plant riotous *jungles* in the rubble! Your long nightmare *will* come to an end, for I will bring you home again. Resurrection *will* dawn." What keeps us going, what helps us endure the battles, what is *our* "balm in Gilead"? Nothing less than our fierce hope that the future belongs to God, that God *is not done with us yet*. Oh, yes, whenever we open our mouths for God, we *will* provoke a reaction. But we will *not* be alone. God's not finished with us yet. Our God will be with us. Count on it.

So, my sisters and brothers, look around you. What do you see? I see two kinds of people here today: those who have *been* wounded for the Word of God and those who might well be. Somewhere, sometime, your turn may come. You may be yanked out of that comfy life and handed an "El Scorcho" Word to speak, a word unwelcome in certain corners of this world. You may be called to speak from a grieving heart, broken by what we see. If you've been baptized, you're fair game. And even if you haven't been baptized—who knows? But I want you to know, I want you to understand: you *will not* be alone. Never! Baptism drenched us in the Spirit of God. And every time we gather around the Table of the Lord, we receive the *virtus*, the living

power of the risen Lord, his very life singing in our veins and our wounds embraced by his, filling us with the fearsome power to speak God's love into this unwilling world.

Notes

1. William Cowper, "The Time Piece," quoted in Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 155.
2. Long ago I heard this arresting image in a sermon by Fred B. Craddock.
3. John Dear, "The Soldiers at My Front Door," available from http://www.johndear.org/articles/soldiers_at_my_front_door.html.
4. Alan Paton, *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981), 66-67.