

Finding God in the Midst: A Lenten Sermon from Jeremiah

Jeremiah 30:12-22

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Lent is a beautiful and unique time in the Christian calendar. It summons us to travel the journey of the cross, beginning with Ash Wednesday and culminating in the sacred drama of Holy Week. Lent invites us towards honesty about what is really real—the truth of brokenness and the power of resurrection. In some ways, Lent asks the best out of us as people of faith. It challenges us to set aside the regular patterns of living and, for 40 days, commit to new practices that might allow us to spend time with God and grow in closer relationship to God and one another.

This is all well and good. But, after the challenging and trauma-filled years that we have had, perhaps it is hard to imagine taking on one more thing. Or, perhaps, we are exhausted by the relentless news of brokenness in the world and are, instead, hungry to just rush to resurrection hope. Or, perhaps, we find ourselves pinballing between despair and hope, depending on the day, hour, or moment. In this challenging Lenten season, there may be no better companion than Jeremiah. The weeping prophet is known for being able to hold brokenness and be honest about what is happening in the world. But, at the same time, he fully proclaims the promise that God is not done yet. So, let us open ourselves to challenging and good news as found in Jeremiah 30:12-22:

12For thus says the LORD:

Your hurt is incurable,
your wound is grievous.

13There is no one to uphold your cause,
no medicine for your wound,
no healing for you.

14All your lovers have forgotten you;
they care nothing for you;
for I have dealt you the blow of an enemy,
the punishment of a merciless foe,
because your guilt is great,
because your sins are so numerous.

15Why do you cry out over your hurt?
Your pain is incurable.
Because your guilt is great,
because your sins are so numerous,

I have done these things to you.
 16Therefore all who devour you shall be devoured,
 and all your foes, everyone of them, shall go into captivity;
 those who plunder you shall be plundered,
 and all who prey on you I will make a prey.
 17For I will restore health to you,
 and your wounds I will heal,
 says the LORD,
 because they have called you an outcast:
 "It is Zion; no one cares for her!"
 18Thus says the LORD:
 I am going to restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob,
 and have compassion on his dwellings;
 the city shall be rebuilt upon its mound,
 and the citadel set on its rightful site.
 19Out of them shall come thanksgiving,
 and the sound of merrymakers.
 I will make them many, and they shall not be few;
 I will make them honored, and they shall not be disdained.
 20Their children shall be as of old,
 their congregation shall be established before me;
 and I will punish all who oppress them.
 21Their prince shall be one of their own,
 their ruler shall come from their midst;
 I will bring him near, and he shall approach me,
 for who would otherwise dare to approach me?
 says the LORD.
 22And you shall be my people,
 and I will be your God.

How are you? It's a simple question: three little words. It's a question we ask and get asked probably a dozen times a day. And most of us, I think, have been conditioned or taught somewhere along the way to offer a short, quick one-word or one-phrase answer: "Good," "Fine," or "Hanging in there." Or, in these days when it is possible to stay on mute over Zoom, we respond with a simple gesture: thumbs up, thumbs down, a smile, a frown, or just a shrug of the shoulders. "How are you?" It's a question we have learned to brush off or slide by, assuming that the other person isn't *actually* interested in starting a long conversation about our wellbeing. Instead, it is often treated as a casual greeting or a prelude to something else, something more important.

But then a few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to catch up with a friend I haven't connected with in a while. We got on Zoom, and I asked the question that has become all too predictable: "How are you?" I expected the quick, casual, rehearsed

response. Instead, she sighed deeply, looked right into the camera, and responded, “That’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it?” It wasn’t the answer I expected, and I didn’t really know how to respond. So, for a moment we just sat in silence. She finally broke the silence and proceeded to tell me how much had transpired since we last spoke: the death of her grandfather from cancer, the story of her engagement to her wonderful fiancé, the fear over almost losing her mom to Covid. She told me about having to put down the family dog and the joyous news of becoming an aunt for the first time. She described the joy and challenge of her work as a fifth-grade teacher, helping kids who were deeply scarred by the pandemic or struggling to move from online learning to an in-class social situation. “So,” she said, almost out of breath after the rapid-fire update, “you asked me how I am. I don’t know. I’m all the things. It’s just...a lot.”

I’m grateful for my friend’s honesty and willingness to take this question seriously. After all, this kind of deep, reflective, candid accounting of our own emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual state is exactly the kind of work we are invited to do in this season of Lent. In this liturgical season, we are called to journey together on the way of the cross, being honest before God and one another about where we are and how we are.

So, friends, how are we? Really. It’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it? And the answer certainly can’t—and perhaps shouldn’t—be encapsulated in a single word or simple shrug of the shoulders. It’s a hard question to answer, I imagine, for many of us in these days. We face so many difficult, disorienting, and traumatic realities. And the troubles seem to be tumbling one on top of the other—mass shootings, international conflicts, natural disasters, and extreme heat and flooding due to climate change. Siblings all over the country and across the globe struggle under the oppression of poverty or everyday violence. We live in a society where political divisions run deep and threaten to tear at not just our communal structures, but the very fabric of democracy. At the same time, our country is being summoned to reckon with our history of oppression and marginalization as we take seriously the ongoing realities of racism, sexism, ableism, and LGBTQIA+ discrimination. And on top of all of that, we continue to be bombarded with public health crises from contaminated water to monkeypox to the ongoing impacts of Covid-19. And all this doesn’t even acknowledge the daily burdens people in our communities carry—people who are struggling to make ends meet as prices increase; people who are struggling to find meaningful or substantial employment; people mourning the loss of loved ones; people who are struggling with the daily work of parenting or caring for aging loved ones; people wrestling with mental illness or addiction. The list could go on and on. Indeed, whenever I’m asked to write a Prayers of the People these days, I don’t know how to start or where to end.

But also, friends, how are we when we see signs of hope? How are we when we see social media posts of children returning to school or church families able to meet in person again? How are we as we begin to witness communities honestly

reckoning with injustice and seeking to welcome those who have, for too long, been marginalized or alienated? How are we when we witness acts of self-sacrifice and kindness after a natural disaster? How are we when we see new life come into the world, relationships forming and growing, and find simple joys in things like fresh baked bread, puppy cuddles, or sunny days? How are we when we are able to gather with and hug loved ones, something we no longer take for granted? How are we? It's complicated. It's the million-dollar question.

But then, right in the middle of it all swings in this (honestly) mess of a text from Jeremiah. Yes, this complicated, convoluted passage might *actually* be the Word we need for this moment—for these days when we are asked to hold and carry so much.

This pericope in Jeremiah is the first part of a larger, three-chapter section labeled by biblical scholars as the “Book of Comfort” or the “Book of Consolation.” In fact, chapter 30 begins with God commanding Jeremiah to write down these words of hope and restoration for both Israel and Judah. It's a refreshing change of pace after 29 chapters largely filled with painful prophesy and language of sin, exile, punishment, and condemnation. But it feels a bit like a fake-out, for the opening stanzas of this poetic “Book of Comfort” do not begin with hope or even comfort. Instead, the text opens with pain, anguish, guilt, and trouble. It begins with an honest wrestling with the reality of the community's traumatic woundedness. Indeed, Jeremiah is writing this while the people are still in exile, while they are physically distanced from all they know and love. He is writing these words for those feeling emotionally and spiritually distanced from the God who has brought them thus far on the way.

Twice in this passage, the peoples' wounds and hurts are declared “incurable.” The community of fallen faithful are summoned to take seriously their sin—the ways they have distanced themselves from God and God's call upon their collective lives. And within those words there is a true reckoning with what is deeply broken. Jeremiah authors these verses with all the painful and troubling flair so well practiced in the 29 chapters that have come before, utilizing patriarchal and patronizing feminine images and pronouns to label Israel and Judah as weak, unwanted, and abandoned by friends and lovers. The first part of the “Book of Comfort” is saturated with hurt and pain, confusion and confession, oppression and patriarchy. It is a wrestling with a present reality that cannot be understood, grasped, or made sense of.

So, Jeremiah scribbles down these words at God's command, following the prophetic poetic formula. It begins in the usual way: “For thus says the Lord....” Jeremiah then proceeds to name sin and brokenness, call out guilt and acknowledge pain, dole out shame and blame, count the offenses one after the other. “Why do you cry out over your hurt?” begins verse 15. “Your pain is incurable. Because your guilt is great, because your sins are so numerous, I have done these things to you. *Therefore....*” Any reader of the prophets knows what comes next. It's time for the verdict and the sentencing. The divine, through the pen of the prophet, has assessed the damage done and now is ready to declare the price to be paid. But it is right here

we, as readers, encounter a surprising shift. Where we expect a sentence of condemnation and punishment on Judah and Israel, the *therefore* signals instead a word of condemnation for those nations that have been *oppressing* the people. At the turning of a word, the language shifts from condemnation to restoration, from past sins to future hope.

It all comes crashing together in whirlwind. Grief and ruin collide into hope and expectation. Brokenness and alienation smash into restoration and covenantal connection. God's mercy all of a sudden, without warning, exceeds and confronts God's apparent will to punish. Compassion and confession run headlong into each other without logic or reason or even poetic consistency. Then the verses unfold into an eschatological-style vision of a restored Israel and Judah. And this vision is not one for the sweet by and by, but a tangible restoration that includes land and homes, righteous rulers and offspring, congregations praising and worshipping together again, and a restored relationship and covenant with God. And all this is declared to be true even while the people are still dealing with the realities of exile.

Even more, God is in the midst of it all. God is right in the mix—in those murky waters sloshing between pain and promise. God hurts with our hurt and gets disappointed and even angry when we hurt one another and do not live into the creatures or communities we were created to be. And God is present with abundant compassion, inviting our confession, facilitating restoration, opening a way for peace, and welcoming our return to loving relationship.

This is where Jeremiah meets us today: where good news and hard truths come crashing together. And I don't know what's more surprising, the vision of hope in the midst of the pain of exile *or* the honest accounting of pain unceremoniously dropped in the middle of a word of hope. But, as biblical scholar Louis Stulman writes,

The very starting point for the hopeful future is the acknowledgement of brokenness, loss, refugee status, and massive upheaval....For Jeremiah, any vision of the future that avoids the real world of human suffering makes a travesty of the past and can never deal with the emotional and symbolic pain of exile. It is therefore no accident that the Book of Comfort depicts the people of God as "survivors." They have endured war, [crushed] hopes, splintered families, and the travail of a shattered world. Now, by the power of the Word, God empowers these broken and shipwrecked people to imagine a future when none seemed possible.¹

God summons them towards potential restoration even as they are in the midst of the present pain of exile.

This experience of the intermingling reality of traumatic truth and persistent hope is not new. This year, much of the season of Lent falls during Women's History Month where we celebrate and remember the women who have sought to lead, work, and, yes, even preach, through, against, and in spite of the persons and systems who

would seek to silence them. We remember the marginalized voices that know all too well what it means to find God in the midst of hurt and hope, pain and promise. We remember Anne Marbury Hutchinson, whose call to preach in the 1630s sent shock waves through the Massachusetts Bay Colony. She was a woman who knew loss and depression and yet found voice and gained spiritual authority through her work as a midwife. She was a woman who was able to “get away” with talking about the Bible at women’s meetings until those speeches were attended by almost every woman in Boston and even some men. And then, having “stept out of her place,” she was put on trial, excommunicated from the church, and banished from the colony.

We remember women like Jarena Lee, who, when she experienced the call to preach was first told “no” by Richard Allen, the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. And this call physically ate away at her until, one day, when the male guest preacher made such a mess of things and lost his place in preaching the story of Jonah, she stood up and took over from the pew, proclaiming the Word given her by God for her people. Yet, even when her gifts were recognized and certified by Rev. Allen, she was forced to be an itinerant preacher, leaving behind her child, barely surviving encounters with those who would threaten her life because she was black or a woman or both. And when she dared to write down her testimony and no longer had the blessing or protection of Richard Allen, the church body, seeking legitimacy and shot through with patriarchy, called her writing a sham and refused to distribute it.

We remember women and femmes like Sister Carmelita or Rev. Aimee Garcia Cortese or Barbara C. Harris or Pauli Murray or Junia Joplin or Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, all of whom were delayed or denied pulpits and preaching spaces due to their gender or race or sexuality or all of the above. Even as we give thanks for the women and femmes who have forged a way, even as we honor those who have modeled brave, bold, and faithful leadership, even as we honor how far we have come, we still mourn and wrestle with the way patriarchy still infects our societies and structures. We continue to grieve the way—for too long—women’s voices and experiences have not been honored, especially women of color, trans women, and queer women.

But we are invited to hold all these together—the gratitude and grief, the laughter and lament, the celebration and confession. After all, Jeremiah reminds us, we have a faith, a language, and a God who can hold all these things with us. We are a people of the cross. We encounter glory and redemptive love in a rejected and crucified Savior. And even the holy narrative towards which we are marching in this season of Lent reminds us that in order to encounter the resurrection, we have to be willing to look into the tomb.

So, dear friends, siblings in Christ, how are you? It is a complicated question, I know. And it is one to which we are invited to be honest. Do not be afraid. For we have a faith and a language and a God who holds all of this with us. We worship a God who casts a hopeful vision even as we trapse through pain and continue to

wrestle with the burden of patriarchy. We follow a Christ who offers us healing and wholeness for the seemingly incurable wounds of our corporate life so marred by white supremacy, oppression, injustice, and exploitative economic realities. We are blessed by the Spirit who gifts us community and covenant even as we are just beginning to contend with the ways the pandemic has traumatized us and torn us apart. Thanks be to a God who holds all of this with us and accompanies us on this journey to the cross.

Note

Louis Stulman, *Jeremiah*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 283.