



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 15
Proper 20 (C)

A Song of Sorrow

[RCL] Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

On some Sundays, it's enticing to piece together a puzzle. It's interesting to do interpretive gymnastics and sit in the presence of a bewildering word. On some Sundays, it's a whole lot of fun to weave together an impossible text and sit in the heap of unanswerable questions.

But on other Sundays, we need sounds and rhythms and poetry. We need sonic reassurances. Some Sundays, we simply cannot take another puzzle because at least one of the pieces always seems to be missing. Some Sundays, we just need to sit in the company of our own ache and anger and sorrow.

Once in a while, we just can't stomach an inscrutable parable and for days like that, the prophet Jeremiah offers us something very different indeed.

Jeremiah is often called the weeping prophet, and the scholar Kathleen O'Connor likes to call our text appointed for today a weeping poem. A weeping poem is for when we find ourselves weeping and for when we find ourselves unable to weep. It is a gift for God's people – a people who find themselves in all sorts of varied and exhausting and heart-wrenching circumstances.

Jeremiah offers his weeping words for when you don't have any words yourself, when only a dead silence greets you in the night. They are poems for when your words come so hot and fast that they slip out of you like darts aimed at the closest target – maybe this weeping poem will melt those darts into tears, exposing the sadness that your anger hides. They are words for when you feel as if salvation is a hoax and there is literally no hope rising on the horizon and you are utterly convinced that every day ahead will be barren and empty. They are words for when you wonder if God is going to show up to help with any of the messes we find ourselves in, for when you hurt not only for yourself but for all those who suffer far more than you. They are words for when you see disease sweeping across the land and health seems far from being restored. They are words for when trauma bites and you find yourself reeling from another panic attack. And they are words for when you wish you could cry because at least you'd be able to release some of the sorrow in you, like a pressure valve, whistling out a song of relief.

Perhaps Jeremiah's words don't resonate with you right now – and if that's the case, give thanks for such a season of grace. Relish the goodness in your life, savor the peace, proclaim the joy, and carry all this with you into our aching world.

But if Jeremiah's words did resound, or if they echoed in you, bouncing off your past, then you are invited to rest in them. To let them become a haven, an oasis, a place where you might experience solidarity and accompaniment.

To these words, the words that might offer us some company and comfort this morning, we now turn.

One of the great questions of these weeping poems revolves around the identity of the speaker. The author is the prophet Jeremiah, at least we think it is. But from whose mouth does Jeremiah imagine this poetry pouring forth? It is possible that Jeremiah himself is voicing these words, concerned about the poor people, and wondering whether the Lord is present with them. Perhaps it's an imagined speaker, someone like the leader of Israel. But maybe it is the Lord himself as one of the imagined speakers in the poem.

If this is the case, the poem forms this incredible dialogue between the Lord and the Lord's people.

There is this sense, on both sides, of piercing sadness and agonizing grief. Both God and the people are crying out. The people mourn, "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." We are still not saved. Even after the season of abundance, after the time of hope and new life, salvation has not yet come. The Lord responds, "For the brokenness of the daughter of my people I am broken, I mourn, and horror has seized me." The poor, especially, are on God's heart and their hurt is causing him to mourn, to dismay.

It's as if this poem becomes a duet. The question is: Can they hear each other? Are they singing to each other in the same room or from different sides of the cosmos? It's hard to tell if they are speaking past one another or if they can hear each other loud and clear. It's sometimes hard for us to tell if our prayers make it to God's ears or not, or whether they whizz past the Lord into a great abyss.

But let's imagine, for our sake, that they can hear each other, that the duet is being performed in the same room. Israel's cries, then, are answered. In fact, they are more than answered, the Lord *joins in* with their crying. The Lord accompanies them in their mourning. The Lord says, "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 slain of the daughter of my people!"

Perhaps if you have a notion of God as this unmovable, unchangeable Being, then this poem could be unnerving. Why would God mourn and lament with Israel – why wouldn't God *do something* about their situation? Why doesn't the Lord stand up for Israel and act on behalf of the poor?

Or, put another way, is the Lord's presence and solidarity and accompaniment sufficient in the face of sorrow and grief? Is it enough?

Jeremiah imagines a God who sings a song of sorrow along with the Israelites, who laments with them and on behalf of them. The Lord is no stoic god, removed from the world, but a God who longs to become a spring of water and a fountain of tears.

No, this reality does not extinguish our grief or our sorrow. It does not stop or end our suffering. But is there anything more powerful, more comforting, more needed than for God to say to us in those dark nights of our existence: "I am with you. I see where you are, and I will not let go of you. You may feel as if salvation will never come and you might question the goodness and faithfulness of your God, but I would cry for you if I could. I would become a fountain of tears if that would help you."

Like a friend who sits in the darkness with you, squeezing your hand and bringing you a cup of tea, the Lord never leaves our side. The Lord stays with us in our grief, whatever it may be. The Lord responds to our lamentation with his own weeping words. The Lord sees her people and can't help but mourn for them.

And the Lord longs to cry for us. Such tears, if we could see them, might be that balm so desperately needed in Gilead. They might be the water that fills our fonts and the rain that spills forth from the skies. Maybe it was the water that flowed forth from Christ's own side, becoming a fountain of life for the whole world.

God cries out for the world, and we cry out with God; we form a duet together. A duet that might just transform our silent sorrow into a tune that pulses with tenacious hope.

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