

Jeremiah 8:4-10:25 II/II

Gilead's Balm

Let's start with prayer!

Prayer:

Oh, Christ.

Introduction:

So, for those of us who are plugged into the pastor underground, there's a huge pressure to preach as relevantly as possible this morning to the events of this past week: To speak to ratcheting economic pressures, to fears from an out-of-control COVID pandemic, to the existential anxiety driven by the failed political insurrection on Tuesday, to the shock at the inequality seen in the treatment peaceful black protestors receive versus what white armed violent terrorists received, to the shock that many of us aren't shocked at all. There's pressure to speak to the fact that for many people, right now is as an existentially unsettling moment as they remember or have experienced for decades. Things have been building and they keep building.

I'm going to resist the pressure. Sort of.

Because we're in Jeremiah, right? We're continuing to walk in Jeremiah. And Jeremiah is, if it's anything, a book about terrible things happening and about to happen. Terrible things have happened--Israel, the Northern Kingdom is gone;

are happening--Assyria is threatening, actively, Judea and its peoples; and will happen--Judea will fall, not from Assyria, but from Babylon. It's like being attacked by velociraptors, you know? Judea will be looking to the North, and they'll get it from the East. (Is Jurassic Park universally known enough for me to reference? I dunno.)

Overlap:

But I think there overlap between the experience of hearing what God says through Jeremiah and living in this moment. Jeremiah's prophecies, and how we as readers are meant to experience them is eerily similar right now.

So it's not that I want us to linger in anxiety, or feel some sort of existential dread, or actively worry about anything right now. But I do want us to be honest about anything negative we're feeling, and allow ourselves to make peace with that negative feeling, relate to it without fear, as a feeling we experience as people, and even see it as good, because the truth is that when bad things are happening, we are meant to notice our response, and act appropriately.

And guess what, even in this we have more in common with Jeremiah than we realize, because Jeremiah knew what he was telling Judea, and look: He could do nothing to persuade them to listen. Just as many of us can do very little to act in a constructive way with the existential worries we may have right now. Oh, we can complain. We can post something

strongly worded on Facebook. We can argue over zoom with someone who might listen. But especially given COVID many of us may feel as if we're powerless to do anything with the anxiety we feel. We may be experiencing a sense of powerless to do anything with the anxiety we feel.

And, look, that's terrible, right? That's a terrible way to feel alive, because anxiety and dread and worry are meant to move us to act. Having anxiety and being unable to do anything with it is one of the most helpless things a human being can feel. And just as Jeremiah was helpless to actually persuade anyone; we may feel helpless to actually do anything about our worries.

Tips & Tricks:

There are things we can do, and do, of course. Tips and tricks, right? Some positive, like getting into our bodies in healthy ways: walking, breathing, moving, feeling our own bodies and appreciating the distraction they can give us. Some negative, like booze or drugs or whatever illicit thing we can hide in. I definitely promote the good things.

But I'd remind us of this: God does not help those who help themselves. That's not biblical wisdom; that's wisdom of a different kind, whose supposed-virtue is driven by self-interest. We have different wisdom: "The Lord sustains the humble," Psalm 147 says. James reminds us that "God...shows favor to the humble." We're told, "Cast your

cares on the Lord and he will sustain you.” The biblical call is to, in our helplessness, whatever it is, turn to God for help, and we will be helped. And many of us, this side of whatever hard things we’ve felt, either now or almost-forgotten, we can cite the ways God has helped us through our helplessness. We’re the ones who “cast all [our] anxiety on [God] because he cares for [us].”

But we need reminded of these things continually, constantly, just because it’s when we need them the most that we forget them, forget to turn to the Spirit. We end up in the same negative space Jeremiah ended up in today’s passage. Remember it? It’s small:

The Text:

Jeremiah prays. Here’s his prayer:

***18 You who are my Comforter in sorrow,
my heart is faint within me.***

***19 Listen to the cry of my people
from a land far away:***

***“Is the Lord not in Zion?
Is her King no longer there?”***

***“Why have they aroused my anger with their images,
with their worthless foreign idols?”***

***“The harvest is past,
the summer has ended,
and we are not saved.”***

***Since my people are crushed, I am crushed;
I mourn, and horror grips me.
Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then is there no healing
for the wound of my people?***

The Text: Walking Through

At it's most basic, today's little section is a string of deeply personal rhetorical questions and responses. The first seemingly asked, and it's hard to find context here, by those Israelites who Assyria has already exiled. Jeremiah seems to be lamenting Israel's captivity. Maybe things are shuffled around. Maybe this is after Judea's captivity, and that's what he's grieving. Maybe he's so sure of how Judea will fall that he's imagining the future, and speaking as if it's become a reality. Who knows? And you know what: I don't care. If the Bible isn't going to give me historical context for a passage, I'm not going to cry when I can't make it up. What is clear is the felt emotion in this passage. Let's do it again, and think of this as a dynamic conversation between Jeremiah, Exiled Israelites, and God.

Jeremiah starts with declaring who God is to him, and that

declaration is a charge: Help me. “You who have been my comforter, comfort me now.” We read:

***18 You who are my Comforter in sorrow,
my heart is faint within me.***

***19 Listen to the cry of my people
from a land far away:***

***“Is the Lord not in Zion?
Is her King no longer there?”***

Why is Jeremiah heartbroken? Because the exiled Israelites have given up hope. They ask “Isn’t the Lord in Zion? Isn’t her King there?” And they are expecting a negative answer: No, the Lord is not in Zion. You can tell, because you’re here in exile. God’s done. God’s gone.

And God speaks up.

***“Why have they aroused my anger with their images,
with their worthless foreign idols?”***

God does not answer Jeremiah. God does not answer Israel. God does not say “I will comfort you.” God does not say “I am still in Zion, still alive, still active.” Instead God responds with condemnation. God lays out facts. There is no comfort in this, guys. It’s...cold. I can point to plenty of places where God is not cold, but here...it reads like the parent who has

said the same cautions a million times to their child, and the child, when bad things happen to him or her and all they want is empathy, then discovers the parent has spent all their empathy.

It doesn't make me happy to point this out. But considering that every single chapter of Jeremiah up to this moment has been God continually pleading with Judea to ignore Israel's example, avoid idols, and come back to their marriage vows...I guess I get it. This is the only time God speaks in this passage.

And, then again, we hear from the Israelites out in exile:

***“The harvest is past,
the summer has ended,
and we are not saved.”***

All they have is their grief. Things keep getting worse. And maybe, you know, we can identify with this feeling. They thought, “Well...give it a couple of seasons. Things will get better.” But they haven't gotten better. God must not be in Zion.

And, having asked for comfort and gotten none, having God ignore both him and the Israelites, having heard Israel say again, almost despondently, “we still aren't saved,” Jeremiah speaks again:

***Since my people are crushed, I am crushed;
 I mourn, and horror grips me.
 Is there no balm in Gilead?
 Is there no physician there?
 Why then is there no healing
 for the wound of my people?***

Jeremiah is in solidarity with his exiled people, even though they completely ignore him and the Lord. And if God won't show empathy, well: He has enough. He asks, rhetorically, "Isn't there medicine in Gilead? Aren't there doctors there?" And this time the answer is "Yes. Of course."

And so Jeremiah can ask, as the NRSV puts it, "Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?" I don't love the NRSV here, but I understand it.

What Jeremiah is doing is extrapolating poetically, which is hard for us to get. He's saying, look, there's medicine and those who know how to use it in Gilead--across the Jordan river, in Assyrian-occupied territory. He'll go on in chapter 9 to cry for the Israelites who have died, specifically. But the NIV's translation, "Why is there no healing for the wound of my people?" Is good. I think what Jeremiah is getting at here is, oh, everything bad. The wound that's their idolatry and all it's cost them, from death to exile.

Why is there no solution to how broken Israel has become? Jeremiah knows who he is complaining to. For God, fixing this problem--fixing all of it, the idolatry, the death, the exile, the selfish leadership, broken worship--fixing it should be no problem. It'd be like a doctor using medicine. Why don't you fix it? Why isn't there a fix for this? "Do something!" Jeremiah is crying. "Do something!" And he doesn't want to hear the good theological answer, you know? "Well, an authentic relationship means free will has to be a...vomit vomit vomit." We've talked before, all the facts in the world don't win out over our feelings, especially if we don't express them. "Do something!" "My God."

Why can't Israel be fixed? Why can't this be fixed?

Lingers:

And look. This passage just...lingers. It lingers in its helplessness. It lingers in the emotionally distant non-response of God. It lingers in resignation. It lingers.

And it's not that I expect the New Testament to pick it up, but I kind of do. I wish that it did. I wish that somehow, you know, Peter would have been, like, "There is a balm in Gilead. And gone onto talk about how, sure, this might not have helped Israel, but God did promise in Jeremiah, after all, that any who, as a remnant, would stay faithful to Him would discover His kept promises."

“There Is A Balm In Gilead”:

I’m not the first to wish this text wasn’t so disheartening. Others have before me. Like good ol’ Washington Glass, who first put it into a lyric, and it became a backbone of an African American spiritual called, “There is a balm in Gilead.”

***There is a balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the sin-sick soul.***

***Sometimes I feel discouraged,
And think my work’s in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again.***

***If you cannot sing like angels,
If you cannot preach like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus,
And say He died for all.***

There’s nothing trite about this song. This song is good theology. It tells a basic story: God did come through for His People. God did do something, in Jesus, to fix things. And when we feel helpless, when we feel discouraged and hopeless, just like Jeremiah and Israel felt, well: The Spirit can “revive our souls again,” bring us back to hope and peace. It reminds us that we are never unable to do

anything, because we can always “tell the love of Jesus”--to ourselves, to anyone. We can return to the coming through for us that Jesus did.

And that’s where I want to end this morning. Because Glass, and those who sung this song into existence, they were able to see the low-hanging fruit of Jeremiah’s lament, and answer it with Christ. And I think we need to follow their lead.

Not Conclusion:

I’m not inviting us to, you know, go on facebook and remind everyone who’s your facebook-friend that Jesus died for them. They know, probably. I mean, if you’re led by the Spirit who revives your soul to go that way, go for it. I don’t want to stand against God. But what I am suggesting is that you “tell the love of Jesus” to yourself, at least.

Start there.

Go back to that basic. Cast your anxiety upon the Lord, because he cares for you. Wait until you’re lifted from despair by the prayers of someone, until your soul is revived. Because as we talked about last week, we Christians if we’re anything are people who wait for the Lord to act for us.

Conclusion:

If you are feeling anxious, worried, or fearful, what can you do to “tell the love of Jesus” to yourself? What about his

death and resurrection do you need to remember? How can you position yourself so that the Spirit might revive your soul in the midst of the discouragement and resignation and helplessness you feel? If you can't lift yourself up right now, can't even manage this, who can you reach out to so that they can help lift you up?

And remember, no matter how functional it feels to simply ignore what we feel, you can't escape your feelings. It's not worth the dysfunction to suppress them. Push these things down, they'll just squirt out the sides and make a mess.

If the news of this past week has made you feel as resigned and full of lament as Jeremiah and Israel felt, that's fine. If the news of this past week has made you feel as resigned and full of lament as Jeremiah and Israel felt, that's fine. What can you do to open yourself up to the Spirit, so that your soul can be revived? What can you do to tell the love of Jesus where it needs heard? Especially if you're the one who needs to hear it?

Destiny:

Look, lament was not Israel's destiny, no matter how much Jeremiah did it, or how much exiled Israel felt abandoned. It's not yours, either. But along the way to destiny, real lives leaves us with great, huge reasons to lament, to grieve, to become discouraged. We need revived by the Spirit and comforted by Christ's love if we're going to stay sustained

through this hard life. So pursue those things. And if you need help in their pursuit, seek help. Giving and receiving that is part of the Christian life.