



Worship Series: “A Prophet’s Witness: From Grief to Hope”

“From Lamentations to Actions”—Sermon Text: Jeremiah 8:18—9:1

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

18th Sunday after Pentecost: 18 September 2016

“We should be taught not to wait for inspiration to start a thing.

Action always generates inspiration. Inspiration seldom generates action”

(--Frank Tibolt).

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Let us hear the word of God and listen for what the Spirit is saying to the church:

18 My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. 19 Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: “Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?” (“Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?”)

20 “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.” 21 For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? 9:1 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 my poor people (Jeremiah 8:18-9:1)!

When U. S. Grant was fighting his last campaign with cancer at Mount McGregor, General O. O. Howard, who had honestly won the title “The Christian Soldier,” came to call on him. He spoke for a time to Grant about some of the battles and campaigns of the war in which both men had played so illustrious a part. Grant listened for a time and then, interrupting him, said, “Howard, tell me what you know about prayer.” Face to face with death and the unknown, the question of prayer was of greater interest to the dying soldier than the reminiscences of his battles. In a pertinent way, this lesson from Jeremiah 8:18—9:1 is about prayer—even intercessory prayer. My friend, John Holbert, writes:

As we approach Jeremiah 8; we have listened to the prophet attack, abuse, and generally excoriate his own people for their lack of attention to YHWH’s demands for justice and righteousness, their complete lack of the knowledge of what YHWH wants from them, and their continuous attraction to other gods and their idols of one sort or another. In short, Jeremiah up until chapter 8 sounds a good deal like his prophetic forebear, Amos, who majored in verbal assault against the sins of Israel. But now Jeremiah and Amos part company (patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/What-It-Takes-John-Holbert-09-16-2013).

“My joy is gone; grief lies on me; my heart is ill” (8:18). Jeremiah’s prophetic charge, to

“pluck up, pull down, destroy, overthrow” (1:10) gives him no pleasure. Quite the opposite is true; he is joyless, grief-stricken, and sick at heart. His God-given task to announce the anger of God and to urge his people to complete change of heart and life is not a task that he finds fun. A prophet, he implies should not take pleasure in excoriating his people. If we read our lesson with care we will see Jeremiah is really praying for a reconnection between Yahweh and Yahweh’s people. Jeremiah as much like Poland during WW II—smack dab in the middle of being stuck between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. Jeremiah was stuck between God and the people of God. The prophet had done what we expect prophets to do: denounce his people for turning away from their God and lusting after idols and other deities. This gets the dander up of even the most inept prophets—and Jeremiah was one of the greatest of all Israel’s prophets and he was none too happy with the people.

God called Jeremiah and his life reveals him as courageous and persistent. As a prophet he endured physical misery for his devotion to God’s prophetic call. As Chris Haslam (Anglican Diocese of Montreal) reminds us, Jeremiah also suffered inner doubts and conflicts, as his own words reveal, especially those passages that are usually called his “confessions” (11:18–12:6; 15:10–21; 17:9–10, 14–18; 18:18–23; 20:7–12, 14–18). The texts expose a strong conflict between Jeremiah’s natural inclinations and his deep sense of vocation to deliver Yahweh’s message. Jeremiah was by nature sensitive, introspective, and perhaps shy. He was denied participation in the ordinary joys and sorrows of regular people and did not marry. He even said: “I sat alone,” and with God’s hand upon him. Jeremiah had periods of despondency when he expressed the wish that he had never been born or that he might run away and live alone in the desert. He reached the point of calling God “a deceitful brook . . . waters that fail.” Jeremiah, if you can believe it, even accused God of deceiving and overpowering him. Yet there were times of exaltation when he could say to God: “Thy words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart;” and he could speak of Yahweh as “a dread warrior” fighting by his side.

As a prophet Jeremiah pronounced God's judgment upon the people of his time for their wickedness. He was concerned especially with false and insincere worship and failure to trust Yahweh in national affairs. He denounced social injustices but not so much as some previous prophets, such as Amos and Micah. He found the source of sin to be in the weakness and corruption of the hearts of human beings—in what he often called “the stubbornness of the evil heart.” Jeremiah considered sin to be unnatural; he emphasized that some foreign nations were more loyal to their pagan deities than Judah was to Yahweh. Jeremiah often contrasted nature's obedience to law with human disobedience to God.

Jeremiah had more to say about repentance than any other prophet. He called upon people to turn away from their wicked ways and dependence upon idols and false gods and return to their early covenantal loyalty to Yahweh. Repentance thus had a strong ethical complexion, since it meant living in obedience to Yahweh's will for the individual and the nation. In the latter part of his career Jeremiah had to struggle against the despair of his people and give them hope for the future. He expressed his own hope vividly by an action that he undertook when the Babylonians were besieging Jerusalem and he was in prison. He bought, from a cousin, a field in Anathoth, his native town. In the presence of witnesses he weighed out the money and made the contracts and said, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.” In this and other ways he expressed his hope for a bright future for Israel in its own land.

Jeremiah always lived against the grain. When people despaired he preached hope. When people were buoyant and optimistic he held them to a more sober reality. He comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable. He seems the most human of all the prophets.

I began by speaking a few minutes ago about President Grant and his dying request to learn more about prayer—even intercessory prayer. It is hard for many believers to address the idea of intercessory prayer for we feel inadequate in asking or too forward in pressing our case or

pressing for a friend to God or we feel presumptive in asking God something so specific. Granted many folks do not feel this way, then then again—many do.

Jeremiah stood between the people and their God. They could not understand why God had abandoned them: *“Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?”* Likewise God seems to have turn aside from his own people—the Chosen People of God: *“Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?”* We are caught between a rock and a hard place when our two best friends fight. Thus Jeremiah is between a rock and a hard place. He seeks to join those two so long divided—God and God’s people. He does this through lamentation and intercessory prayer. He seeks to build a bridge by which God and God’s people can reconnect.

This week I would ask you to take about five minutes each day to pray for a situation that seems to put you between a rock and a hard place. It could be for or about relationships between family members, co-workers, or even neighbors. But spend a little time praying for someone else and ponder what that does to you and for you.