"A Weeping God…"

Text: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

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Where have all the prophets gone?

My last semester at Columbia Seminary, I heard an extraordinary lecture by one of the senior members of the faculty. He was telling the story of a seminarian from the mid-19th Century who had come to Columbia and been converted. During his time on campus, this student became passionate about the abolition of slavery. He pursued this cause with all of his energy, convinced that God had called him to proclaim the utter absurdity of Biblical defenses of slave-trading. But then, my professor explained, this student graduated from seminary. He moved to South Carolina and began to serve as pastor of a local congregation. His burning passion quickly cooled. His stirring proclamations about the evils of slavery gave way to more acceptable sermon topics. He became comfortable, so comfortable in fact that he could afford to purchase slaves of his own. And he did.

It was at this point in the lecture that our professor looked up from his notes, and addressed the group of 21st-Century seminarians gathered before him. "I remain concerned," he said, "that students who graduate from this seminary too quickly give in and take the easy road of assent to the larger culture rather than the more difficult and unpopular path of justice." Indeed, where have all the prophets gone?

Well, if the life story of the prophet Jeremiah is to be taken as the standard, it is not difficult to see why prophets are so hard to find these days. It is not easy work. Jeremiah was called to a prophetic vocation when he was only a young child, with these words from God: "See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." No wonder Jeremiah, like almost every other prophet in the Old Testament, is reluctant to accept the call. In fact, throughout the book of Jeremiah, the prophet himself is portrayed as remarkably introspective, clearly struggling with his call to speak words of doom to a people gone astray, words of judgment to a nation that had given up its worship of God in favor of the idols of wealth and power.

Like all prophets, Jeremiah was often forced to suffer for the divine words that he speaks to humanity. But unlike any other prophet, we are given a window into Jeremiah's broken heart for the people of Israel. We are told of his pain at being rejected by his own and his desire to save his nation from the destruction that is surely coming. Jeremiah, as a prophet, inhabits two worlds simultaneously, and I believe that it is this balancing act that is most trying for him. His role as prophet forces him to predict the destruction of the land that he loves and the exile of his own family. Jeremiah is tormented by the responsibilities of being a prophet in his homeland. Perhaps Jesus himself was reflecting

on Jeremiah's pain when he recited a well-known First Century aphorism: "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown." How true that was for Jeremiah and how much he suffered brining painful news to those whom he loved.

Gilead is the title of an extraordinary recent novel written by Marilynne Robinson. In it, she tells the story of Reverend John Ames, a Presbyterian minister who is preparing to die and decides to write his young son a letter about his life so that the boy might know his father's story firsthand. The novel takes the form of this letter, with profoundly sad and beautiful narratives surrounding words of wisdom and advice. At one point in the novel, Reverend Ames comments on a magazine writer who is critical of the kind of Christianity he sees in the American Churches. Ames writes, "To his mind, all those people in all those churches are the scribes and the Pharisees. He seems to me to be a bit of a scribe himself, scorning and rebuking the way he does. How do you tell a scribe from a prophet, which is what he clearly takes himself to be? The prophets love the people they chastise..."

The power of a true prophet lies in the pain it causes to speak the truth. Many of those who imagine themselves as prophets in our own time would do well to observe Jeremiah and lose the smirk that often accompanies their judgmental language. For this prophet, there is no pleasure in speaking of God's judgment or the people's sinfulness.

Which brings us to the passage before us on this Sunday. Jeremiah has spent the last several chapters of the text speaking Gods word to the people of Israel and Judah. And it has not been a pretty sight! God commands Jeremiah to stand at the gate of the Temple, the most prominent and public spot in the entire nation, and speak these words: Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to idols, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!" —only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord." It is at this point in the story that readers might expect Jeremiah (and the God for whom he speaks) to walk away and leave the people of God to their own devices of destruction.

But what follows instead are the words we read this morning. Words of pain and not pride. Words of mourning and not abandonment. One of the most interesting aspects of the original Hebrew of this passage is that it is impossible to distinguish who is speaking at what time. The pain and suffering of God, the prophet, and the people are identical. Their mingled voices create a kind of harmony of lament.

The people have abandoned their God, they have worshiped idols, they have become divided and alienated from one another. There is no justice or peace in the land, only oppression and warfare. The people have driven God to the breaking point…but contrary to what vision we may hold of the God of Israel in the Old Testament, God's breaking point here is not one of anger but one of sadness. God looks at the waywardness of the people who were led out slavery in Egypt by God's own outstretched hand, and feels

great pain. God, like the prophet, is broken-hearted, because like Jeremiah, God has invested much in this people.

I am concerned about the picture of God that is most visible and publicized our nation today. I am concerned because, though I hear a great deal of talk about God's power and might and ability to solve our problems, I hear very little about God's suffering. Admittedly, it's not a comfortable topic. It was no more comfortable for the people of Israel in Jeremiah's time, who refused to hear of a God who was both judge and fellow-sufferer. Instead, they sought out quick-fix idols who gave illusions of power without price and kept a safe distance away.

But the God of Israel, the God whom we worship this day, is incapable of keeping away for long. The God whom we worship is one of vulnerability and everlasting love. For Christians this was most clearly demonstrated on a hill called Golgotha, where Jesus Christ revealed to us a God who will suffer the depths of human pain for the salvation of God's people. The cross is for us a sign of hope because it reveals a God who takes on human flesh and shares in human suffering.

At the end of his letter, the Reverend John Ames pens these words from his office in Gilead, "Augustine says the Lord loves each of us as an only child, and that has to be true. He will wipe the tears from all faces. It takes nothing from the loveliness of that verse to say that is exactly what will be required." (p. 245).

This is a prophetic word in our time and place: God is not unaffected by human pain and suffering. God's heart is not unbreakable. God weeps.

But it is not the final word. Later in Jeremiah, these words come from the lips of God to the nation in exile: I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O Israel. Again you shall take your tambourines and go forth in dancing!"

'Prophetic imagination,' a term coined by Columbia professor, Walter Brueggemann, describes a wonderful ability to "imagine God's promises coming true." In Brueggemann's view, the prophets exercised prophetic imagination by envisioning a reality, different from the world that surrounded them. This is why Jeremiah can speak of building houses and planting vineyards while the people are exiled in Babylon. With and for the world, prophets are called to imagine the newness that is sure to come.

At its best, the church is called to a prophetic role. This is not an easy task, for it involves ministering to the needs of the world, speaking of God's pain at what is taking place, and imaginatively envisioning a new world coming.

When we see injustice, hunger, homeless violence, suffering, and the power of sin at work in the world surrounding us, we are free to grieve alongside our weeping God. We give voice to the pain of the world and to God's own cries. In his letter to the Romans,

Paul writes that we who have the first fruits of the spirit groan inwardly as we await redemption. We are called to grieve with and for a world that seems so often more preoccupied with death and destruction than life and hope.

But, if we are to be a prophetic church, we must not allow our tears to have the final word. Instead, those tears must become hands wielding hammers and grasping seeds as we build houses and plant vineyards and enact the change that we believe is on its way.

You may have noticed the question that Jeremiah raises, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” It is one of desperation and despair, with very little hope.

Those suffering from the injustices of slavery in this country also knew something of desperation and despair. But they knew more than that. And so they took Jeremiah’s question and framed it into an affirmation of hope. They understood that God in becoming flesh in Jesus became a walking balm in Gilead. In lifted voices they sang, “There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul.”

These oppressed people knew what the Psalmist had proclaimed thousands of years earlier, that weeping may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning.

A few years ago, at a church in Greensboro, North Carolina, I witnessed this transformation of weeping into joy. It was at the funeral of an elderly member of the congregation there who had battled cancer for some time. I watched as his widow, a woman who had acted as unofficial grandmother to every child in that church for thirty years, came down the aisle sobbing in pain. Throughout the service, she appeared inconsolable, the weeping was unceasing. After the service, a remarkable thing happened. I walked into the fellowship hall where we were gathering for cookies and punch, and saw Miss Lena seated in the corner. She was surrounded by her unofficial grandchildren, some of whom were over forty years old. She was laughing and smiling and kissing cheeks, just as she always had. The pain was real and it was not replaced. But, in that moment, Miss Lena found Gilead, and its healing balm washed over her.

It is only after entering deeply into the pain of our world and the pain in our own sorrowful human hearts that we can raise our voices and with confidence proclaim: There is a Balm in Gilead. Let us do so now.