

Church of the Crossroads
Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 23, 2007
Neal MacPherson

THE BROKEN HEART OF GOD

Jeremiah 8:18–9:3
Psalm 79
Luke 19:41–44

One of the prophetic tasks, if not *the* prophetic task, is to bring the nature of God into the realm of human speech. Such speech will inevitably use human terms to describe the character of God. Thus God will weep. God will be angry. God will desire to make whole. How can we human beings do otherwise? We have no categories other than human categories to speak about God. There is no other way to bring the nature of God into the realm of speech. I suppose that we could set all human categories aside and simply describe God as a mystery. To describe God as a mystery is well and good (after all, we can never fully understand the nature of God), but simply to say that God is a mystery fails to connect us to God. That we can do only by describing God in human categories.

But how can the prophet know anything about the nature and character of God? The prophet comes to know God intimately through a process of identification. Jeremiah, overcome completely by the Spirit of God and called by God to be a prophet, so identifies himself with the inner life of God that he speaks not only for God; he literally speaks the words of God. Jeremiah therefore says: “*Thus says the Lord.*”

Often, when we read the words of Jeremiah, we cannot quite figure out who is actually speaking. Is it Jeremiah himself? Or is it God? Such is the case with our reading for today. The words of this particular reading form a lament, haunting and powerful.

*My joy is gone, grief is upon me,
my heart is sick.
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?”*

...

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

*For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt,
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.*

–Jer 8:18–21

Is this Jeremiah speaking? Or is it God speaking? Walter Brueggemann, as usual, is helpful. He says that it is *both* Jeremiah *and* God speaking. The identification of Jeremiah with the inner life of God is so complete that we hear both Jeremiah and God speak. And the speech is not the language of matter-of-fact prose; it is the language of poetry. It is language so profound, so deep, so metaphorical, so haunting, that we cannot help but hear it as poetry. Such an expression of grief can never be prosaic. It runs too deep for that. It is not unlike the language of another prophet named Jesus who weeps over Jerusalem, who laments, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.” (Luke 19:42)

Jeremiah weeps. God weeps. The prophet’s heart is being torn apart. God’s heart is broken. Why? Because those foolish children want God to save them but they are not doing the work of the heart that is required. By their faithlessness, they have hurt God profoundly, deeply, and still they are unrepentant in their hearts. They have put on their sackcloth and ashes, but what God requires is a fasting of the heart. So serious is their offense against God, this God who had brought them out of bondage into freedom, that the prophet Jeremiah describes their faithlessness in terms of a rape. God very being has been violated. No wonder God is angry! God has every right to be angry! But here it is not anger that God expresses. It is profound grief. That, however, is not unusual. After all, anger and grief belong together. A woman who has been raped is filled with anger and also unspeakable grief. She grieves over all that she has lost. So it is with the God of Jeremiah. There is anger, to be sure, but there is also profound grief, a grief that is almost too deep for words. God has lost a people who were God’s own people.

It is little wonder that God cannot respond to the people of Judah as they cry out. God is too filled with grief, too overwhelmed by hurt to respond. All Jeremiah can do, all God can do is weep, and ask some questions.

*Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?*

The tone is different from that of the African American spiritual our choir sang earlier. The spiritual is in the form of an affirmation: “There *is* a balm in Gilead to heal the wounded soul.” Here, it is a question. “*Is* there a balm in Gilead?” If there is a balm in Gilead, if there is a salve that can heal the wound, then the health of Judah would have been restored. But it has not. Laments Jeremiah and God, “Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?” There is *no* balm, *no* physician in Gilead. The weeping goes on unabated.

*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!*

—Jer 9:1

So deep is the grief and the hurt that Jeremiah / God would just as soon abandon the people and go into some desert place, far away from Judah:

*O that I had in the desert
a traveler’s lodging place,
that I might leave my people
and go from them!*

—Jer 9:2a

The reason?

*For they are all adulterers,
a band of traitors.
They bend their tongues like bows;
they have grown strong in the land
for falsehood, and not for truth;
for they proceed from evil to evil,
and they do not know me, says the Lord.*

—Jer 9:2b–3

Sometimes, the only thing that Jeremiah / God can do is to weep. Sometimes, it is all that we can do as well, if the spirit of the prophet is in us. That is how Walter Brueggemann wants us to see it. He wants us to see ourselves as the prophet looking upon a beloved people who have lost their way. He wants us to learn from the prophet Jeremiah. After all, have we not wept over America? Can we not imagine God weeping bitterly over our nation, so mired in bloodshed and falsehood, so enamored with power, so caught up in greed, so callous in its dealings with our own people, let alone peoples far away? Asks the President, publicly: Why would the Congress vote to raise the tax on a pack of cigarettes to \$1.00 in order to extend health insurance provisions to the poor children of our nation? Then, he adds, “Does not the Congress know that I will veto the bill?” Sometimes, weeping is all that God can do, and that is all we can do as well. If we were to have our way, our nation would turn around. It would walk in the paths of peace and justice. It would head the cries of the poor, the children. We are not unlike the prophet Jeremiah who saw so clearly, who entered into the pathos of God so deeply.

So deep our despair, so broken is the heart of God, that the shedding of tears may be the only thing we and God can do. Lament is surely the order of the day.

We feel so disconnected. The world is falling apart. Iraqi citizens are still losing their lives, as well as our own sons and daughters. Modern Israel rattles its sabers. Iran is fast becoming the newest object of hatred. The poor of our land go destitute. But to watch CNN, one would think that the only things that matter are O. J.’s stupid behavior, and Britney Spear’s addiction, and the most recent police chase, and how many I-phones have been sold. It makes us angry; it makes us weep, and if those are our emotions, cannot they also be God’s emotions?

The Book of the prophet Jeremiah complicates our understanding of God. God is no longer the God who is simply omnipotent—all powerful; omniscient—all knowing; and immutable—unchanging. God is no longer the God who simply answers prayers. God’s nature is far more complicated. The God who is so bound up with humankind is a God who can be angry and judgmental, a God who can be deeply hurt, a God who is incapable of responding, so overwhelmed is God by grief. If these can be our human emotions, why can we not poetically imagine God having the same?

Yes, sometimes the despair runs so deep that there can only be lament and grief. Our culture runs away from such emotions, especially if they linger. A “moving forward culture” will have no time for grief.

Yet, without weeping, without grief, there can be no hope, and that will be the subject of the second part of this sermon on the prophet Jeremiah. (I will preach the second part next week; you will just have to come back!) You see, it is possible to hold grief and hope within one’s heart *at the same time*. This, too, we can learn from the prophet Jeremiah. For now, let me say, that when grief is spoken, whether the grief of God, or Jeremiah’s grief, or our own, something within us is opened up; something gives way to other possibilities, including the possibility of hope. For today, though, let us not move to solutions or answers. With God, let us simply grieve for our nation, for our world, for ourselves. It just may be that if we grieve enough, there may yet be another word to speak. So may it be. Amen.