

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Living Between Pain and Praise

Jeremiah 11:18-23

U2's lead singer Bono did an interview for *Rolling Stone* magazine in which he talked about learning to connect with David's laments and prayers in the book of Psalms. Due to a bike accident, Bono had suffered several facial, arm, and shoulder fractures that required three metal plates and 18 screws. He also had serious problems with his back and vocal cords. Bono acknowledged that out of that experience he had been writing songs with deeper meaning. He said: "I read the Psalms of David all the time. They are amazing. He is the first bluesman, shouting at God, 'Why did this happen to me?' But there's honesty in that too."¹

If Bono benefited from engaging with David, he might also benefit from meeting Jeremiah. He too is known for singing the blues. According to tradition, Jeremiah is known as "the weeping prophet." His preaching is always filled with deep emotion, particularly sorrow and sadness. In a passage a couple of chapters before today's text, Jeremiah, speaking for God, says, "Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people" (9:1).

In today's text, Jeremiah once again lives up to his nickname. These verses form the first in a series of laments. Lament is a form of expression, often poetic, in which an individual or a group of people give voice to trauma, suffering, and loss. Lament is more than just complaining or griping. It often involves a deep sense of pain and rage against the injustices of life. Lament involves calling out, seeking out, reaching out, particularly to the Lord. As one person has put it, lament "allows both the individual and community to 'stay real' with God about the stuff of life."²

Jeremiah is one of the Bible's best at staying real with God. In our text, he begins by declaring how his sense of innocence has been shattered by a revelation from God. God has shown Jeremiah that there's a plot underway to take his life, to shut him up because his preaching disrupts the status quo. To many people, especially those who hold the reigns of power, Jeremiah isn't patriotic enough. His sermons threaten the interests of those who would rather keep things the way they are. So they want to silence Jeremiah by eliminating him, and any memory of him, from the earth.

No wonder Jeremiah is a mixture of sorrow and anger. Between the plans of God and the schemes of humans, Jeremiah feels like a complete victim. He's angry with the people whom he thought were his friends and neighbors rather than his enemies. He's angry with God who called him into this ministry in the first place, giving him a message that the people resist to the point of killing the messenger. In that respect, God is the one who has put Jeremiah in harm's way. God is the one whose plans and purposes have landed Jeremiah in such pain and persecution. What kind of people are these? What kind of God is this? What kind of covenant is this between such a God and such a people?

But notice that Jeremiah's lament isn't without hope. In fact, his lament is what one person calls "a grasping toward hope."³ That's because the relationship between God and

Jeremiah, between Jeremiah and the people, and between the people and God, still matters to this broken and beleaguered prophet. He keeps seeking God and relying upon God to ultimately set things right. True, we shouldn't look to Jeremiah's call for retribution and vengeance as a model for our own faithfulness, but we should learn from his willingness to engage deeply with God, to pour himself out to God, and to trust God to do true justice in the long run.

Moving toward that kind of reliance on the righteousness of God takes lament. As I've indicated, in the book of Jeremiah, there's lament all over the place. The prophet's lament. The people's lament. God's lament. All the participants in the covenant share in the sorrow, loss, and grief of historical events and the reality of the people's exile. But in God's faithfulness and mercy, that shared pain and sorrow becomes the space where redemption starts to happen and hope starts to take shape. This has significance for our own life together as God's people, and our mission in the world. It means that our commission to be messengers of God's mercy will require us to enter into other people's sorrow and join them in working through their experiences of lament.

Ellen Davis tells a story about a young priest who visited one of her parishioners in the nursing home where he was living. According to Davis,

He would neither speak to her nor look at her; he simply stared straight ahead. Her pastoral instincts were good, so she did not try to engage him in chitchat, but went straight for the psalms. She read him psalms of comfort.... But the words of comfort elicited no response—just the same stony stare. So as a last resort, she began reading from the laments: *I have become like a vulture in the wilderness, like an owl among the ruins.... I eat ashes like bread and mix my drink with tears because of your indignation and anger, because you (God) have picked me up and tossed me aside* (Psalm 102:7, 10-11). At those words the stony face softened. For the first time, the man looked at his visitor and said, "Finally, somebody who knows how I feel."⁴

Sometimes your ministry may involve helping a person find the words they need to give voice to their sorrow. Sometimes your participation in lament will take the form of joining someone who's grieving the death of a loved one. This is something we have lots of experience with in the life and ministry of the church. But no matter how often we're called upon to mourn with those who mourn, we don't want to lose sight of how important it is to draw near to those who are going through such loss. In his book *Lament for a Son*, Nicholas Wolterstorff writes:

... please: don't say it's not really so bad. Because it is. Death is awful, demonic. If you think your task as comforter is to tell me that really, all things considered, it's not so bad, you do not sit with me in my grief but place yourself off in the distance from me. Over there, you are of no help. What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.⁵

Whatever the cause and context of someone's pain, practicing lament requires that we come close to them and be with them, that we sit with them in their sorrow. Presence and patience are essential.

We saw and experienced some of this last weekend on the 20th anniversary of 9/11. Two decades after the horrific events of that day, we paused as a nation to remember and reflect on what happened, and what continues to happen, as a result of those attacks. Last weekend was a form of national lament. Individuals, families, communities, and the entire country took time to keep working through the grief. I noticed that many broadcasts included lots of personal stories from men and women, especially those close to the events,

who described what happened to them, and how that day's death, destruction, and damage will always be part of who they are.

I think of Jeremiah and his experience with the people of Israel. Jeremiah's weeping flows out of personal and public catastrophes. His message of repentance rejected and his own life in danger. Invasion and attack by the Babylonians. The temple ransacked. The city reduced to rubble. Many of its inhabitants exiled. So Jeremiah has witnessed the complete and utter disintegration of his society. He's operating in an atmosphere of shock, sorrow, and dislocation. His ministry becomes critical in the work of mourning and the movement toward hope.

Pastor Palmer Chinchen writes about living and serving in other parts of the world where he has witnessed firsthand the devastating effects of civil war, oppressive regimes, pandemics, and extreme poverty. In a book about responding to human suffering and hurt, he talks about how the Hebrew people have a special way of coming together to help people deal with pain, loss, and grief. Chinchen says:

They call it *shiva* (which means seven, or sits of seven). When there is a death, the closest family members come together: the father and mother, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, and spouses. They come together and sit. But they don't sit alone: all their friends and family come and sit with them. They sit until the healing begins. They sit because they want you to know you're not alone in your sorrow.

They sit together for seven days, and here's what I love about the seventh day—everyone in the community comes on the seventh day, and they walk with them around the block. The subtle message is, *You can begin to live again. We know you hurt, and we hurt with you, but you can heal over.*⁶

Today, no matter what seat you picked here in this sanctuary, you may very well be sitting near someone who's in sorrow. When you arrive here for worship, we don't require you to check your pain and problems at the door. No, you bring your lament with you into the Lord's presence. The sources of the sadness vary. Illness. Injury. Grief. Family division. Marital strife. Domestic violence. Sexual abuse. Abandonment. International conflict. Trauma from battle. Job loss. Financial struggles. We aren't promised that one worship service will take it all away and remove all the tears. But we are assured that in the community of God's people, there's room for lament. There's space for learning how to live between pain and praise. And there are people who will sit in that space with you.

Jeremiah knew what it was like to live in that space. True, he was the weeping prophet. But he was also the praising prophet. Jeremiah knew how to name the sorrow. But he also knew how to work through it and make progress toward a better place, a place of renewed trust in the Lord. A place where hope can take shape. Hope grounded in God's faithfulness. Hope anchored in the conviction that God is trustworthy and will judge righteously, so that the end is not pain but praise.

¹ Jann S. Wenner, "Bono: The *Rolling Stone* Interview." *Rolling Stone* (January 2018).

² Keith A. Russell, "On Exposing the Lie," *The Living Pulpit*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (October-December 2002) 10.

³ Megan Fullerton Strollo, Commentary on Jeremiah 11:18-20. Working Preacher website. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-25-2/commentary-on-jeremiah-1118-20-5> (September 15, 2021).

⁴ Ellen F. Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Lanham: Cowley, 2001) n.p.

⁵ Nicholas Woltersdorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) n.p.

⁶ Palmer Chinchen, *God Can't Sleep: Waiting for Daylight on Life's Dark Nights* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2011) 168-169.