

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
September 18, 2022

## **Can the Wound Be Healed?**

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

Recent years have seen a boom in crystals, especially as a health and wellness trend. Many believe that crystals have mystical properties and the power to heal. As one author explains it, "We work with crystals to draw out the 'negative' and 'heighten' the positive, such as love, protection, abundance or seeking to detoxify from fear, guilt, worry. Crystals are formed under pressure, much like ourselves. The power of life force—what's not to love about that?"<sup>1</sup> Thanks to promotions from celebrities and the rise of New Age spirituality, it's no wonder that crystals have boomed in popularity.

But a few years ago, reporters for the British newspaper *The Guardian* exposed some of the dark side of this modern-day healing movement. It turns out that Madagascar, one of the poorest countries in the world, has a treasure trove of these gems. And most of them are mined by human beings not machines. One reporter visited villages that mine large rose quartz deposits. In most of the homes, there's no electricity or running water. The residents live below the poverty line of \$1.90 per day. According to the area's deputy mayor:

Between two and four men died each year in the crystal pits surrounding this village ... Landslides are not the only danger for miners. Fine dust and quartz particles can penetrate deep into the lungs ... increasing the risk of lung cancer and silicosis. Child labor is also widespread: the US Department of Labor estimates that about 85,000 children work in Madagascar's mines.<sup>2</sup>

Is there a balm in Madagascar? Many think so. But the pursuit of this balm has created woundedness and suffering for those who do the digging. And in today's text from Jeremiah, we're called to turn toward the true source of healing and hope, the Lord our God, who feels the distress of those in the mines of Madagascar.

In our Scripture passage, the Lord himself laments over the distress of his own people. Having described their sin and pronounced judgment, the prophet Jeremiah now expresses anguish over the people. But it's not just Jeremiah's sorrow. It's also God's sorrow. One of the striking things about this text is how hard it is to know who is actually speaking at many points. Even in the opening verse, it's possible that God, the prophet, and the people are all taking turns. Their voices overlap. It's hard to pull them apart.

But maybe we don't need to try to disentangle them. Perhaps there's comfort and reassurance in the fact that the people, the prophet, and even God himself are all caught up in the sorrow of the people's condition. As one commentator has put it, "No one rejoices in what is coming; all involved are becoming aware that this grief will be all-encompassing."<sup>3</sup> In view of what has already happened, and what is coming, there's plenty of lament to go around.

Lament is a form of expression, often poetic, in which an individual or a group of people give voice to trauma, suffering, and loss. It often involves a deep sense of remorse about

sin, or pain and rage against the injustices of life. In the last verse of today's text, Jeremiah, giving voice to the heart of 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). It's no wonder that Jeremiah is often known as "the weeping prophet."

Weeping prophet. Weeping God. Weeping people. That usually doesn't describe what we're aiming for when we come together in the presence of the Lord. We expect to be uplifted and strengthened. But our life together as God's people isn't true to life if it doesn't include space for mourning, weeping, and sorrow. We need to make room for grief, loss, and distress. We need to allow for questions that have no immediate answer. Jeremiah asks, "Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?" The prophet knows that there's no quick fix for what's wrong in the relationship between God and his people. At this point, all he can do is look upon the wound, face it, and wrestle with it.

Being God's people in the world includes abiding patiently and faithfully in those spaces and experiences where there's loss, confusion, and pain. We're not a community whose primary message to the wounded is "Well, we know it hurts, but don't worry, you'll soon get over it." On the contrary, our mission revolves less around get over it and more around how can we get into it. How can we enter into your woundedness and help you look upon it, wrestle with it, and find hope in the midst of it?

Author and professor Robert Wicks tells the following story about how one of his African students discovered the healing power of an entire community:

When the student was ten years old, he got trapped in a burning hut that he had accidentally set on fire. The fire had started at the only entrance to the hut, and the flames were too much for him to go through. He felt this was his end and let out a wild scream. Fortunately for him, his father braved the inferno and got him out. He had lost consciousness due to the heat, smoke, and possibly fear.

When he finally regained consciousness, he was lying in a room surrounded by the women of his village, who were nursing his burns and offering him food. He could also hear the voices of the men outside and knew that the whole village had come to the support of him and his family.

Two weeks later, he told me, the village elders came to his home to perform a ritual partially intended to prevent similar accidents, but also—and of even more importance to him as he looks back on it—to help him deal normally with fire.

To accomplish this, they built a model hut in the open field and instructed him to go in the hut and set it on fire in the same way as in the accident. They had him reenact the accident three times, and each time one of the villagers would rush in to rescue him. In addition, they had him tell his story again and again to village members who came to see him and his family.

From this he learned as a child something that people in rural areas seem to teach each other instinctively: namely, that the tragedy of one individual or one family is a tragedy for the whole community .... In the words of South African poet Mzwakhe Mbuli in his Zulu poem:

An injury to the head,  
Is an injury to the whole person,  
Is an injury to the whole family,  
Is an injury to the compound,  
Is an injury to the village,  
Is an injury to the kingdom,  
Is an injury to the world.<sup>4</sup>

The injuredness of the world shows up everywhere, in a multitude of ways, including here among us in our lives. Signs of the woundedness of humankind are certainly with us. The wound of past sins that still weigh you down with a sense of guilt or shame. The wound of physical violence or abuse that you suffered at someone else's hands. The wound of trauma from warfare. The wound of a broken or violent home. The wound from a long-time relationship that ended abruptly. The wound of disease that has left you weakened or disabled. The wound of material poverty or economic injustice. These are just some of the forms of woundedness that we continue to wrestle with, individually and together.

And all these within a larger society, and a larger world, where there are wounds and injuries, crises and catastrophes, devastations and destructions, that seem beyond any cure. As one person has said, "Humans have done and are doing things to one another, to entire populations and cultures—to say nothing of our planet—that it may very well be too late to fix."<sup>5</sup>

And yet, the God we worship and serve is still a God of hope and restoration. And God has given us this congregation, this community of his people, to be a space where we can lament, where we can struggle, where we can weep, and where we can seek healing. That doesn't usually mean a quick fix or easy answers to the injuries we bear. God's work of healing, hope, and restoration is often a long project, filled with moments of discouragement and despondence. But it does mean that our lives, and the life of the world, are still in the hands of the Great Physician, who has shared in our brokenness and has opened the way for us to experience life on the other side of devastation, destruction, and death.

Greg Zanis is a carpenter from Aurora, Illinois, who learned the trade from his father-in-law. In the process the two of them became best friends. In 1996, Greg's father-in-law was the victim of a violent crime and died. Greg sought some way to express his grief and personal sense of loss, so he built an eight-foot wooden cross and planted it at the scene of the crime. This turned out to be just a beginning. From there, Greg built crosses and erected them at the scenes of fatal crimes or accidents. He even constructed crosses standing in honor of the victims at Columbine High School. Zanis's ministry is called "Crosses for Losses." He builds the crosses for families of victims of violent crimes throughout the country and then personally delivers them. Over time he has planted hundreds of these eight-foot-high crosses, as a reminder that in Jesus there is consolation, peace, and grace.<sup>6</sup>

Jeremiah asks, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" (8:22). The area of Gilead, east of the Jordan River, was noted for trading in balm, an aromatic resin that was viewed as having properties that could either ease pain or cover the smell of festering wounds. So when it comes to the hope of healing, Jeremiah is looking in the right place, even though he concludes that God's sick and dying people are beyond hope. This is part of why he weeps, because in this case even Gilead doesn't have what it takes to heal the wound of the people.

But as dire and hopeless as things look, God doesn't ultimately abandon the covenant and forsake his people. The wound of the people and the weeping of the prophet are part of a larger story where lament eventually gives way to renewal, and the Lord's redeeming purposes prevail. So in the midst of our wounds and the world's wounds, it's no wonder that the old African American spiritual still has us singing:

There is a balm in Gilead  
To Make the wounded whole;  
There is a balm in Gilead

To heal the sin-sick soul.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited at Preaching Today. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2020/march/crystals-reality-behind-booming-new-age-healing.html> (September 14, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Tess McClure, "Dark crystals; the brutal reality behind a booming wellness craze." *The Guardian* (September 17, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Anna Marsh, "Life on the Other Side of Catastrophe." *Working Preacher*. September 11, 2022. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/life-on-the-other-side-of-catastrophe> (September 14, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Robert J. Wicks, *Streams of Contentment* (Notre Dame: Sorin, 2011) 60-62.

<sup>5</sup> Marsh, "Life on the Other Side of Catastrophe."

<sup>6</sup> Southern Baptist Convention.net and Douglas B. Skinner, Northway Christian Church, Dallas, Texas.