

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1
Psalm 79:1-9

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Mark Twain once said, "I have never let my schooling interfere with my education." He was full of aphorisms. Aphorisms are those short little expressions of wisdom that often have a witty edge to them.

I recently saw this one on a wall in a waiting room- also by Mark Twain. "The man who carries a cat by the tail, learns something that can be learned in no other way."

I really like, "Golf is a good walk spoiled."

Years ago, when I worked in sales at Xerox corporation, I had a friend who we used to call the word merchant. He had a great command of the English language and an unending supply of aphorisms. He was a modern day Mark Twain.

In meetings where we sat around a table strategizing about how to land an account, if an idea came up he thought wouldn't work he would say, "well that would be like walking into a buzz saw." Which usually steered the conversation in another direction. My friend had been in sales a long time and was quite a seasoned and wise sales rep. So, if a new sales associate made a rookie mistake he'd lament, "yup, walked right into a buzz saw on that one."

My friend had a lot other aphorisms that didn't include buzz saws, but as I mentioned, he was a seasoned sales rep, so few of the others are fit for church!

The people of Judah have walked right into a buzz saw. They have been warned by God through the prophet Jeremiah they need to change their ways. For they have been fixated on worshipping other gods and idols. They have been warned

against this practice. But they did not listen. They picked the cat up by the tail and they now find themselves in the midst of exile-learning that living outside the way of God has consequences.

It is the trauma of exile of which the Psalm laments. In the psalm we hear the voices of those in exile.

¹O God, the nations have come into your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple; they have laid Jerusalem in ruins.

²They have given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the air for food, the flesh of your faithful to the wild animals of the earth.

³They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them.

⁴We have become a taunt to our neighbors, mocked and derided by those around us.

⁹Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and forgive our sins, for your name's sake.

These are words of lament over the situation in which the people of Jerusalem find themselves. It's a mess. It's a mess they got themselves into. One might expect Jeremiah to say, "I tried to warn you. I tried to tell you. I told you so." Or maybe to be ready with "You made your own bed, now lie on it."

But Jeremiah's response to the people is anything but.

Jeremiah 8, beginning with verse 18,

¹⁸My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. ¹⁹Hark, 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.**

Continuing with verse 9: **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!**

The response is not, “Not I told you so”.

Jeremiah, even though he warned them, even though he saw it coming, even though he has been weighed down by the burden of speaking to deaf ears, does not celebrate or admonish. Jeremiah simply joins them in their grief.

He can't fix what has been done. He can't undo it. He can't make it better. He can only be present with them in their grief.

Theologians who wrestle with the original Hebrew structure of this passage wrestle with who is really speaking in this passage. Other versions of the bible don't, but the NRSV version of the Bible puts parenthesis around the words, **“Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?”**

Therefore, some theologians say these are the words of God in this passage of Jeremiah. That in fact, it is God who **“weeps day and night for the slain of my poor people.”**

Theologians ponder whether these are the words of Jeremiah or those of Yahweh, I certainly cannot settle that quandary. And I'm not sure we need to. Because what seems most important is that the people, Jeremiah and God are all in grief together. What has affected the people, has affected Jeremiah. What has affected Jeremiah has affected God. All come together to share in the grief. And as theologian Steed Davidson puts it, to “sit in the circle of pain”- together.

The truth revealed in these scriptures is that even in the midst of the mess we sometimes make for ourselves, ...*God joins us in our pain and suffering.* God is not a vindictive God who seeks to see us suffer. Nor does the Holy One

administer suffering to teach lessons. Life itself, coupled with our own decisions bring lessons on their own.

Rather, the heart of God breaks open with ours in times of grief.

Entering into the grief of another is then a model for us when the ones we love suffer. Sometimes that suffering is self-imposed and when it is, the response of love is not “I told you so”. It is rather to bear the burden of another and to declare in mercy and grace, **“My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick”**. To love another is to accept there will be times when we **“might weep day and night”**.

We do not suffer alone.

There is of course, plenty of suffering which is not self-imposed. Regardless, the faithful response to suffering in the lives of others or even our own life, is to give praise that God is present there too.

“Laugh and the world laughs with you, weep and you weep alone” the saying goes. This may speak truth about the world, but it simply does not apply to God nor the one’s God loves. Our God weeps with us. We do not grieve in isolation.

When those around us are suffering in grief, just being present with them can feel insufficient. We prefer to fix things. We desire to make it better. We want to do something. We want to be able to fix it-especially when it comes to our children and our loved ones. It’s natural.

But there are situations in life we simply cannot fix. See how neither the Psalm nor the Jeremiah passage resolves the suffering.

There are things beyond our control so we trust God that just showing up in the “scatteredness” of grief, in the chaos of suffering is enough.

There are parts of this journey through life where there are no words of wit, no words of wisdom, no aphorism appropriate. All one can say is, "I will weep with you. Day and night, I will weep with you." And it is enough. Amen