

Year C  
Proper 20  
Jeremiah 8:18-9:1  
Psalm 79:1-9  
1 Timothy 2:1-7  
Luke 16:1-13

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

If today were a person's first time entering an Episcopal Church, after hearing today's scripture readings, they could be forgiven for not wanting to come back. Jeremiah's grief-stricken poem, the lamenting psalm, Paul's letter on prayer, and Jesus's deeply ironic parable all combine to set us off balance, and perhaps tip us into gloom. Happy Homecoming Day! If I could have chosen more cheerful lessons for today, I probably would have.

At the same time, one of the wonderful things about the Bible is that it deals with the full breadth of human experience. We see victory and defeat, goodness and evil, joy and sorrow. Our culture tends to brush off grief and lament; we're uncomfortable with it and don't like to dwell on it. So we tend to allow a short time for people's grief, and then we're encouraged to "move on." But the Bible shows us an understanding of human grief that is, really, healthier than what we find in our own culture. It shows a culture that acknowledges and acts on people's grief and despair. People are encouraged to express their negative emotions in words, and tears, and actions that allow that grief to be processed and released.

For instance, Jeremiah's poem is a lament for the situation that God's people find themselves in, due to their rejection of the Lord. Again, and again the people of Judah have worshiped false gods, ignoring the many prophets who have urged them to turn back to the Lord. Now, because of their backsliding, the soldiers of the Babylonian empire is coming to attack them, and transport many of them out of their own country, to forcibly resettle them in Babylonia. This "Babylonian captivity" or "Babylonian exile" is their punishment for being such a "stiff-necked people." And Jeremiah is bewailing this coming fate. He is sometimes referred to as "the weeping prophet," and this poem is a good example of why. "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?" Jeremiah is so grief-stricken at what is coming that he has no joy; even though the people have disobeyed continually and perversely, he is still heartsick at what is coming.

Simultaneously, Jeremiah expresses God's thoughts, because he is God's prophet: "Why have they provoked me to anger with their images,/ with their foreign idols?" The punishment is justified; the people have turned away from God, and then expected God not to care. And Jeremiah doesn't say the people shouldn't be punished—just that he wishes he could sufficiently express his grief at what is coming: "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!” This level of grief, especially in a religious leader, is something we don’t see today. But the Bible is filled with acknowledgements that grief is real, and it needs expression.

You might know that the emotion of grief comes from the most ancient part of our brains. It comes from the same part of the brain that our fight or flight reflex comes from, which means it happens, whether we want it to or not. Grief is real, and has effects on our bodies, whether we realize it or not. Sometimes it’s hard not to realize; I imagine most of us have experienced a wave of grief, that is so overpowering that it stops us in our tracks. But we’ve been taught to cover our grief, or to deny it, or to tell people we’re okay, even when we’re not. The problem is that, because grief is, actually happening, if we deny it, it has physical consequences. It might be something as mild as indigestion, but it also might be an ulcer. Or a migraine, or anxiety attacks. And if you have multiple griefs and traumas piled on top of one another, without dealing with them, it’s even worse. The various writers of the Bible seem to understand that grief needs expression.

The psalm today, for instance, is one of the lament psalms. Until I went to seminary, I didn’t know that there was a category of psalms that dealt with lament, because we so seldom have them as a part of our worship. But they’re there—actually one-third of all the psalms deal with lament. The one we might know best, or at least part of it, is Psalm 22 which begins “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Of course, Jesus said this on the cross, and his religious tradition of honoring and expressing grief gave him exactly the words he wanted as he hung there, dying in agony.

Years ago, there was a young girl who was killed in Winchester in a hit-and-run accident as she was walking to school. One of the other chaplains and I were with the girl’s father, and several of her friends and neighbors in the emergency room that morning. Her father was mostly stunned and silent as people around him grieved his daughter’s death. Eventually, though, he looked at me and said, “why would God let this happen?” and then he put his face in his hands. Remembering the Psalm 22, I quickly pulled it up on my phone, and put it gently into one of his hands. “Is that how you feel?” I asked. He looked at those words in amazement, “this is exactly how I feel!” he said, wept.

Just like in our psalm today, asking God why something has happened, or “How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever?/ Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?” is an understandable reaction to trauma or grief. We are in relationship with God, and God understands our needs even before we voice them. Keep the conversation open by telling God how you feel. Rage at God. Weep at God. Yell at God. God can take it. And your conversation with the Divine is a healthy and biblical response to your situation. Eventually, if you give this conversation a chance, you might get some answers.