

## THE KEY OF LAMENT

Sermon on Jeremiah 20:7-13 & Matthew 10:24-39

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Wow! Both our lesson from Jeremiah and our lesson from Matthew, assigned to be read today in churches throughout the world, do not strike me as easy listening, especially on this first summer Sunday of the year! Rather than sweet summer religion, they sound a chilling note on the cost of faithfully following God's call.

Jeremiah feels trapped between an irresistible force and an immovable object. On the one hand, God has compelled him to speak harsh words of judgment to the people of Judah, especially to the wealthy and powerful politicians and clergy (a group that includes his own family). On the other hand, those to whom he has been compelled to prophesy for years not only do *not* listen to God's word, they mock Jeremiah, denounce him, and actively wish him harm and failure. Jeremiah feels that God has sold him a bill of goods when it comes to being called to be a prophet of the Most High. Some vocation!

And in Matthew, Jesus warns those who wish to follow him that *they* may encounter Jeremiah-like tribulations, and, worse, what Jesus himself is and will be enduring. These are the faithful people of God! We might echo Teresa of Avila, a 16<sup>th</sup> Century mystic, theologian, and spiritual writer who thrust her own bitter lament at God, saying, "If this is the way you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few!"

And yet, in the midst of both readings, we discover a sense of trust in God's steadfast presence in life and in death and in God's ultimate saving power. If we look with reverent fear and awe on the God in whom we find our deepest identity—and only on God, we need not fear those who can hurt or kill just one aspect of our creaturely being. But our compressed scripture language may get to an emphasis on God's faithful care too fast for me—and perhaps for you. How can we trust that assurance?

Slowly, we realize our scriptures recognize that those whom God calls—and we are *all* called in baptism—will not just waft through this world immune to struggle and doubt, despite what some prosperity gospel folks preach. There is no promise of life as a rose garden this side of Jordan. But throughout both Old and New Testaments, we can trace our ancestors in the faith encountering—and Jesus embodying—God's desire to walk with us, to save us, and to make us whole spiritually, even in the midst of the worst the world can throw at us.

We are so familiar with the verses from Matthew about God's eye on the sparrow (and even more so on us) that we lose the jolt of adrenalin that can hit us when we realize that those little sparrows "sold for a penny" end up being *eaten*. Jesus

is saying (in a way that some literalists can misread) that rotten things happen in this might-makes-right world. But God cares—enough to join with us in human form and to point to the *fulfillment* of God’s will, when the values of the world will be upended.

That fulfillment will usher in a time of *real* peace, not the world’s form of peace that so easily takes up the sword when a peasant preacher’s teachings threaten the status quo. That reign of God will be a time when families will NOT turn away from each other because they make an idol of their own authoritarian family structures or because they refuse to see each family member for who he or she is. When God reigns, people will open their arms to the inclusive and loving family Jesus inaugurates and desires, valuing each member. But how *do* we deal now with the hard times in this world? Jeremiah provides a clue.

Only Jeremiah, of all the Hebrew prophets, makes crystal-clear the great personal suffering and cost of following God’s call. Michelangelo recognized this when he painted his distinctive portrait of Jeremiah on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. You can see the prophet’s weary anguish in the portion of the painting copied onto your orders of worship.

Even though I knew that the words of Jeremiah read by Lou today were called a lament, it was not until I felt my head spin at Jeremiah’s lightning changes of mood, within just a few verses, that it fully dawned on me Jeremiah was *not* just a wacky prophet letting it all hang out. Instead, Jeremiah was lancing his emotional wounds, laying on God’s broad shoulders all his deepest anger, hurt, and bitterness; but he was doing so in the faith language and lament pattern of his people.

Jeremiah was so steeped in the singing or praying of Hebrew psalms of lament in worship that he stepped right into their pattern, finding in them a vessel to sail his volcanic emotions to God. Because the Hebrew pattern of lamenting directly to God formed Jeremiah’s spirituality as much as the Hebrew models of praise, he found that adopting that lament pattern brought him the comfort of ancestral community, even when he felt most isolated.

Jeremiah is able to spew out all his rage and hurt and humiliation—aimed at God, at his vocation, and at his opponents. He then follows the classic lament form as he suddenly turns from his catalogue of woes and rediscovers his trust in God’s steadfast presence and strength. This rediscovery comes, paradoxically, as he complains that God will NOT let go of him, however burdensome Jeremiah finds God’s grip. He continues in the lament pattern by asking God directly for what he wishes—vindication, and then he calls for the faithful to praise God who will surely “prevail.” Even as Jeremiah suffers in the present, walking through the steps of lament shows him that God remains with him and anchors him to future hope.

We middle-class and upper-middle-class Americans may find that we drift into the category of fair-weather Christians, focused only on pleasant scriptures, hymns, and practices. While these are important resources, they leave us an incomplete picture of God and God's relationship with us. We learn this to our cost when we run smack into trauma or loss (whether loss of health, of a job, of a relationship, or of a loved one), and we find our partial faith has faltered. Or we find that choosing to follow a clear call from God in our work remains hard and unpleasantly distinct from the world's definition of success—as when a new medical school graduate, laden with debt, feels called to serve in a free clinic in Detroit, to the fury of her parents and the chagrin of her friends.

Reflecting together upon the gritty reality of Jeremiah and the warnings of Jesus *before* we encounter inevitable tough times and choices can deepen and strengthen our faith. And, in Jeremiah, we are given the gift of lament to aid us. The people of God have prayed in the key of lament for centuries and have found a key to renewed hope in lamenting to God, as did their faithful foremothers and forefathers. If we practice singing and praying the laments that lead us to deep trust and praise, we may more easily live into that pattern when we need it. AND we may simultaneously find God knitting us into stronger, more resilient communities and individuals of faith, able to see and respond to God's call to serve God and neighbor, fully aware of both the abundance and the destitution around the corner.

During the school year, I spend time living and working with residents at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven. The residents are church workers, missionaries, or scholars from all over the world who come to OMSC for rest and study. This year, I saw the relevance of today's tough texts come alive in the faces and life stories of several residents. The cost of their discipleship has been terrible, but a sense of God's Spirit both compelling and strengthening them shines through them. Let me share one glimpse with you.

Insar and his wife Uzma, church youth leaders, found their hearts shattered and Uzma's body ripped open last September 22nd when two suicide bombers detonated their weapons, spraying blast shrapnel and ball-bearings through the courtyard of historic All Saints Church in Peshawar, Pakistan. 130 Christians were killed as they gathered after worship, including Insar's mother and Insar and Uzma's children, son Eshan (11) and daughter Naiher (9). Terror, trauma, and unthinkable loss engulfed this young couple because they are Christians in Pakistan, called to God's service in that place and this time.

Insar and Uzma will never "get over" their losses or fully recover from their traumatic experience. The doctors say Uzma will never recover from lingering nerve damage to her left hand and wrist. But the trauma has not continued to paralyze them as it has others. They have screamed and wept and raised their laments to God; and their brothers and sisters in Christ, back home and at OMSC, have listened to them, wept with them, held them, and prayed the

laments and the hopes of our tradition with and for them. Insar and Uzma sought out churches in New Haven where they could pray the Psalms daily—including the Psalms of lament, and where they could partake of Holy Communion, taking into their own bodies the tastes of bread and wine, the body and blood of the God who knows what it is to suffer and who suffers with them. Those ancient prayers and the presence of Christ in Holy Communion and in Christian fellowship have helped carry Insar and Uzma through each long day.

Somehow, my new friends are now following God's call back to Pakistan, back to All Saints Church, to work with the traumatized children of their youth group who survived the bombing—and the parents of those who did not. They are grateful for their respite at OMSC. They face continual threats in their call. Uzma and Insar know what it means to live, like the psalmists, with one foot in lament and one in hope—trusting in the God made known to them in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

The latest news is that Uzma is pregnant.

Thanks be to God. Amen.