



Someone's Crying, Lord

TEXT
Jeremiah 8:18–9:3

October 20, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Jeremiah was a prophet of judgment. He told his people that their community was falling apart. It wasn't something he wanted to say because he loved these people. It's never fun to tell those you love that they are missing the boat. But that was Jeremiah's calling. The truth is, he had to speak judgment because he loved them.

The people knew things were wrong. They did. They even asked themselves, is God no longer in Zion? Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no healing for us?

And yet, when Jeremiah spoke, they thought he was overreacting. Sure, things weren't ideal; but the judgment that Jeremiah predicted, well, it seemed extreme.

I don't know what you think about judgment. Personally, I'm not a big fan. Most folks have grown fatigued of the church spouting judgment. That's why it wouldn't surprise me if you knew some of the Sermon on the Mount, or knew some of the stories that Jesus loved to tell — the good Samaritan, the prodigal son, maybe the sower and the seed. You know the Christmas story, but you probably don't know much about Jeremiah, this

prophet of judgment. We grow weary of judgment.

I was meeting with a woman to discuss the memorial service for her father. He had been a part of this church family for decades. She hadn't been here since the days of Dr. Bob and didn't know me from Adam's house cat, as they say. She was a little anxious about what I would say at her father's service. I told her that her father and I were not strangers; indeed we were friends. And she said, "That's good." But then she let me know her concern. She said, "I just don't want it to be preachy." That was her word. "I don't want it to be *preachy*." She apparently found no irony in saying this to a preacher. But I get it. She was equating preaching with judging. I understand why.

There is too much judgment today. There is too much condemnation today. There is too much speech that only tears down.

Self-righteous judgment is the currency of political speech. And it is far too comfortable, far too often in pulpits.

She said, "I just don't want it to be too *preachy*. Do you understand?"

I said, "Yes, I do. I really do."

Maybe the folks in Jeremiah's day felt the same way. They knew things weren't perfect, but they just didn't want Jeremiah to be too preachy. After all, they were good people. They went to worship. They were doing the best they could do. Why be so dramatic to say things are falling apart?

It didn't sound like God to them. You get that, don't you? God is gracious. God is loving. God loves us — maybe even likes us. So, why would God judge? It just doesn't fit. We don't speak of judgment; we speak grace.

Mrs. Foshee was my elementary school art teacher. I was one of the most promising art students she had ever seen. She told me so. I remember turning in my art projects to her. I always got an A. I surely had real talent because it didn't matter if I spent all period, or just scribbled something out in just a few minutes; it wasn't hard. Just came naturally. She was impressed with my stick figures, or my sculpted clay wiener dog. I got straight A's from Mrs. Foshee. It took a while, maybe a long while, to realize I wasn't any good. But she still gave me A's. Now you might think that is grace; but it wasn't. She gave

me A's because she didn't care. It was just as easy to give an A as it was to give an F. It didn't matter what I did, she would give me an A.

Somewhere we taught ourselves that the opposite of grace is judgment. That's not true. Do you know what the opposite of grace is? Apathy.

One thing the prophets make clear: There is no apathy in God. The prophets speak judgment — not because God has turned against us, but because God can't let go of us. So, God's judgment is not ultimately an expression of divine anger; it is an expression of divine grief.

Scholars call this portion of Jeremiah a lament. *My joy is gone. Grief is upon me. I hurt for the hurt of my poor people.* The words betray Jeremiah's broken heart. He grieves what is happening with God's people

What was his concern exactly? Jeremiah knew that Jewish Kings Jehoiakim and Zedekiah were making horrible foreign policy decisions, and the people would suffer. Jeremiah knew that Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar had national security concerns, and the people would suffer.

But the real problem was the people themselves. "You don't know God anymore." When you forget about God, there are consequences.

We know about consequences. Sometimes consequences are imposed on us from outside, like when you are caught going 40 in a 25 mph zone, there can be consequences, so I have been told. But more often, consequences

are just the natural result of unfaithfulness.

When my son Nathan was young, he loved Raisin Nut Bran. Even today when he comes home, a box will last two days at the most. Well, one day before school, he decided that he wanted to spice up his cereal, and he asked for ketchup. I asked, "Why do you want ketchup?"

"I want to put some on my Raisin Nut Bran."

"Oh Nathan, you don't want to do that."

"Yes, I do."

"It won't taste good, trust me, you won't like it."

"Yes, I will."

I said, "Nathan if you put ketchup on your cereal, I'm not going to pour you another bowl. This is breakfast today. If you ruin your breakfast, you are either going to have to eat it anyway or go without."

In the long-established tradition of sons rejecting the wisdom of their fathers, he poured ketchup on his Raisin Nut Bran. He took one bite and said, "This is yucky."

I said, "Enjoy your breakfast."

Judgment is like that. It is the unavoidable consequence of unfaithfulness.

Jeremiah says, *Why are you not concerned about the poor? Why are you not concerned about injustice in the courts? Why are you not concerned about the violence in the community?*

They said, *Oh Jeremiah, we are, but don't overreact. This is the way things are.* What the

prophets protest is our all too common temptation to normalize that which dehumanizes.

I don't know if it was the pain of the weak or the apathy of the strong that was harder for God to take, but the unfaithfulness left the prophet broken-hearted. And it seems, it wasn't just Jeremiah who wept. It was also God.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel says, the prophets were profoundly sensitive to those who suffer, and they were mystified that it didn't bother everyone. The prophets saw that we normalized the things that were destroying us. Somewhere along the way, we learned to normalize injustice. We learned to normalize poverty. We learned to normalize dishonesty. We learned to normalize selfishness.

We normalize that which dehumanizes. And the prophets asked, *Why doesn't that bother you?*

There have been over 120 murders in Kansas City so far in 2019. I can't imagine a circumstance where God would be okay with that. Storms and fires and climate refugees are news stories almost every week, as the earth warms. I can't imagine the grief God has as she watches the world she made get sicker and sicker.

Our youth are stressed, and it shows up in loneliness, anxiety, even self-harm. I can only imagine it is breaking God's heart.

Jeremiah tells us when we normalize that which breaks God's heart, there will be consequences to us, sometimes to our

children and to our community. Judgment comes not because God lets go of us, but because God can't. Jeremiah speaks of God's tears.

I was in ninth grade at Lakeside High School in Atlanta. I got a D in English. This is one of my early memories of judgment. My father walked into my bedroom with my report card in his hand, and he said, "There is no reason in the world you should have a D in English. Now there are some kids who may be doing the best they can, but for you, there is no excuse. So, you have lost your right to choose when you will do your homework. It comes first. And in addition to the homework your teacher gives you, you are going to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* and talk to me about it every Sunday evening.

I said, "That's not fair. You preach about grace every week. Where's the grace?"

He handed me the book and said, "Might as well get started now."

I looked at him, and he wasn't angry. It was much worse. He was disappointed.

There is no apathy in God. The judgment of God comes because God can't let go of us, or won't let go of us. So, sometimes we disappoint the God who loves us. And I imagine God has more than once wondered if she should just let us go. But then the tears come, and God knows there is no way to let go of this people, God's own people.

So, with a tear-stained face, God sends folks like Jeremiah to

warn us against normalizing that which dehumanizes — because it brings consequences to us, and it breaks God's heart.

Jeremiah spoke judgment, but only because sometimes that is what love requires. And it is this form of love that is the balm that heals a sin-sick soul. This is the balm that heals a wounded community.

Through Jeremiah, we see that God finds herself inescapably vulnerable to the suffering of God's people and of God's creation. So, with one hand God is holding on to the fractured pieces of her broken heart, and with the other God is holding on to us.

That is the best image of what judgment looks like that I know.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.