

A LAMENT AND A LONGING FOR HEALING

Jeremiah 8:18-22

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(online worship only)

The prophet Jeremiah has a pretty miserable job. He is God's spokesperson during the time when the people of Israel are being conquered and taken into exile. Think of his role as a combination of a presidential press secretary and a parent delivering a stern lecture. The people cry and complain to Jeremiah, "Why is God doing this to us?" "Why are so many terrible things happening?" "Why isn't God intervening to stop our suffering?" Jeremiah stands at that podium and listens to one question after the other, each person louder than the next; they all interrupt each other. When he finally gets to speak, he reminds the people that they still need to obey God's commandments. They haven't been taking care of each other; they haven't been nurturing their relationships with God. They've forgotten to put God at the center of their lives. It's a hard message to deliver in the best of times. But who wants to be lectured when you're already suffering?

The book of Jeremiah, the longest of the prophetic books in the Bible, features this kind of back-and-forth conversation. It has been called

disaster literature AND survival literature. It is a **survival guide for suffering people**. In the book of Jeremiah, many people are taken into exile, forced to leave their homeland, but Jeremiah imagines a future beyond destruction. **God shapes new beginnings from the ruins of fallen worlds.**

At the same time, Jeremiah continues to remind the people of their covenant relationship with God. The prophet urges God's people to practice social justice, faithfulness, and compassion, especially on behalf of the most vulnerable in society.

Our passage begins not in the voice of the presidential press secretary, but in the voice of a parent who feels the pain of her children: "No healing, only grief, my heart is broken." In other words, "I know how bad things are for you right now. **I feel it with you.**" Many biblical scholars believe that not only are these words of empathy coming from Jeremiah, they are coming from God, who speaks through the prophet. This is God's heart, broken along with those of the people God loves.

The people haven't been perfect, but that's not the point in this passage. They're in pain. They're desperately homesick. Not homesick the way you are when you're at camp for a week, not homesick like a college freshman during her first quarter. Rather, homesick like a refugee

who had no choice but to leave everything behind and get on a boat, knowing he might not survive the trip, but he definitely wouldn't survive if he'd stayed, and he knows he might not ever see his country again. The people of Israel were forced to leave Jerusalem, forced to leave the temple, the place where they felt the presence of God. To them, their land and their God were almost one and the same. How can they worship in a foreign land? Is that even possible? When will they return? Will they ever? This is the source of their pain. They've lost control over their own lives; their power and agency have been taken away from them.

And so they cry out. The biblical word for this kind of complaint is "lament." They name what they've lost. They ask for what they need.

Jeremiah responds, "You're right; things are bad right now." And he joins in the lament. Gilead is a region that was known as a place of healing and medical care, a place you could go to find ointments and herbal remedies. Jeremiah says, "Isn't there anything in Gilead that could help us? Any ointment? Any balm? Any doctors? Why haven't we been healed yet?"

This phrase, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" is left as a question in the mouth of Jeremiah, but when it develops into an African-American spiritual, it becomes an affirmation. "There **is** a balm in Gilead. There is a balm in

Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul. If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus whose love is for us all.” The balm of Gilead is **love**. The words of the spiritual declare that love is the source of all healing. A slave-owner could dictate almost everything about a slave’s life, but he could not determine the content of a slave’s mind or heart. What one chooses to think, who one chooses to love, that is an inner freedom no one could take away. It was the one thing a slave could own and control, and it was worth singing about. We have found the balm of Gilead, the spiritual proclaims, and its name is love.

During this season of Lent, we are naming our desires to be healed. To be healed from physical pain, from isolation, and loneliness. To be healed from the habits that we know lead us away from God and the life God intends for us: habits like selfishness, greed, blame. We long to be healed from all forms of bigotry.

In a human body, healing is the process by which cells regenerate and repair to reduce the size of a damaged or dying area. Healing incorporates both the removal of dying tissue and its replacement with new tissue. Healing occurs when the dead areas of our lives are replaced with

vital, living tissue. Regeneration and repair take place in order to bring a living organism back into balance.

So healing begins when we acknowledge those areas of our lives that are in need of repair. Perhaps we call it lament. And then we ready ourselves for renewal. It is the work of Lent. The discarding of what no longer serves us or God, and the preparing of ourselves for new life.

The source of all healing is love.

Some of you may know the author, John Green. He's written several best-selling young adult books, including [The Fault in Our Stars](#), which also became a popular movie. Green lives with a diagnosis of severe anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder. He says that if you're living with a chronic illness, as he is, the people who are most helpful to you are the people who care for you and love you and who know you're not going to magically get better. He talks about the difference between the desire to be cured and the desire to be healed, saying this: "When we pray for cure, we're praying for something that's not going to happen, for an erasure, for things to go back to the way they were. When we pray for **healing**, we're praying for **peace**, we're praying for **connection**." People who live with chronic illnesses long for people in their lives who accept them, and who know that things can't always be fixed. In that love is a kind of healing.

John Green has a vitally important message for all of us to hear: **“the vast majority of mental illness is treatable, and people live full and rich lives while also having chronic mental health problems. I am evidence of that. I’ve had serious mental health problems for most of my adult life. I also have a really good life,** and I think that story is common among people with chronic mental health problems.”

Healing, then, looks like love and acceptance. Healing comes when people stay by your side, knowing they can’t take away your pain, but they will not abandon you either. They will accompany you through it.

This is David Fajgenbaum. When I first heard his story, I had trouble believing all that he has faced and accomplished in his lifetime. When he was 19 years old, he was on top of the world. He was a freshman in college, a quarterback for Georgetown University and in such great physical condition that he was winning bench press competitions. He’d only been at school a couple of weeks when his mom was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumor, and she died shortly thereafter. He made two decisions at that time. First, he would start a grief support group for college students, and second - he would go to medical school and do whatever he could to find a cure for cancer. He started that grief support group - it is now a national network of support for grieving young adults.

He also made it to med school. In fact, at the age of 34, he has two master's degrees and his medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania. But while he was in med school, he became very ill himself with a disease that came on suddenly. He knew something was wrong, but he wanted to finish that semester's exams. He took his final exam then walked himself to the ER. They took one look at him, ran a series of tests and said, "David, your liver, your kidneys, your bone marrow and your lungs are shutting down. We have to hospitalize you right away." And within a couple of days, he became critically ill. He had a retinal hemorrhage that made him blind in my one eye. He gained 70 pounds of fluid due to liver and kidney failure, and he needed a feeding tube. He required daily transfusions to keep him alive, all with no diagnosis. David was kept alive for 11 weeks, and then finally given last rites. 48 hours later, finally, an answer. A diagnosis of a rare disease known as Castleman's. A decision to try chemo. And gradually, success, and a return to health. He now runs a research lab that works on treatment for Castleman's, other immune disorders, and currently is working on COVID.

It's obvious that David Fajgenbaum is brilliant and understands the science of how he got well. But he credits something more to his recovery, too. As he was lying on his hospital bed, tubes everywhere, he thought

about the girlfriend with whom he'd decided to reunite. From the depths of his illness, he reconnected with her, telling her that ending their relationship was his biggest life regret. They decided to marry, and thinking about that possibility gave him hope. He says that he felt **pulled into the future, pulled into hope by the sheer force of love.**

There is a balm in Gilead. Its healing property is love. Sometimes, when love and science collide in the best possible ways, as in David Fajgenbaum's case, it actually leads to cures. Most often, healing looks like it does for John Green. Most often, healing looks like an acknowledgement that not everything can be fixed, but wholeness can be found anyway.

When we suffer, God feels our suffering; God's heart breaking along with ours as Jeremiah poignantly describes. God doesn't usually take away people's pain, but God never stops the flow of love. And love ends up being stronger than the pain, making the pain more bearable, reminding us that **nothing can separate us from God, from love, from those two forces which combine together and give our life its joy, its meaning, its hope.**

Let us pray. Holy God, we offer up to you our prayers for healing during this Lenten season. Even as we long for our own healing, may we

also be conduits of your healing love, offering acceptance and the gift of presence to those we know who are hurting. In Jesus' name. Amen.