

“We Are Being Taken Care of....”

Sermon Notes/Outline

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We are still in the world of Jeremiah. The first reading is from Lamentations. A Book of the Hebrew Bible that is said to have been written by Jeremiah – although no one is quite sure that is so. The tradition is that in 586/7 B.C., during and after the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah retreated to a cave and wrote this intense book of the reflection of pain, disappointment, and despair. Hardly understanding what was going on – or why things had come to this and such punishment – the writer never totally gives up on God. In fact, it is God who gets the writer through.

There are times when retreat to a cave seems like a good idea. For me, I usually think of escaping to a mountaintop – far away from everything and everyone. Sometimes the demands, conditions, situation, events, and seemingly inevitable prospects for more of the same make me want to shake the sand from my shoes and head off into the distance.

I actually think that's a good & healthy response. Sometimes *it* calls for time away, just as Jesus frequently sought time away. Deserts and mountaintops are not highly populated areas, generally. Places Jesus, himself, frequented. It seems that his actions and words call us to such solitude, reflection, and prayer – if his example is to be taken seriously.

Still, at other times, events are simply so wrong, bizarre, hurtful that if we didn't initially feel like running away – there probably would be something wrong with us.

That “flight” is a very human reaction, frequently described in the first of the 5 stages of grief:

Denial and Isolation.

At first, we tend to deny the loss has taken place, and may withdraw from our usual social contacts. This stage may last a few moments, or longer.

Anger.

The grieving person may then be furious at the person who inflicted the hurt (even if she's dead), or at the world, for letting it happen. He may be angry with himself for letting the event take place, even if, realistically, nothing could have stopped it.

Bargaining.

Now the grieving person may make bargains with God, asking, "If I do this, will you take away the loss?"

Depression.

The person feels numb, although anger and sadness may remain underneath.

Acceptance.

This is when the anger, sadness and mourning have tapered off. The person simply accepts the reality of the loss.

Yet, these things, these processes do not happen in a void. They happen within us, mingled, supported, challenged by all the experiences we have gone through at other times in our lives, and for many of us – under girded in the belief, the sense, even that fact that we are being taken care of. God is in our life and with us through these stages and everything else.

Even Jeremiah or the author of laments says this:

“Because of God’s great love, we are not consumed, for God’s compassions never fail”...

And as if to acknowledge that it all may not happen quickly:

“It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of God.”

Still, the healing requires more than solitude and quiet reflection. I can be quiet and calm inside – centered – but it doesn’t mean I have given up on action. It is true that sometimes the hardest thing is not to react from a place of noise inside – impulsively, angrily – to forget to take actions from a place of quiet, thoughtful resolve.

I saw that this week, on the train...

Then I experienced the opposite...

It is between those two places I find myself, all the time: the quiet, thoughtful, reflective person Paul talks about in his letter to Timothy, when he says:

“I couldn’t be more sure of my ground – the One I’ve trusted in can take care of what he’s trusted me to do right to the end.”

And the reactive, angeriness that can easily creep into my life and behavior over the simplest of things. There’s an expression that “it’s not the big things that get us to the edge, but the broken shoelaces...”

Still, I have come to believe that outrage, the kind in which Jesus turned over the tables, that kind of outrage is not to be avoided when called for. And, I am there again over the senseless suicide of Tyler Clementi, someone harassed and embarrassed because he was gay and lived in a society where the lack of acceptance is still enough to drive some to the ultimate tragedy of taking one's own life. This is church work that has failed in my opinion.

After Matthew Shepherd I thought for sure we'd come to our senses. Instead, we've made peoples' lives an issue, objectifying them until they are like objects, won or lost, life goes on. You will find in the bulletin on page twelve more examples in just the last month of how we have gone wrong.

And it outrages me, as well it should. I want everyone to feel the hurt and tragedy, captured by W.H. Auden in "Funeral Blues"

"Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.
Let the aeroplanes circle, moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message 'He is Dead'.
Put crepe bows 'round the white necks of the public doves,
Let traffic policemen wear black, cotton gloves.
He was my North, my South, my East, and West.
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever:
I was wrong.
The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good."

That's what I want. Everyone to feel that loss and connection for what is taking place in the lives of others in the prejudice and bigotry of this world. To reach that low place of desolate isolation, to touch the core of our humanity together where there is nothing else to save us, save the love of God. And from there rebuild our relationships with one another and with God. Maybe if we all got to that place...we could rebuild anew.

It is what I think we are charged with...

Paul to Timothy...

“God does not want us to be shy with the gifts we’ve been given, but bold and loving and sensible. So don’t be embarrassed to speak up...we can only keep going, after all, by the power of God, who first saved us and then called us to this holy work.”

It’s somewhere in those words or others like them, in your company or others like you that I come back, so to speak, come down off the mountain and out of the cave to keep going, up from the depths of sadness - knowing that God is taking care of us. That no matter what the difficulty or suffering, we know Jesus suffered even more and kept going. And we believe that God is not a distant cool God, but a compassionate and loving God – and so God suffers with us and then gives us what we need to go on.

And back we return to hope...

And we do. We cry, we laugh, we agree, we argue – we get it right, get it wrong – we lament and we celebrate – and we go on, because the journey is leading us ever closer to God – and when all is said and done, that closeness has always been enough and always will be. It is the embodiment of hope, in all its promise.

To close with the words of Paul:

“So keep at your work, this faith and love rooted in Christ, exactly as I set it out for you. It’s as sound as the day you first heard it from me, Guard this precious thing placed in your custody by the Holy Spirit who works in us.”

And in my words, know that we are being taken care of.

So, as we come to the table, let us come together and break bread together in remembrance of the one who leads us and cares for us today and always.

And let it embolden us to a love that refuses to accept what is...