

LEARNING TO WALK IN THE DARK

Weary to the Bone

Jeremiah 20:7-13

March 9, 2025

I was seven, maybe eight, years old. I can't remember the precise circumstances surrounding the event, but I had been sent to my room. In my mind, I was the subject of unjust persecution. I slammed the door and locked it. I was crying angry tears, and right then and there, I decided to resort to extreme measures. You see, I had recently learned that there were words (I had a partial list) you were not allowed to say. In fact, there were words that God commanded you not to say. But where was God when my parents acted in such an unfair way? I got into my bed, I covered my head with blankets, and I said directly into my pillow, "Heck." I paused, anticipating divine punishment, but none came. So, I upped the ante, whispering this time, "Hell." There was a knock at my door. I prepared myself for utter obliteration. But the visitor at my door was not God, just my dad coming to explain the consequences of my action. I still can feel the relief that washed over me.

Have you ever been so frustrated, so exhausted, so exasperated, that you said something you weren't sure you were allowed to say? Maybe even to God? In this morning's scripture text, the prophet Jeremiah goes there. *Oh God, how could you? You tricked me into this. You never said it would be this hard.*

Now, how can Jeremiah talk to God, the Sovereign Lord, the Righteous Judge, the Creator of the Universe... How can Jeremiah talk to God like this?

To understand, you have to go back to the beginning. Jeremiah's story starts with the voice of God spoken to a child.

Before you were born, I anointed you, I appointed you a prophet. Now, child, I have put my words in your mouth. Today, I appoint you over nations and kingdoms: to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.

And with that, the young prophet is sent into the world to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. This may sound simple. But wait—there's more! What Jeremiah must declare is divine judgment.

Divine judgment against corrupt leadership, against religious hypocrisy, against societal injustice and inequity. In the waning years of the kingdom of Judah, Jeremiah confronts both King and Council with the message:

You will soon reap what you have sown. Your fragile nation will be undermined by idolatry of power and failure of compassion for the weak. Eventually you will be overtaken by King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian Empire.

Jeremiah does not hold back. He speaks it in the public square. He preaches it in the Temple. He tells the truth to anyone who will listen. He proclaims God's displeasure and describes the consequences that are surely coming. Exile is on the horizon.

And so, the prophet does just as God commanded. *I have put my words in your mouth. I appoint you over nations and kingdoms.* Well, it goes about how you might expect.

Jeremiah is dismissed and then condemned by religious officials. He is publicly beaten and placed in stocks. He is denounced by false prophets who insist on smooth lies over difficult truths. He is threatened with death. He is viewed as a traitor to the nation he loves. All of this for speaking God's word and pleading with the powerful to change their ways—to return to God with their hearts.

Jeremiah is sometimes called the weeping prophet. In this morning's text, we meet him in a place of utter exasperation. Today's tears come from a place of anger. The man is stuck between an insistent God and a resistant people. He is ready to give up. But first, he lets God have it. *You enticed me, and I was enticed. You overpowered me, and you prevailed. And because of that, I have become a joke to my people.*

How can you talk to God like that?

It was the kind of conversation that takes place whenever a group of pastors gathers around cups of coffee to commiserate

and encourage each other. We were discussing a recent study which ranks the nine leadership positions that impose the greatest stress on those who pursue them. Pastors landed at number five, neatly situated between coaches and mayors. To relieve the suspense and save you a search, number one: stay-at-home parents. Can I get an amen to that?

In time, the conversation shifted to the unique burdens of ministry in recent years. The dramatic, sudden shifts required by unprecedented times. The contradictory, competing, and yet equally compelling forces of secularization on the one hand and sectarianism on the other. The unrelenting drumbeat of practical and pastoral crises. And, perhaps most disheartening of all, the evaporation of civility and flood of extremism that increasingly characterize our culture and, yes, even our congregations. The meanness of it all. Every pastor in the group had been the recipient of hostile responses to words delivered from the pulpit. *Stay in your lane, Preacher*. Many had concluded that congregants come seeking only affirmation, not challenge—expecting to have their own perspectives echoed rather than challenged and shaped by scripture. One pastor voiced his consternation this way. He said, “These days, sometimes, my prayers sound more like arguments with God. I gave my life to this call, but I never expected this.”

Oh Lord, you enticed me, and I was enticed.

The tension is real. Do we risk rejection? Do we hold back? Do we speak up?

No wonder Jeremiah is upset. God called. He answered. And they refuse to listen. Following God's command, Jeremiah speaks words of dire warning. The nation mocks him, ridicules him. The leaders seek to silence and sideline him. We meet the prophet at a crossroads. We hear a window into the wrestling match in Jeremiah's heart. Tricked by God, rejected by the people, endangered by the authorities. He's considering calling it quits.

But he can't do it. For me, the most moving moment comes in verse nine, when Jeremiah dares to imagine what would happen if he gave up. He asks aloud, “What if I just stop mentioning the name of God? What if I just stop speaking in God's name?” Answer: “there is something like a burning fire in my bones. I grow weary from holding it in. I cannot do it.”

There is something within the prophet that will not let him abandon God's word, no matter the consequence. He will not lie. He will not endorse idolatry or pander to power. Come what may, Jeremiah will follow the One who has called him. He will say what must be said.

Reading this passage again, I was struck by something I had never noticed before. Jeremiah is weary, and at first glance, I assumed the weariness is from this struggle—from the mockery, the threats, the rejection, the close friends around him begging him to shut it up. But that's not quite right. Read it closely. His exhaustion does not come from speaking out, but from holding back. The real burden is suppression. The real cost comes from forced silence.

Holding back is precisely what others want Jeremiah to do. *Stay in your lane, Prophet!* They want him to go along with injustice, to turn his eyes from oppression, to accept lies as truth, to silence God's voice, to amplify the propaganda of the King. But such silencing will not obviate exile. God's judgment is not thwarted by our determined denial. Jeremiah's people will face the consequences. As Robert Frost wrote, “the only way around is through.”

And so, Lent begins...in ashes. We start this season by acknowledging what is broken instead of pretending all is right. Jeremiah's honesty with God models for us the spiritual discipline of truth-telling. This season calls us to carefully examine where we've held back God's truth, where we've chosen comfortable silence over holy speech. In these forty days, mirroring Jesus' wilderness journey, we will strip away pretense and confront the darkness around us and within us. Like Jeremiah, we might find ourselves weary, caught between the call of God and the resistance of the world. But let me suggest that it is precisely in this tension that transformation begins.

Lent is a deeply personal season, a time for serious soul-searching. When the conversation is just between you and God, it does no good to pretend or posture. Better to confess the ways we've chosen comfort over conviction. Better to examine our complicity in systems that cause harm. Better to stand firm and speak truth. Jeremiah's witness reminds us that holding back God's word will create a deeper weariness in us. There is a fire in our bones. The prophet will keep speaking truth about the abuse of power, the hypocrisy of the religious, the idolatry and injustice

of his people because he must. It is the only remedy for weariness. It is the only way to awaken the conscience of his people, to stir within them a moral courage grown dim and gone dormant.

This morning's sermon title is actually drawn from two texts. The first, of course, is Jeremiah. Centuries later, another poet captured a prophet's weariness. Paul Simon's "American Tune," written at a time of national crisis, echoes the exhaustion of truth-tellers throughout history this way:

Many's the time I've been mistaken
 And many times confused
 Yes, and I've often felt forsaken
 And certainly misused
 Oh, but I'm alright, I'm alright
 I'm just weary to my bones

If you've heard the song, you know the mournful tenderness the music evokes. There's a reason for that. This melody carries a long history. Not an "American" tune. It echoes through time, popularized in Bach's great Passion Chorale, later given lyrics we will sing this season:

O sacred Head, now wounded,
 with grief and shame weighed down,
 now scornfully surrounded
 with thorns, Thine only crown;
 O sacred Head, what glory,
 what bliss till now was Thine!
 Yet, though despised and gory,
 I joy to call Thee mine.

How can we speak of God like this? With grief and shame. Weighed down. A crown of thorns. Ridicule and scorn. Because like the prophet, we must tell the truth. The world is weary to its core. You see, the message of the cross echoes across the ages. Grace and mercy mocked by those who would tear it all down to reap the benefits of collective pain. The vulnerable stripped of security and sustenance. The sacred wounded and weighed down.

So, Jeremiah persists in his prophetic proclamation. He tells the truth. And, in time, his vision moves from exile to homecoming, from despair to hope. Just after this morning's passage, the prophet is commanded to go and buy a field in land that will soon be occupied by the Babylonians, to buy a field in hostile territory.

A terrible investment if the future is only despair. But Jeremiah sees something else.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with my people. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God. They will be my people.

How can Jeremiah speak like this? The promise makes his truth-telling possible. A new covenant is coming. Not written on stone tablets, but engraved on the hearts of the people. In our weary bones. The dark road of Lent will lead to a new dawn. The poet William Cullen Bryant captures it, "Truth, crushed to earth, will rise again."

A few weeks ago, after worship, one of you came up to me with some feedback. (Always grateful for that!) "Well, Pastor!" I braced myself. "Your sermons make me uncomfortable. I don't always like what you say." (Deep breath). "And that's why I need to be here. So, thank you... I guess."

Beloved, I urge you to embrace some sacred discomfort. It's the only way we will learn to walk in the dark. You see, the way is not always clear, but we will never walk by ourselves. The God who called Jeremiah, the God who took on the shame of the cross, calls us to courageous witness. And if we are faithful, and if we follow the God of our weary hearts, the fire in our bones will light the way ahead. Amen.