

Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 21, 2021, Daniel Garner Tate
Jeremiah 31:31-34, Hebrews 5:5-10, John 12:20-33, Psalm 51:1-13

God, please bless us this day and help us. Amen.

Why was Jeremiah called the weeping prophet? Jeremiah's job was to warn Israel of their coming destruction because they worshiped other Gods' and burned their own children as sacrificial offerings (19:5). He didn't want to be a prophet when God called him. He said he was too young. God basically said to Jeremiah, I am making you a prophet and I will put my words in your mouth, and from that point on Jeremiah without saying yes, does whatever God says. There are times in the book where it is hard to tell who is speaking, God or Jeremiah. Sometimes when I read Jeremiah, it seems like God has possessed him.

For forty years he spoke, but Israel didn't want to hear what Jeremiah or God had to say. Jeremiah was isolated and alone. He was not allowed to marry (Jeremiah 16:2). His family turned against him and tried to kill him (Jeremiah 1:8, 11:21-23, 12:6). His friends abandoned him (20:10). He was put in the stocks, whipped (20:1-3), attacked by mobs (26:1-9), threatened (36:26), ridiculed (28), arrested, beaten, accused of treason, thrown in jail (37:1-15), and thrown in an empty well (38:1-6). Among other things. He felt abandoned by God. (Lamentations 1:16)

He suffered so much personally and for his people, he wished he had never been born (20:14-18). He foresaw and then witnessed his people scattered, and the destruction of Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple, the place where God dwelled.

In Chapter 9 KJV he says, "Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" (9.1)

In Chapter 13 Jeremiah says, "But if ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret places for your pride; and mine eye shall weep sore, and run down with tears, because the LORD'S flock is carried away captive." (Jeremiah 13:17, KJV)

In Lamentations he says, "For these things I weep; mine eye, mine eye runneth down with water, because the comforter that should relieve my soul is far from me: my children are desolate, because the enemy prevailed." (Lamentations 1:16, KJV)

This is why Jeremiah is called the weeping prophet.

The book of Jeremiah chronicles the dark themes of endings, death, loss, and grief that lurk behind today's scriptures.

Psalm 51, attributed to David, is an expression of remorse, and guilt, and begging for forgiveness after his likely having raped Bathsheba and murdered her husband Uriah.

In the Gospel reading from John, Jesus, when told by the disciples that some Greeks wanted to see him, he suddenly starts talking mysteriously about up his coming death, in the form of a short parable. "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." It's as if he is suddenly reminded, while everyone is celebrating him at the festival, of his ultimate mission, to suffer like the rest of us and die.

But these scriptures mark a transition for us in Lent. There is hope for the future. Yes, Jesus is going to die, but he is going to resurrect, his action will bear much fruit and transform the condition of the world. His message of salvation and eternal life is for everyone in the world in addition to the Jews.

Much of the book of Jeremiah is a lamentation, about loss, suffering and grief, but as is shown in our reading today, also has expressions of hope and promise for the future. “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” “I will put my law within them, and I will write it in their hearts.” This is the answer to the problem of the temple having been destroyed. Now, the temple of God will be in the people’s hearts, in our hearts. No need for a physical temple. There is a new covenant.

The Psalmist begs God to “create in him a clean heart, and to blot out all his iniquities.” God in Jeremiah says, “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

There are parallels today with us in our country as it was with the Israelites in Jeremiah’s day. The Israelites sacrificed their children to other gods, and I wonder if we haven’t been sacrificing our own children to the gods of patriotism, isolationism, selfishness, and greed. One out of six of all children living in this country live in poverty.¹ A child living in poverty is more likely to grow up with health problems, or to have little or poor education, and as a result live in poverty the rest of their lives. During the last administration, children were separated from their families and put in cages after trying to cross our southern border looking for a better life. This was a moral failure, if not an act of evil.

Regarding global warming, prophets everywhere have been warning of climate disaster if the governments of the world don’t exercise the will to act. Not everyone is listening.

During the last several years, hate speech and racial violence has increased. Another racially motivated mass murder was committed last week in Atlanta. Acts of domestic violence and child abuse have increased 8% in the United States during the pandemic.² During the last year, 2.7 million people across the world have been lost to the virus. Each day still, thousands more are dying. We still have to keep socially distanced from each other. This is especially difficult for those who live alone or who are single. Many have not touched or hugged anyone for over a year, including myself. This cannot be good for our health, this not touching each other or being in physical community. We are social beings. In order to prevent possible outbreaks of the virus, families and friends have not been able to visit in person their sick or dying loved ones in the hospital.

But the country is in a period of hopeful transition. After the murders in Atlanta last week, the new president and vice president, instead of raising racial tensions, or making excuses, vowed to do whatever they could to address racial violence and work for solutions. We have a vaccine for the virus now, and a government that is working more efficiently to distribute it.

¹ [https://www.childrensdefense.org/policy/resources/soac-2020-child-poverty/#:~:text=The%20child%20poverty%20rate%20\(16,and%20older%20\(10%20percent\).](https://www.childrensdefense.org/policy/resources/soac-2020-child-poverty/#:~:text=The%20child%20poverty%20rate%20(16,and%20older%20(10%20percent).)

² <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/domestic-violence-covid-19-increase-us-ncccj-study/>
<https://www.medpagetoday.com/special-reports/exclusives/90394>

There is even talk of helping those outside our borders, to send vaccines to other countries. Hospitals are starting to loosen up their visiting policies. Some schools are letting kids back into classrooms for in person teaching. A stimulus bill passed last week, which will hopefully speed up recovery from the pandemic, and boost the economy. Because of it, the child poverty rate could be cut by almost half.³

But there is a long way to go. The stimulus bill is not enough, and there were many who opposed it. Write congress and ask for the help you want for what you want to have changed in our society. If you have plenty, donate to a cause you believe in. Or, if you don't, volunteer your time. Pray as Jeremiah, David and Jesus did. Pray without ceasing.

It is good to take time out during this Lenten period, to grieve, to mourn our losses, to ask forgiveness for our failings, and our sins, known and unknown. But it is also good to look forward to the future with hope, to let go of grief, to be forgiven, and to forget.

Even Jeremiah, the weeping prophet had words of hope and promise. Another verse from Jeremiah, "This is what the Lord says: "Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded," declares the Lord (Jeremiah 31:16) At the same time, we don't have to do anything. Jesus, through grace, gives us everything, even resurrection and eternal life.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/07/us/politics/child-tax-credit-stimulus.amp.html>