

Psalm 25:3-5 Show me your ways, O LORD, and teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; in you have I trusted all the day long. Remember, O LORD, your compassion and love, for they are from everlasting.
(48)

Introduction

Exceptional grief and sorrow don't last forever. I remember a couple of years ago, around this time, that I entered into a period of marrow-deep sadness. At the end of 2019, a few negative external events collided with an already present sorrow blended with grief abiding in my soul, and then I was swept into the deep waters of sadness. While I was functional—the gift of being a detached observer—I felt the pain when I was alone. Then, as 2019 turned 2020 and 2020 let down its mask revealing itself for the virus laden threat to human existence that it was, I was further pushed into the depths of those deep waters, feeling as if I was just barely keeping above the threatening abyss opened below me.

One chilly afternoon in the middle of a deep south Louisianan winter, I sat on a couch in my therapist's office expressing my pain through tears, she told me, *this intensity of emotional pain only lasts for 45 minutes; if you can make it through 45 minutes, it will alleviate. Your body and mind and soul know they can only handle so much.* I trusted her. So, the next time I felt the suction into darkness and pain, instead of trying to numb or run from it, I just sat there in and with it like a blanket draped over me—the intensity of sorrow and grief washing over me, and then, like she said, it would lift. It would not lift completely, but it lifted just enough for me to catch a breath, stretch, fall asleep, care for my kids, and sometimes even laugh and see beauty in what was before me and with me.

Nothing excruciating lasts forever. It can feel like excruciatingly painful moments and events last forever, but they don't. Even in the deepest and most profound sorrow, things will lighten up emotionally. Even in the scariest moments, that fear will lighten up. Rage will dissipate. Even extreme bliss and happiness will mellow. (This is why there's caution against chasing the dragon of "happiness"; you cannot sustain such an eternal and infinite sensation; it's why it's okay to be "okay.") While it's probably easier for most of us to climb down from extreme happiness than climb out of extreme sorrow, it's nice to know extreme sorrow and grief do not linger forever.

Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Our First Testament reading is from the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah is the weeping and suffering prophet. The words of Jeremiah's prophecies tell of a soul who felt incredible pain, felt the threat of doom, the urgency of repentance because he felt the tremors and the footfalls of divine presence drawing nigh and with it, divine judgment; but nothing he did or said could cause the people to respond. So, he lived with an immense feeling of failure.¹ "He screamed, wept, moaned—and was left with a terror in his soul."²

Through these feelings, the divine word sought God's people, the beloved. Jeremiah exhorted—through prediction—pestilence, slaughter, famine and captivity (ref. Jer. 15.2).³ God's judgment was coming: *turn and repent!* Jeremiah cried. But when that judgment came to Israel and Judah, Jeremiah switched gears; the prophet of sorrow became the herald of good tidings offering hope and comfort to those who were heavy burdened.⁴ Jeremiah, in our passage, is in this role, and he tells the people of God, the God who fulfills promises who is fulfilling God's good word.⁵ The wailing and weeping, the long suffering and existential dread, the fear of threat and weight of burden will not last forever, says Jeremiah. *God will rescue! God will redeem! God will save! God will comfort and bring rest! God will act! Do not lose hope Jerusalem; shema! Do not lose hope, Judah; shema!*

This God on whose behalf Jeremiah speaks is the God of the covenant—the covenant made with all of Israel—the covenant through which God yoked God's self to Israel, forever being their God and they forever God's people. This covenant will be fulfilled not through the obedience of Judah and Jerusalem, but by God and God's self; it is this that gives the covenant that eternal and divine actuality. It will never and can never be violated; God will keep it.⁶ Weeping, writes Jeremiah in chapter 50, the people shall come and seek God who has come near, who *is* near in comfort and love, in rest from burden

¹ Abraham J. Heschel *The Prophets* "Jeremiah" New York: JPS, 1962. 105. "Jeremiah's was a soul in pain, stern with gloom. To his wistful eye the city's walls seemed to reel. The days that were to come would be dreadful. He called, he urged his people to repent—and he failed."

² Heschel *Prophets* 105

³ Heschel *Prophets* 129. "For many years Jeremiah had predicted pestilence, slaughter, famine, and captivity (15:2).

⁴ Heschel *Prophets* 129. "However, when calamity arrived, in the hour of panic and terror, when every face was turned pale with dark despair, the prophet came to instill hope, to comfort, to console ..."

⁵ John Bright *Jeremiah: A new Translation with Introduction and Commentary* The Anchor Bible. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman gen eds. 2nd Ed. 1986 Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965. 296. v. 14 "*fulfill the promise*. Literally '...the good word.'"

⁶ Heschel *Prophets* 129-130. "The climax of Jeremiah's prophecy is the promise of a covenant which will mean not only complete forgiveness of sin (50:20), but also a complete transformation of Israel. In time to come God will give Israel 'one heart and one way' and make with them "an everlasting covenant" (32:39-40), which will never be violated (50:40)."

and weariness.⁷ The *true shoot of Jesse, the scion, the heir* will come;⁸ the Messianic King comes to make manifest God's divine presence and eternal love to God's people and to bring in all who suffer and weep, those who grieve, those who are in pain, those who are wearied.⁹ Extreme sorrow and grief do not and will not last forever.

Conclusion

Everything that we've been through in the past (near) 20 months has not been taken in as single unit. Walking through a global pandemic and social upheaval, barely keeping our hearts and minds and bodies and souls intact isn't something we do all at once. Rather, we do it 45 minutes at a time. I know that the demand to keep walking, to keep getting up, to keep breathing one breath at a time can feel daunting in times like this. I know you may feel like you just can't keep going at times; but I know you can.

I know you can because you're not alone; and you've not been alone—even if it felt like you've been alone and isolated. The truth is, you've been embraced by God and by the eternal cloud of saints who move ahead, alongside, behind, and with you. And I know this because I've had the honor and privilege to be called to walk with you these past twelve months. Through ups and downs, masked and unmasked, in moments of chaos and calm, in change and consistency, I've watched you walk, one foot in front of the other, one step at a time, through this time—this very historical and very difficult time. And you've done it every day with God and with each other, bonded together through the divinity of profound and real love. And the only thing I've needed to do, because God's love for you presses upon me, is remind you that you are the *beloved*.

And as we enter this new season of liturgy and worship of Advent, let us be consumed with that deep abiding knowledge and peace that comes with the ever-present love of God. Let us come into expectation, let us be brought (together) to the brink of curiosity as we await—with breathless anticipation—the humble arrival of the divine Christ, God's love born in flesh into the world to reconcile the world to God, to eliminate any and all thought that there's any such great distance to be crossed to God by God's people.

Beloved, extreme sorrow and grief will not last forever, behold, *Immanuel*, God with us.

⁷ Heschel *Prophets* 129. "The rule of Babylon shall pass, but God's covenant with Israel shall last forever. The day will come when 'the people of Israel and the people of Judah shall come together, weeping as they come, and they shall seek the Lord their God They shall ask the way to Zion, with faces turned toward it, saying, Come, let us join ourselves to the Lord in an everlasting covenant which will never be forgotten' (50:4-5). Jerusalem will dwell secure under the watchword, 'The Lord is our vindication' (33:16)."

⁸ Bright *Jeremiah* 296. v. 15 "*a true 'Shoot.'* Or 'Branch (so many EVV), i.e., a scion...But Note (vs. 17) that here the promise is broadened to include not merely a single king, but the continuing dynasty."

⁹ Bright *Jeremiah* 298. "The name *Yahweh-sidqenu*, which is there applied to the Messianic king, is here transferred to Judah and Jerusalem, while the promise of the true 'Shoot' of David is referred (vs. 17) to the continuing dynasty rather than to a single individual. Moreover, the promise is broadened to include a never-ending succession of Levitical priests who serve beside the king."