

Grace Episcopal Church, Woodlawn, AL
The Rev. Mary Bea Sullivan
August 21, 2022

Proper 16C, Jeremiah 1:4-15, Psalm 71:1-6, Hebrews 12:18-29, Luke 13:10-17

Did it happen all at once?
I am wondering about that bent-over woman in the synagogue.

Was she suddenly stricken?
Or was it more gradual?
Little by little,
shoulders slumping more and more
until hers became a life of looking down.

No taking in the beauty of the surrounding mountains,
no gazing at the stars...
no looking at a beloved eye to eye.

Just day after day, staring at the dusty street and sandaled feet.

And yet, for nearly 20 years she endured. Her world had become so small. I wonder too, in the smallness of her world, did she develop compassion for the ants and other small creatures trod upon by those dusty sandals?

What could she see in her stooped over state that others,
scurrying upright,
were passing by?

I think of friends I have known who have experienced debilitating diseases and how the woods,
previously driven by unnoticed,
became an array of splendor to savor from the perch
of their medical facility windows.

I think of people I have known who have experienced a downturn in their financial situation and realize, there was so much they had taken for granted when they could take what they want. And counterintuitively, were more grateful in their seemingly less-plentiful state.

My intention is not to glorify physical or financial challenges, but to say—humility, compassion, and gratitude are often hard won characteristics.

We don't know much about this woman other than—she apparently didn't ask for healing, Jesus simply noticed her and called her over.

We know she had been suffering for eighteen years.

Eighteen years of stooping over, miraculously relieved with a word and a touch.

Why in the world did she have to wait so long?

Eighteen years of suffering, and then breaking all the rules,

Jesus couldn't wait one more day to provide relief.

Why do we have to suffer so long?

Why doesn't Jesus just heal all of us right away?

Much of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are devoted to wrestling with the complexity of suffering and crisis.

Six Centuries before that bent-over woman walked into the temple, the prophet Jeremiah was speaking to a people in crisis. The call that Jeremiah tried to avoid when he said,

“Hey, I am just a kid—you might want to find someone else to talk to the people.”

was the call to warn the Israelites that their worshipping false Gods and unfaithfulness to the covenant would mean exile from God.

Tragically, many were exiled to Babylon,

and those who stayed home, were subject to foreign rule. Devastatingly, the temple was destroyed...

It was a horrific time. Like the Exodus from Egypt, the Babylonian exile is a defining moment for the Israelite people. And in this time, God spoke to God's people through Jeremiah, who was faithful to his call. Ultimately, Jeremiah was the messenger of the new covenant—

God's law would no longer be written on tablets,
but on their very hearts.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman writes that the book of Jeremiah is about God's holiness at work—even in this, even in this exile, even in this heartbreak, even in this pain.¹

God's holiness at work, even as we

re-order our lives post-pandemic;

even as we seek a way forward after Robyn's death;

God's holiness at work even in the midst of generations of poverty and racism and all of the injustices that come with it.

¹ Walter Brueggeman, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) xiii.

It would be easy to stoop over in despair.

Brueggeman points out that if you read the arc of the entire book of Jeremiah you find, the prophet

“claims and sounds the utterance of holiness in the midst of disruption,

sounds about the Holy One,
sounds from the holy one,
that summon to honesty and hope.”²

Honesty and hope are the way forward.

Honesty about our losses

Honesty about our pain

Honesty about our anger

Honesty about our disappointments and griefs

Honesty about being sick and tired of being
stooped over by systems that reward the
powerful and marginalize those in need.

It is from this place of truth, we stand tall instead of hanging our heads in despair.

And here at Grace, I believe some of the work of the listening sessions we will host in September and October, as a part of the search process for your new rector, will be a time to honestly name—

the many gifts and opportunities for this parish,
and those challenges and concerns that we desire be
addressed.

Next week, your vestry will be gathering in retreat to articulate the priorities for Grace over the next few months, and to better define the priorities of the search process. I ask you to pray for us as we prepare and gather.

It is in honestly naming where we are today, we find hope in our tomorrows.

And this hope is a hope in God;

a hope in God’s holiness at work—even when it seems not so.

Did you know that it was when they were in exile that the Israelite people learned that God was not contained in the temple?

² Ibid. xiv.

They experienced God's mercy and presence even in exile; even outside of the temple. Had they stayed home; had the temple not been destroyed, their vision of God would have continued to be limited.

Did you know that it was when they were in exile they began to weave together the many sources of the Hebrew Scripture and compile them for future generations?

Every time we read those scriptures we are the beneficiaries of those who carried the flame of hope in a time of exile and despair.

If for any reason you are enduring a time of exile, a time of pain, fear, suffering, anger, I am here to say that it is so real, and I am so sorry you are going through this.

I pray for the grace for you and for this community, to hope in God's holiness at work. To remember therein is our refuge. We are to listen like Jeremiah for the word of God; and to bravely trust—even in this, God is working something new.

One of the most helpful things for me, has been to remember what Catholic priest Richard Rohr often repeats,

“If we do not transform our pain, we transmit it.”

Sometimes the healing is gradual...we notice
we are a little less angry;
a smile surprises us;
a sparkle of joy enlivens in us,
a pain-free hour,
and we wonder—is this the hoped-for healing?

Sometimes the healing is dramatic, like a long-suffering bent over woman standing up straight with a word and a touch from Jesus.

When the healing does come, and it will, IT WILL
we have an example, in the woman in Luke's Gospel, for how we are to respond. “...to stand up straight and begin praising God.”

We are an Easter people and we are a people of hope,
trusting in the slow work of God,³
that in Christ all things are redeemed.

And when you are losing hope and can't believe it, do not be afraid, do not be afraid, honestly name it to God, and perhaps with a trusted friend, maybe someone in this community, and we will hold that hope for you, knowing one day, you may need to hold it for us. Amen.

³ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.