

“SAY IT AIN’T SO”

Psalms 79: 1-9 Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 Sept. 29th, 2019

*Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright;
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light,
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout;
But there is no joy in Mudville---mighty Casey has struck out.*

Now I don’t know if you remember this poem—“Casey at the Bat” by Ernest Lawrence Thayer but it is referred to daily in my house. George is a big Yankees fan and has been all his life. He was born and raised in Denville, New Jersey, and he loves his Yankees! So each morning of baseball season when the Wyoming Tribune is brought in from the front porch he turns immediately to the Sports section and looks to see how the Yankees did the previous day. And then he announces: “It’s a bad day in Mudville” (if the Yankees lost) or “It’s a good day in Mudville!” (if the Yankees won).

Those of you in this congregation who are avid Rockies fans probably have similar reactions to how your team is doing on any particular day and root for them with the same fervency that George does for his beloved Yankees.

Standing by them in good times and bad and sometimes just falling back on the old refrain—we’ll get ‘um next year!! With the World Series coming up shortly there are many baseball fans who are anxiously waiting to see who will be playing and just who will win the Pennant for 2019!

The year was 1919, and it was the beginning of the first World Series after the “War to end all wars.” There was so much excitement leading up to what baseball fans call “the Fall Classic,” that the normally best-of-seven-game series had been expanded to a best-of-nine “spectacular.” The Cincinnati Reds made their first World Series appearance that year, against the heavily-favored Chicago White Sox who were led by one of the greatest batters in the history of the sport, “Shoeless” Joe Jackson. With all the hoopla and hype, things got off to an inauspicious beginning, as Chicago pitcher Eddie Cicotte hit the first Reds’ batter of the series with a pitch.

But that seemingly errant pitch was not the result of nervous jitters; rather it was a prearranged signal to gamblers that the fix was on. Eight members of what was to become known as the Chicago “Black Sox” team—including “Shoeless” Joe Jackson—had conspired to deliberately lose the series. When the scam was revealed the following year, Jackson and his co-conspirators were arrested. It was reported that as Jackson left the courthouse after his arraignment that a little boy looked up at him and plaintively said, “Say it ain’t so, Joe.”

Although Jackson later denied the episode ever happened—as well as denying his involvement in the scheme to which he had once confessed—the little boy’s plea passed into the language of American popular culture. The now cliché response to any news that seems too awful to contemplate is: “Say it ain’t so.”

That could have been the reaction of the Israelites to Jeremiah’s prophecies! It could be our reaction to any number of recent news events from natural disasters to man-made disasters to personal events or illnesses of loved ones or friends in our community! “Say it ain’t so”, Lord, because I really can’t even cope with this now!

Today’s reading presents most of a lament poem (Jeremiah 8:18-9:3) written by the prophet in the aftermath of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. The appeal is to the presumed presence of healing balms and physicians who might be hoped to restore the people to health (8:22). Jeremiah counseled that accepting the “yoke of the Babylonians” during that time was a way to head off further destruction (chs. 27-28) but his counsel was rejected (cf. 9:2-3).

There are apparently three different speakers within this lament. It opens with the words of the prophet (8:18-19a), who quickly turns to quote “the cry of my poor people.” This cry, recounted in 8:19b-20, is apparently interrupted by a rhetorical question from God in 8:19c (placed within parentheses in the NRSV) as a response to whether the Lord had deserted Zion. God’s response would be both that the Lord had indeed deserted the city and that the reason for this action was the people’s provocative act of worshiping foreign deities. The prophet returns to speaking in his own voice at 8:21 through the end of the lament.

Within the portion of the lament included in the lectionary reading, the prophet’s lament is solely in response to “the hurt of my poor people” (8:21). He is at a loss to explain why the people continue to suffer when healing agents are available to them (8:22). His mourning has left him completely spent, and he wishes to find the personal resources to continue his intercessions on their behalf. In the final two verses not included in the lectionary reading, the prophet turns to complaints regarding the treatment he is receiving from the people.

The prophet, then, is also overwhelmed with a sense of “Say it ain’t so,” as he is struck to a point of disbelief that the usual means to restoration seem to have failed. God has deserted the people, the usual means of healing are nowhere to be found, and even mourning and repentance have proved apparently ineffective. Although not absent from Jeremiah’s message on the whole, within the confines of this lament both the prophet and the people remain almost totally bereft of hope. They still cling to the belief of a “balm in Gilead” and the physicians there who might restore them, but there is no present evidence to support that belief.

Rev. Victoria Rebek tells this story about growing up in a rural part of Ontario and visiting relatives there: When I was growing up, my family would visit them almost every year. For some reason, the tap water in the small town where my cousins lived looked murky and smelled terrible. As a child, I could not tolerate it, so I drank a lot of soda pop instead of water while we were there.

During one of these visits, my family took a short side trip to the little town of Komoka. At that time (probably the early 1970s), the town was known for its natural springs. We filled bottles with water that came right up out of the rocks. With some trepidation, I took a small sip. Then I could not drink enough. It was clear, clean tasting, and refreshing. I immediately felt better, probably due to proper hydration.

Water has healing and soothing properties. I have visited Hot Springs, Arkansas, the Roman baths in the aptly named town of Bath, England, the natural hot springs outside of Casper and the pools of Glenwood Springs, Colorado. While Bath is now a World Heritage Site, and the Roman baths are essentially a museum (well worth visiting), all three of the other sites I mentioned still have bathing sites or pools that use the water from the springs. While the health benefits of these baths/pools are debated, the experience can be quite soothing. George and I enjoyed the mineral hot springs spa at a Holiday Inn in Thermopolis recently and it was definitely a very relaxing experience! Soothing goes a long way toward healing.

There is a lot of suffering in the Jeremiah passage today. The people have realized that God was serious; if they made a choice to walk away from God, they would see what life was like without God. “Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: ‘Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?’” (v.8:19).

Surely all of us have endured grief. We may have lost a loved one to death or a serious disagreement; undergone divorce or a painful breakup; or perhaps we received a diagnosis of a life-threatening illness. We may have pursued our own self-interest and in the process hurt others. At times like this, we can wonder if we will ever feel happy again. “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there not a physician there?” (Gilead was known for medicinal herbs, so the people would have understood the reference.) Today, we might ask, Will I ever be healed of this

heartache? Will our church ever recover from its conflict? Will God forgive us?

The United Methodist Book of Worship included in its order of weekly worship a congregational prayer of confession. The leader says: Let us confess our sin against God and our neighbors. Then the congregation repeats this prayer:

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your name. Amen.

It might be helpful to keep in mind that this is a corporate prayer that confesses where we have failed as a church and have fallen short. It also gives us a chance to remember our baptismal vows, acknowledge where we have failed to keep them, and then return to them and accept God's forgiveness, which is always waiting for us if we are willing to return to the God who cares for us and blesses us to be a blessing.

Some commentators suggest that the sorrow that Jeremiah expresses is felt by God as well. It is quite forlorn: "My joy is gone, my heart is sick" (v.18); "for the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me" (v.21). Even God can feel profound anguish. As dismaying as it has been to read about God's anger and the destruction of creation, we learn here that God is tenderhearted as well.

As Terence Fretheim says: "God is not an executioner who can walk away from the judgment exacted, thinking: 'I only did my duty.' Nor is there any satisfaction, let alone celebration, that justice has now been done... For God to mourn with those who mourn is to enter their situation; and where God is at work, mourning is not the end" (The Suffering of God, Fortress, 1984; 136).

Admitting when we are wrong, whether to God, family, friends, colleagues, or neighbors, can be difficult. And we sometimes think "repent" means to punish ourselves with self-loathing. What it requires is a willingness to be honest and acknowledge the truth. This is a part of reclaiming our integrity.

The repentance that God seeks is that we "turn around" --turn from our selfish, hurtful ways, toward God, who loves and nourishes us like a mother.

Now the water of life that was mentioned in Jeremiah 2 has become bitter tears. "O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people! (v.9:1).

There is something soothing about the water of these tears. Knowing God cries for us and with us reminds us that we are not alone; we may dare to hope for healing.

While every problem may not be solved or fixed, we are not abandoned. What the future may look like for us, we do not know. But we know that if we turn to God, God will embrace us. What we have with God is a relationship, not a transaction. Both Jeremiah and Jesus call on us to hold on to our belief that there is indeed a "balm in Gilead" and "a physician there" in our God who acts with undeserved grace and love. Amen and amen.

