

When Life Crashes Down – Bob Munshaw

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

Sometimes, we get some nice joyful texts to work with ... and then there are this week's texts ...
Sometimes our worlds just get rocked ...

This week I received an e-mail that went out to all of our Canadian FMC pastors. One of our own ... a pastor near my age took his 24-year old son into the hospital a week ago this past Thursday.

Our Dear Friends:

Late this afternoon, our second son, our precious Jamie, went to be with the Lord. What had begun on Thursday evening as pancreatitis caused by gall stones proceeded to septic shock in his internal organs ... and early Saturday morning, cardiac arrest. We cannot say enough about the good people at Victoria Hospital ICU in London for their enormous efforts on Jamie's behalf. But, the hour came that his brain simply could not continue. Our hearts are broken. But, we are thankful for the 24 wonderful years we had with him, and the immense joy he brought to our lives. We place our faith in the loving God and the living Christ in Whom Jamie trusted.

Blessings,

Paul & Allison, Adam and Alexis.

Last week, as Elise spoke about being a rejoicing community, she focused on a concern in the texts that recognized our brokenness and the need we have of God's grace. This is a theme that reverberates throughout the Scriptures. Our heroes in the Old and New Testaments are always broken men and women just like we are. They have some great moments of faith in action, and there are, of course, many moments of joy in their stories, ... but also very often they struggle, complain, fail ... or have their lives turned upside down through their own choices or through the choices of others. What makes them our heroes in the story, I think, is that in their brokenness, they continue to turn to God. They found that God's love, grace, and mercy have often carried them through ... and so when their worlds fall apart as they are in our two old testament passages this morning, they continue to turn to God

The philosopher poet, Terry Taylor, spoke to this issue, writing, "There's not a holy man who doesn't know grief well ... or think the road to heaven doesn't pass through hell." He also wisely noted that "before he danced, Jesus wept."

Sometimes, I like to imagine what it must have been like to be Jeremiah. We know of Jeremiah as "the weeping prophet," and rightfully so. He had an awful lot of bad news to deliver to the

people of Judah on behalf of God, and near the end of his life, he elected to stay in Jerusalem as the temple was destroyed and the population decimated before he finally escaped to Egypt with thousands of other Judeans.

But, lament, misery, and sorrow were not the sole themes of Jeremiah's life. Early on, if he'd have wanted to, he could have made a pretty good living preaching a health and wealth gospel.

Jeremiah's call to ministry came in the thirteenth year of Josiah. Josiah was one of those few Judean kings that was actually quite interested in following God, and the kingdom of Judea actually had a bit of a revival both in their relationship with God and also as an independent kingdom in the days of Josiah. When Jeremiah was a young man, there was an awful lot to be hopeful about ... but by the time of our text this morning, that hope was gone.

What we have in our text is a gut wrenching cry of grief and anguish. In the original Hebrew, our text is part of a greater poem that starts at 8:14, and ends in 9:26. The whole poem is etched in sorrow, telling the story of the people of Judah who had lost sight of what it means to follow God, and who were instead often living fully for their own gain and pleasure. Our text finds Jeremiah weeping in advance for the people. The end has not yet come, but as a prophet, Jeremiah is hearing the word of the Lord, and he is devastated by what he knows is coming. He says, "... for the hurt of my poor people I am hurt. I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead?"

Psalms 79 is a lot more cheerful for us. Oh, wait ... it is not a lot more cheerful. Commentators note that this is written after the destruction of Jerusalem that Jeremiah saw coming. I read this Psalm in my O.T. class on Friday, and noted to the class that sometimes life is just crappy! My mom didn't like it when we used that word growing up, but it is certainly fitting. We are not promised that everything will always be good all the time. Sometimes we hear that kind of narrative in the church, but it is just not true. Even when we are living faithfully, like Job, life's carpet can be yanked out from under us.

The poet, Taylor, in another verse pictures a visitation from an angel to the hero of his poem. You're thinking wow, and angelic visitation ... how cool to be visited by angel ... and here is the cheery message he gets... Here's the catch, said the angel. You're gonna suffer for a while. I'll tell you straight, said the angel. Don't plan to go out in style.

Psalms 79 is painful. It is raw. It is gut wrenching. As a prayer, it is also honest ... He is angry. He is upset. He is shattered. He has seen his friends and countrymen decimated. He has witnessed the destruction of Solomon's temple, the central place for the worship of God. This is not some nice, sanitary flannel-board Sunday school story. It is rated R for violence. The Psalmist describes the Judean people as food for the birds and the animals. He points to bodies lying unburied. To get the full picture, you have to at least try and picture it from the Psalmist's eyes. Here are God's people ... the servants of YHWH, he says, rotting in the fields of battle, because there is no one left to bury them.

And yet, he also recognizes that all of this has come because of sin. He begs God to be compassionate ... to bring compassion for God's own sake ... It's easy for me to resonate with these verses ... if we reflect on it, I suspect we can all resonate with them ... because when we honestly look in the mirror, we see ourselves; not as the world might see us, all cleaned up, polished and nice ... we see our brokenness. Most of us know, if we are honest, like the Psalmist, that we are indeed deserving of God's wrath. We are a people who are in need of compassion ... and help!

In first Timothy, we have the apostle Paul asking the people to pray! At the end of chapter 1, he mentions that there are some people in the church who have been (in Paul's words) flat-out shipwrecked in their faith. Here in chapter 2, Paul is inviting us to turn our lives to God ... to lift up our lives, our joys and our sorrows, our struggles and our words of thanks ... just as we will be doing in a few minutes as a church family. God's help and mercy is desperately needed. We see the need we have to pray for our leaders regularly. We have a president who needs wisdom beyond himself to know what to do concerning both domestic and international affairs. It's easy for us to complain about our leaders, but how would any of us possibly handle the many pressures our president is under. Paul says that the need for prayer for kings and other gov't officials is paramount if we have any hope of lasting peace. The Christians at the time of this letter are living in a rough period. ... Whereas our Old Testament passages find God's people falling to the Babylonians, the Christians Paul is addressing are under Roman rule.

This is one of the disputed Pauline letters. If it was written by the apostle, then it would have been written somewhere in the mid 60's. If it was not written by Paul, scholars suggest it might have been as late as the 90's. In the year, 64, the emperor, Nero blamed Christians for the fire in Rome and began to persecute them. So, either way, whether the letter was authentic to Paul, or whether it was written later, Christians had already been scapegoated and were suffering under sporadic persecution in various places in the empire. They must have been deeply longing for an elusive piece of peace.

But, even so, what the author most wants is to see people living in a different kind of peace ... that comes from Christ. We read in the epistle that this is why Christ has come ... not to make all aspects of life easy, but to reconcile us to God and bring us inner peace. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul spelled out all of the calamities that he had endured. He writes ... "I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?" Yet in spite of

this, he could also write that he had learned to be content in all circumstances. ... In our text, we are also here offered the inner peace that comes through being restored to a right relationship with God

The cessation of all war would be great ... It would be such a blessing if all of the hard things in my life began to dissolve away.

My friend, who is a pastor, has speculated that those who are faithful get an easier ride through life by God. They live longer. They are rescued by God from all sorts of things. God protects these people in special ways. But, I just don't think that is true. I don't think it lines up with scripture generally, or with the scriptures for today. The scripture indicates that in this life, the rain falls on the just and the unjust.

In our gospel passage, we run into Jesus ... and Jesus is doing his thing telling parables. The very first commentator I read said that out of all of Jesus' parables, this is the hardest parable to understand.

We have this steward who, in our eyes, is unethical ... and yet Jesus is commending the fellow. What in the world is going on?? Let me just touch on it for a minute in closing.

So, this manager has squandered the man's property. He has been accused by the manager ... and he does not deny it. He is told to get the accounts in order, and then he will be fired. So, he takes the opportunity to set himself up for the future. I'm not going to solve the dilemma of why Jesus used this example. Some commentators speculate that, "It is one thing to applaud the dishonest steward because he acted cleverly, and another issue altogether to applaud the clever steward for acting dishonestly." Either way, the crux of the parable seems quite clearly pointed out by Jesus at the end of the text ... to seek with all we have what really matters most in life ... not a life focused on wealth/ pleasure/ security and the types of things where we build kingdoms for ourselves in this world ... but to seek God and His kingdom, and the deeper inner peace that comes from God that will sustain us despite our circumstances.

Our worlds will be rocked from time to time through the various circumstances of life ... may we like the Psalmist be able to turn with confidence to God in those days, praying as he prayed, "Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and forgive our sins, for your name's sake."