



Picking Up the Lyres Again

A Sermon for Northminster Church

Preached by Claire Helton

October 13, 2019

The Hebrew Scripture reading this morning comes from Jeremiah, Chapter 29, in which the author records the letter that Jeremiah wrote to the people of God soon after the first wave had been carried off into exile in Babylon. Some were prophesying false hope that the people would soon be able to return home to Jerusalem, but Jeremiah wrote with a different message:

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. It said:

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to Yahweh on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

There are some Bible stories that are great for kids. There are others that are...not so great, for kids. (Maybe not so great for adults, either.) Then there are Bible stories that just somehow fly under the radar, not attracting attention to themselves, but carrying subtle truths nonetheless. Our story today is one of these, and I wanted to give it a preface before I tell it because we do a lot of midrash around here – reading between the lines, filling in the gaps in the stories as they’re presented in scripture – but that’s not what I’m doing today. This one is straight out of the book of Jeremiah, it just might not be a story that you’ve ever covered in Sunday School – and I say that because I don’t think I ever have. So, without further ado, let’s begin.

Our story opens in the court of the temple, where two prophets stood toe to toe, the one standing tall, the other bent over somewhat under the weight of what appeared to be a wooden yoke – like an ox would wear. Both remained steady, matching wits in a kind of prophetic standoff. The tension between them had risen to a fever pitch and the onlookers were entranced, waiting to see what would happen next. The court was more crowded than usual – at least, for whatever the usual had become since the Babylonians had carried off a wave of their citizens in the siege of Jerusalem a few years back. People were more eager to come to Temple since the exile had begun; seasons of hardship tend to drive us toward community. The temple court was a place where men gathered; on this day it was filled with priests, with a number of laymen, and with at least two men who considered themselves to be prophets. Seasons of hardship also tend to draw out those who are looking for a platform. Perhaps you’ve heard that saying about how a person with one clock always knows what time it is, but the person with two can never quite be sure – I imagine the same was true of the nation of Judah when it came to the number of prophets claiming to speak for God. It would’ve been a comfort to hear one prophet proclaiming God’s will; but imagine the chaos and confusion of trying to discern between two conflicting “thus saith the Lords.”

Many who had come to the temple that morning for services had lingered, looking for a place to air their fears, a place to lament and to – they hoped – find some encouragement. Jeremiah had arrived that day wearing the symbol he had worn now for days, the yoke of straps and wooden bars on his neck that symbolized the yoke of Babylon over all the surrounding kingdoms – including his own. Already the armies of Babylon had carried off many of their family and friends; now the people of Jerusalem lived in constant fear that another attack would come. Jeremiah had felt the Spirit of God impress upon him this sign of the yoke so deeply that he had worn it now for days; he wasn’t sure yet to what end, or when it would be time for a new image to take its place. In his prophetic vocation people had come to expect this kind of symbolic action from Jeremiah, though it never ceased to raise a few eyebrows. And now he found himself facing off in a public forum with a man who claimed to speak for the

same God as Jeremiah, but who refused to acknowledge the weight of the yoke their nation bore.

“I say to the kings of Edom and Moab as I have said to our own people,” Jeremiah called out, “It is a fact. Babylon has been given dominion over us; why should the people die by the sword because our governments refuse to face facts? Don’t listen to those who want to peddle you lies! Put yourselves under the yoke of Babylon,” Jeremiah cried out, lifting up the physical yoke on his shoulders for effect, “and you may still find that there is life to be lived, even in exi—”

“Ohh, okay. Jeremiah says he speaks for God,” Hananiah cut him off. “Then tell me, why have I heard a different word from the Most High? Our almighty God, commander of heavenly forces, has broken the yoke of the king of Babylon; Nebuchadnezzar’s time is running out. I tell you, two years or less, and God will bring back all those who have been ripped from their homes; within two years our nation shall be restored! Lift your heads – there is no need for sorrow or lament. Let us rejoice in God’s unfailing plan!”

Cheers erupted on all sides; Jeremiah could sense that Hananiah had tapped into the longing that welled up in the hearts of his people; this was the encouragement they had come here hoping to find. He stood calmly, collecting his thoughts until the noise died back down. Then he spoke again, firm, but sincere.

“Amen, brother. May it be so; I pray that God does what you have said. But listen to me now, and listen well.” As Jeremiah spoke, Hananiah turned to face the crowd, stroking his chin, pantomiming consideration, but Jeremiah circled around him to look him straight in the eyes. “You are offering the hope of peace to a people already in the midst of war. The burden is on you to prove that you speak God’s truth.” With the defiance of a petulant child, Hananiah feigned mock fear from behind Jeremiah’s back, as Jeremiah turned away and continued, “When I see peace, then I will know that God has sent you. Not a moment before.” Here he

looked up at the faces around him as he moved through the crowd. “I would encourage you all to embrace this man’s words with great caution.”

The entire temple held its breath to await the conclusion of this showdown between two holy men. After a tense silence, Hananiah moved abruptly, striding across the courtyard to where Jeremiah now stood. Reaching out, he yanked the wooden yoke off of Jeremiah’s shoulders. “Thus saith the Lord!” he cried, lifting the yoke up high, turning from side to side, that all might see. Then, with great drama, he slammed it down onto his knee, breaking it into pieces. “This is how God will break the yoke of Babylon – and soon!”

Jeremiah did not speak again. He knew it wouldn’t do any good; he knew they couldn’t hear him – not yet. As he stepped around the broken wood on the ground, he glanced, sadly, at the crowd of people in denial, cheering around him; then he turned, and walked away.

It is a difficult and a vulnerable thing to be honest about our pain – but unacknowledged pain is one of the most dangerous things there is.

Some of you know that Zach was a film major in undergrad. Most people I meet have a hard time finding anything redemptive about horror films, but living with Zach has taught me to watch movies with new eyes – I might have been happy watching the same three romantic comedies from the ‘90s on a loop forever if Zach had not spent the last decade systematically broadening my cinematic horizons. And I’ve learned that each genre is uniquely powerful in taking on certain topics, in telling certain stories. For some things, like dealing with pain and grief, horror is just the best genre we have. Can you think of any better metaphor for talking about grief than using a story about a haunting? This is the premise of the 2014 film *The Babadook*.

The movie is about a young widow named Amelia whose husband was killed just before her son was born. She and her son, now six years old, have spent the intervening years attempting to

keep grief at bay, not even speaking the name of the husband and father they've lost, though their grief lurks persistently in the background. One night, Amelia's son asks her to read him a storybook called *The Babadook*, named after the dark figure in the book who, it turns out, haunts everyone who reads it. As you might imagine, Amelia throws the book away, as it's not exactly child-friendly. Her son then begins to imagine that he's seeing the Babadook everywhere; strange things start to happen around the house; and the book keeps showing back up: they can't get rid of it. The harder they try, the more the monster seems to take possession of their home, their bodies, their lives. Amelia starts having her own terrifying visions and things won't let up until the film climaxes in a terrible scene in which Amelia, herself, is possessed by the dark spirit – until her son gently touches her face and reminds her of the last line of the story: If it's in a word, or in a look, you can't get rid of the Babadook.

Is that not an effective way to tell a story about grief? The pain we refuse to acknowledge is like a monster dwelling in the shadows, haunting our entire existence, gaining more and more power the more we try to push it down, to push it away. And in the end, they never do get rid of the Babadook. Instead, they find a place for it in their home, tending to it when it needs tending, learning to live alongside it, rather than ignoring it and allowing it to consume them. It is a difficult and a vulnerable thing to be honest about our pain; but the alternative is to live a lie, to starve ourselves by feeding on the false hope that if we don't acknowledge it, our pain might just go away on its own.

The people of Judah had experienced great grief – a communal trauma: their government dismantled, their holy city ravaged by war. In years past, they had sung together psalms of ascent, corporate hymns of joy as they climbed the hill to Jerusalem to make their pilgrimage for the holy festivals. As they wound up the hillside their voices carried on the wind songs like Psalm 122, "I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord! Pray for the peace of Jerusalem, for the sake of the house of God, may peace be within its walls; we will seek the welfare of Jerusalem."

But now, Jerusalem had fallen. And despite Hananiah and others who projected a swift return to good fortune, there was only more tragedy to come in their lifetime. In a few years, the temple itself would be destroyed, and the armies of Babylon would carry off a second wave of captives, taking with them what little remained of the fabric of society in what had once been the capital of their nation. Their songs of ascent had transformed into songs of lament. For some, it seemed they might never sing again. Psalms like the one our choir sang for us this morning portray the depths of grief that accompany the horrors of war; families torn apart, innocents, children caught up as casualties of war. In desperation, they hung up their lyres on the willows of Babylon – for when their faith centered on a God whose presence was made known in the temple in Jerusalem, how could they ever sing the songs of God in a foreign land?

It's no wonder Hananiah sought to alleviate that pain for his people, the nation he loved. It is a great temptation to find a way to lessen our pain. But we have to move beyond the temptation to do the work that will truly offer healing and hope.

I imagine that, after that showdown with Hananiah in the temple court, Jeremiah walked down the steps and straight back home where he began composing a letter. He wrote to the exiles, addressing his letter to the elders – or, those who were left of the elders after the long journey across the desert, and to all the priest and prophets, to all those who now found themselves trying to make sense of their faith in a foreign land. He had a feeling that Hananiah might not be the only prophet who had succumbed to the temptation to preach a message that would comfort the people without doing the hard work of discernment to determine whether or not the message was true. He had a feeling that Hananiah might not be the only one who wanted desperately to believe that his message of imminent peace and a reversal of their misfortune was true. Jeremiah himself longed for it to be true. It was because he wanted it so badly, and yet felt this churning inside, that he knew he could trust his instincts.

He thought about his options. He thought about all the things he could write to his people. He thought about all that they *didn't* need to hear. And he began to write the message of

counterintuitive hope that we hold onto today: *This is what God says to those who have been exiled, to those who are in grief: Give yourselves permission to settle down, to build houses; you'll be there long enough to live in them. Plant gardens – and know that you'll be there to eat what they produce. Go ahead, get married, have kids – have grandkids, even; this is not going to be a short-lived affair, and anyone who tells you otherwise is not looking out for you, he's peddling easy lies rather than telling you the more difficult truth.*

In the face of the very real grief of his people, Jeremiah had the courage to speak what he knew to be as true as their circumstances, and yet somehow more true than their pain: that escaping the circumstances that caused the pain would not erase the effects of the pain itself.

And then, with the songs of ascent swirling in his mind, Jeremiah wrote the hardest part: *Seek the welfare of the city where you now reside, he wrote, for in seeking its welfare, you will find your own.*

For centuries, they had exulted in seeking the welfare of Jerusalem. Now, the people of God would have to learn to sing a different song, to seek the welfare of the city where they found themselves captives. Although some of their descendants did return to Jerusalem generations later, for many, they made their home in exile; they put down roots. To avoid acknowledging the need to make a home would have been to live their lives haunted by an unexamined grief, starving themselves by feeding on the false hope that if they didn't acknowledge it, maybe the pain would go away on its own. The hope that Jeremiah offered in his letter was the hope of making peace with a great grief. You cannot get rid of the pain. But you can learn how to live – and to live fully – alongside it.

As unimaginable as it may have been when they first arrived in Babylon, it couldn't have been too long before the exiles began to realize they hadn't left God behind when they crossed the desert. Sure, they had built a house for God to inhabit in Jerusalem, but God never was much for staying indoors. I like to imagine that, in time, they went back to the willows, and picked up

their lyres again. Perhaps the words of another psalm became the new song of the faithful in exile, singing: *Where can I go from your presence? If I ride on the wings of the dawn or fly beyond the sea, even there your hand will hold me fast.* The temptation to avoid pain at all costs is great; it takes courage to choose the path of healing, instead. No false hope will do. We find our courage in this true hope: that we need not be afraid to look our pain, our grief, our fears in the eye, for there is nowhere they might take us that our loving God will not ever and always hold us fast. Amen.