

“Living in Tension”
Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14:1-7
Salem United Methodist Church
September 11, 2016
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Welcome, welcome all to our worship and welcome from my heart to this time of collective reflection on the Scriptures. As I begin this morning I want to name the heaviness of our Scripture readings this morning. Jeremiah and the Psalm both bring forward some tension-filled words that we will wrestle with today and continue to wrestle with for the rest of our lives. There is also a collective sense of mourning and heaviness across our nation as well because today marks the 15th anniversary of September 11, 2001.

I invite everyone here to close your eyes and take a deep breath, to center yourself and to notice how you are feeling, how your body is physically, what emotions you sense. Invite those feelings that come to you, name them in your hearts or aloud if you wish, and slowly let them pass from you. Take a deep cleansing breath: in, and out. Now open your eyes and give your attention to this place right now.

I like to start worship with this introduction and quiet centering because it helps us remember that we are all living, breathing beings in a created world. And, this sermon will invite you into the depths of something hard to grapple with unless we intentionally dive in together. Centering is a great way to begin that process of inviting intentionality and realizing that we are in a sacred space together. God is in this place with us.

Last year I applied and was accepted into a program called FASPE. A fellowship to study professional ethics at Auschwitz with other seminary and medical fellows also chosen for this program. For two weeks we travelled throughout Berlin as well as Krakow and Oswiecim touring sites where the Nazi party came to power and made devastating and horrific decisions to murder an entire people, the Jews, as well as people that did not fit into their ideal race. We also toured and bore witness to former and current Jewish neighborhoods, sites of memorial to all the lives lost, as well as the devastating site of Auschwitz itself, spending time at both Auschwitz I and Birkenau.

I will return to this experience at Auschwitz; but, for now, I want to come to the Scripture readings for this morning. All of the texts we’ve heard this morning bring our attention to tensions and hard places that we, as people of faith, don’t often get to explore as a community. In Jeremiah, we have to sit with the tension of not knowing God and the consequences of holding God at arm’s length. In vs. 22 of Jeremiah it says, “they do not now know me,”[1] referencing that the people of Judah do not know God. And the Hebrew word used to say they “know” God doesn’t mean to know as in knowing facts like I know that the sky is blue or that the grass is green; rather, the verb in Hebrew means to know intimately, like a spouse knows their partner, a deep, unrelenting compassionate knowledge of the other. Jeremiah is saying the people do not know God intimately. And, because they do not know God intimately, they do not trust God. Jeremiah seems to mourn in the text, in his prophetic role, when he writes verse 22 that they, “do not know how to do good,” directly tying not knowing how to do good with not knowing God in a deep, intimate way.

I read in a commentary on the Jeremiah passage in preparing for this sermon that in the text, One defines the other [that knowledge of God defines doing good]. The proper knowledge of God is where good is carried out, where justice is maintained and the welfare of the community is sought even for the weakest and lowest members.[2]

When I first read the scriptures for this week, I immediately thought, the theme across all the Scriptures this week is accountability. God holding us accountable as human beings, not only to “doing good” or to “doing what’s right;” but, to developing and cultivating a deep trusting relationship with God and living out of that relationship. And, for us as Christians, that means developing a deep, unrelenting relationship to God through Christ in the midst of the Holy Spirit all around us. God created humanity just for this reason, for us to cultivate and develop a relationship with God’s self, and even goes as far as allowing us to live freely so that we are able to love God back freely, without restriction, without interference. As a result of knowing and loving God, we are taught how to mirror and develop that loving intimacy with the rest of humanity. God mirrors for us perfect love in relationship with other human beings.

Elie Wiesel famously declares in his memoir, *Night*, that he forever lost his faith in God at Auschwitz.[3]

Later, in an interview with Krista Tippett, he declares that he lost his faith, but he kept on praying.[4] Wiesel

continued to pray, continued to cultivate a relationship with a God that seemed to have abandoned God's people at the hands of Nazi Germans. In hearing his words, I understand him to be saying that despite who we are as humans and the suffering we encounter, our faith takes us through those painful moments, through the tough encounters, through our anxiety. We are not to turn away from the relationship even though we feel as if the Divine has abandoned us.

After visiting Auschwitz and Birkenau I could imagine how deeply painful and blatantly clear it could have been to Wiesel that God was absent from that place. Words cannot describe the blatant horror and death that went on, not only at Auschwitz, but across Europe over the course of the Nazi party's rule. Where they discovered thousands of ways to maim, disfigure, kill, and dispose of bodies of people that were mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, children, grandchildren, grandmothers, grandfathers, cousins, and friends. They had names, lives, faith in God, and were a part of the human community.

But I quickly learned that our trip with FASPE was not about answering why these horrors happened or trying to solve the problem of evil, because all of us sitting here this morning know it would never be possible in a world so penetrated by evil and sin, sins of the self as well as systemic sins of us all. Our seminary cohort, during FASPE, talked at lengths about and wrestled with the fact that other human beings came to be Nazis charged with the systematized killing of millions of human beings for no more than being part of a religious, cultural, or national identity. These Nazi men and women were in charge of dehumanizing and taking away all pieces of another person's humanity in an effort to eliminate all traces of them. Our group came to grips with the fact that it is only in living with the tension of this painful atrocity, the Holocaust, of coming to grips with what was lost in the Holocaust, and how it could be done at the power of human hands did I find any sort of reconciliation or understanding; albeit, that reconciliation is very little, if any at all.

But, FASPE also made our cohort confront and look deeply at the horrors of the Holocaust. I could not put the Holocaust at arm's length in Germany and Poland. And, what I also learned, was that I could not put God at arm's length in the midst of this occasion either, because it was only in the midst of wrestling with and questioning my trust in God, in the midst of studying and seeing sites of human suffering and tragedy that I truly began to look at and understand both my own personal capacity for evil as well as God's capacity for working out goodness through me as well. Realizing that if I do not embrace God and my intimate knowledge of God that I will carry an ability to dehumanize and "other" people, to live with blinders on to the injustice that goes on in the world. And that is the opposite of who Christ is calling us to be as Christian disciples.

Jeremiah, in his writing, reminds the people of Judah what happens when they do not "know"[5] God. God returns the earth to a desolation, a world before creation, where light and dark do not even exist. And the people ignore Jeremiah's warning. They continue to live as they are. In the Psalm today, it says, they, "eat up my people as they eat bread." [6] Referring to those that do not seek after God.

These texts and the tension created within ourselves when we hear of others who do not seek or follow after God seems as if it could never be us. It is as if I am separate from the people of Judah, from those referenced in the Psalms. I pretend as if the scripture is not holding up a mirror to my face saying, "are you sure you've got this faith thing figured out?" I read it repeating the mantra to myself, "I would never treat other human beings poorly." "How could I ever hurt my neighbor?" But, in facing myself and the tension of Jeremiah's words, I realize that there are places and spaces in this world that I participate in systemic and individual sin against my neighbor. Places where I think I might be able to help, where I could alleviate suffering in my neighbor's life, but cannot get around to doing it because my life is filled with too many things already. Too much with the busyness of work, of school, of relationships, of leadership positions in my communities. I rely on others to do the work of caring for others in my stead.

Somebody will feed that homeless person on the corner today. Somebody else will stand up for the black and brown lives in our country and across the world that continue to suffer injustice. Somebody will take care of the slave who made my cell phone, somebody will feed the woman who made my clothing in sweat shops, somebody will give water to the folks that pick my fruit and vegetables at the supermarket.

FASPE has helped me realize how I am able to step outside of my understanding of black and white in the world, to live in the uncomfortable and tension-filled grey of our world, because I have met God in the "Glorious Dark." [7] I have asked God to come closer in the midst of pain and suffering. I have asked hard questions and continue to look those questions in the face because that means that we are confronting those

things in our world that allow us to continue to dehumanize “the other.” And to dehumanize them means to stereotype or group humans, to allow slaves to work themselves to death for my comfort, to cast someone to the fringes of society on the basis of the color of their skin or because their personality or mental illness makes me uncomfortable.

To know God deeply, lovingly, unapologetically, is to greet the other, to greet other human beings with compassion regardless of who they are and what they have done. And, to be able to show mercy, compassion, love, and grace as Christ has taught us to. I must be willing to work through the tensions of this world. To look at who I am, what I believe, who I support politically, and what I express to the world with an honest heart. To confront who I actually am, compared to who God calls me to be in the example of Jesus through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit present among us. And to embrace the God of us all in the midst of our devastating, yet glorious humanity. Amen.

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