

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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The Holy Rage of Lament

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is an unspoken rule in polite religious society that before we walk through the church doors, we ought to make ourselves presentable. We iron our clothes, paste on a gentle smile, modulate our voices to a reverent whisper, and bury whatever chaos, terror, or fury brought us to our knees during the week. We treat the sanctuary like a parlor where God is a fragile host who might be easily startled or offended by our pain. We carry invisible cans of spiritual Febreze, eagerly spraying a light mist of lavender piety over the stench of our grief, our doubts, and the bleeding wounds of our world.

Then, into this tidy, sanitized room, walks the prophet, Jeremiah. Jeremiah does not offer a polite, measured prayer or apologetic preamble. In the raw, un-Febrezed desperation of a man pushed past his breaking point, he stands under the open sky, looks God squarely in the face, and hurls his agony toward heaven: *"Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail."*

Think about the sheer audacity of those words. In ancient West Asia and Northeast Africa, a "deceitful brook," a winter wadi that rushes with water in the rainy season only to vanish into bone-dry silt when the summer heat bears down, is a death sentence to a thirsty traveler. Jeremiah looks at the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and cries: *You tricked me. You promised life, and I am dying of thirst. You promised justice, and the empire is devouring us.* To our polished religious sensibilities, this language borders on the scandalous. It sounds dangerously close to blasphemy.

Yet Jeremiah is not alone in his discomfort with the raw truth of suffering. Turn to our Gospel reading in Matthew 16. Just moments after confessing Jesus as the

Messiah, Peter hears Jesus announce where this messianic path is truly headed; to Jerusalem, into the crosshairs of imperial power, toward rejection, profound suffering, and a public execution on a Roman cross.

Peter cannot stomach it. He pulls Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him: “*God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.*” Peter is reaching for the spiritual Febreze. He wants to scrub the blood off the messianic promise before it is even shed. Peter wants a “theology of glory,” a clean, invincible, triumphant Messiah who will march into Jerusalem with unyielding imperial power, overthrow their oppressors, and seat them on comfortable thrones.

But Jesus will have none of it. And Jeremiah will have none of it. True faith is not a performative mask of forced optimism or silent compliance to keep the peace. In a world and an empire built upon sanitized denials, cultivating holy rage and practicing radical vulnerability as truth-telling before God is not a failure of faith, it is our most profound act of spiritual resistance.

Consider Jeremiah experiencing that parched riverbed. He has spent his entire life preaching repentance to a culture that mocked him, speaking truth to royals that imprisoned him, and weeping over the impending collapse of his society while religious elites insisted that everything was fine. He is physically, emotionally, and spiritually depleted. He has poured out his life for the cause of divine righteousness, and all he has to show for it is isolation, ridicule, and a dryness that reaches deep into his bones.

I know something of that weariness, and I suspect many of you do too. As someone who identifies on the Enneagram as a Social One (the reformer, the idealist whose internal engine is driven by a burning hunger for systemic fairness, equity, and moral integrity) there is a unique kind of soul-crushing exhaustion that comes from bumping up against the glacial pace of transformation.

You look at the world and see so clearly how good, how generous, how beautiful God intended human community to be. And then you look at reality, and you watch the same corrupt structures perpetuate the same violence day after day, year after year. The anger that rises up is not petty bitterness; it is the heartbreak of watching love be crucified by bureaucratic indifference and self-serving power. It’s the pain of witnessing hundreds of crucifixions a day.

We look around our world today, and we see deceitful brooks everywhere. We look at the promises of global climate accords while catastrophic heat, rising tides, and unseasonal droughts lay waste to vulnerable communities across the global South; communities that contributed the least to the carbon economy and are suffering its most devastating consequences.

We walk through our own city streets and witness the systematic, corporate "thingification" of our unhoused neighbors; human beings bearing the sacred, inviolable image of the living God who are treated not as beloved siblings in need of shelter, healthcare, and dignity, but as municipal eyesores to be swept out of sight by bulldozers and police barricades.

We open our news feeds and watch legislative bodies across this nation churn out hundreds of cruel, targeted bills designed to criminalize and erase our transgender and queer siblings, sacrificing the lives of vulnerable children on the altar of cynical political power. When we see these things, American civil religion tells us to calm down, be reasonable, trust the system, and pray for patience. It tells us to spray our spiritual air freshener and whisper, "God is in control."

No. The biblical witness refuses that narcotic lie. Remember the holy ground we stood on when we reflected on the raising of Lazarus. When Jesus arrived at Bethany, Martha looked at him and said, "*Lord, already there is a stench, for he has been dead four days.*" Jesus did not reach for a bottle of perfume to mask the smell of decomposition. He did not tell Martha to look on the bright side. He stood right there in the stench, stared into the darkness of the tomb, and he **wept**. He **groaned with an anger** that shook his spirit.

God does not require us to pretend that everything is fine when we are distinctly, unequivocally not fine. God does not ask for our manufactured composure. When you stand at the edge of a dry riverbed, when your heart is broken by injustice, when God's timeline feels agonizingly, excruciatingly slow; bringing your raw, unvarnished grief and holy exasperation to God is not an act of rebellion, it is the ultimate act of covenantal honesty.

We have been conditioned by the dominant shallow theology to believe that doubt, anger, and struggle are the opposites of faith. We are told that strong believers simply accept, submit, and smile. Yet our spiritual ancestors tell a radically

different story. Think back to the foundational story of Jacob at the ford of the Jabbok in Genesis 32. Jacob is terrified, alone in the wilderness, caught between the wreckage of his past and the terrifying uncertainty of his future. In the dead of night, an enigmatic divine stranger grips him in the dark. Jacob throws his arms around the stranger and wrestles. And when his hip is thrown out of joint and the agony is blinding, Jacob tightens his grip and roars into the face of God: *"I will not let you go unless you bless me!"*

That is not the behavior of an unbeliever. That is the ferocious, stubborn tenacity of someone who believes that God is real enough, close enough, and personal enough to be wrestled with. Holy exasperation is the deepest sign of faith because it refuses to settle for a distant, disembodied deity who sits untouched in the clouds.

If we relate to God through tidy techniques, doctrinal formulas, and polite pieties, we are trying to control the encounter. We operate out of a "false self," the curated ego that manages God like a vendor, trading good behavior for guaranteed security. But when you step into the ring to wrestle, when you bring your real anger, your unedited tears, your holy rage over the state of this world, you abandon the illusion of control. You risk the terrifying vulnerability of a genuine encounter with the living God. And what happens when you wrestle with God? You do not walk away unchanged. Jacob receives a new name, Israel, "the one who strives with God;" but he also walks away with a permanent limp.

True spiritual transformation is never painless. If you have chosen to love people in a violent world, you will limp. If you have chosen to stand in solidarity with the oppressed and take the blows meant for them, you will have scars. If your heart has broken open for the suffering of this planet, you will walk with a holy wound. Those scars are not evidence of your spiritual failure; they are the holy marks of having shown up to wrestle with the Divine and refusing to walk away without a blessing.

When we understand this wrestling match, Jesus' fierce reaction to Peter in Matthew 16 snaps into sharp clarity. When Jesus reveals that faithfulness requires suffering, solidarity, and the cross, Peter rebukes him. And Jesus turns on his beloved disciple with words that cut like a razor: *"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."*

Why does Jesus use such severe language? Because Peter is operating entirely out of what Scripture calls "the flesh." Not our physical, biological bodies; which God made and called good. Rather, "the flesh" is what the Reformers described as *homo incurvatus in se*, humanity curved inward on itself. The flesh is the self-protective, survivalist ego. It is that fearful, hoarding instinct that claws for its own comfort, security, and preservation at any cost.

Peter wanted the theology of glory. He wanted the soft robes, the gilded halls, and the stable illusions of the palace. He wanted a messianic regime that would use the weapons of Caesar to defeat Caesar, keeping Peter safe, vindicated, and in charge. Jesus looked at the palace and chose the valley instead. Jesus chose limitedness. He chose "the human option." In the incarnation and on the road to Calvary, the Son of God flatly refused the divine loophole of safety. He did not hover six inches above the dirt of human misery; he stepped directly into it. He refused to call down legions of angels to protect himself from the brutality of the empire.

To set our minds on the Spirit rather than the flesh means choosing that very same valley. It means denying our "SELF," not denying our inherent worth as children of God, but dismantling the self-protective, ego-driven armor that keeps us isolated from our neighbor's pain. It means allowing the Holy Spirit to winnow away the dry chaff of our privilege, our fragile defenses, and our desperate need for control.

Taking up your cross does not mean tolerating abuse or glorifying suffering for suffering's sake. Taking up your cross is the deliberate, courageous, and costly choice to stand in the direction of tears. It is the choice to anchor your life in radical solidarity with the crucified people of our world, even when it costs you your comfort, your social capital, and your peace of mind.

So what does God say to all of this? When Jeremiah is done screaming at the heavens, accusing God of being a deceitful brook and an untrustworthy stream, how does the Almighty respond? Does God strike him down for insolence? Does God demand a groveling apology and a promise to be more polite? Listen to Jeremiah 15:19: *"Therefore thus says the Lord: If you turn back, I will take you back, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth."*

Look at the grace hidden in that verse. God does not rebuke Jeremiah's anger. God says: *Your raw, unfiltered honesty, your willingness to bring your real, bleeding heart into my presence, that is what is precious.* What is "worthless" is the cheap, plastic piety of those who pretend that evil does not exist. What is worthless is the smooth, comfortable silence of religious people who look away from oppression to protect their own peace. But when you stand in the ruins and utter your holy grief, when you lament with a rage born of love, your voice becomes the very mouthpiece of God.

And how do we survive this journey? How do we keep from drowning in the dry riverbeds of our exhaustion? We look to Romans 12. Paul writes to an embattled, persecuted community living right under the shadow of the Roman imperial eagle: *"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good... extend hospitality to strangers... weep with those who weep... live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are."*

This is not a list of quaint moral suggestions to hang on a kitchen wall. This is an underground survival manual. This is a blueprint for collective survival and mutual aid in the wilderness of empire. We do not survive the parched lands by going it alone in rugged individualism. We survive by looking at one another in our weakness, taking our dry canteens, and sharing our water. We survive by weeping together when the grief is too heavy to bear alone. We survive by opening our tables to the stranger, wrapping our arms around our targeted queer siblings, defending our unhoused neighbors, and building a rising, alternate world of solidarity right in the crumbling shell of the old.

So, church: take off your masks of comfortable compliance. Drop your cans of spiritual Febreze. Bring your weary spirits, your frustrated hearts, your limping bodies, and your holy rage right here to the altar of the living Christ. Do not be afraid of the wrestling, and do not fear the tears. For when we dare to tell the truth in the presence of God, the dry bones begin to rattle, and the breath of the Holy Spirit begins to move through the dust, breathing life into a weary world.

Go be human, be humanity, be righteous, be who God created you to be... Amen.