



Women's Day

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection – Jeremiah 9:17-20 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 17) Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider, and call for the mourning women to come; send for the skilled women to come; (v.18) let them quickly raise a dirge over us, so that our eyes may run down with tears, and our eyelids flow with water. (v. 19) For a sound of wailing is heard from Zion: "How we are ruined! We are utterly shamed, because we have left the land, because they have cast down our dwellings." (v. 20) Hear, O women, the word of the Lord, and let your ears receive the word of his mouth; teach to your daughters a dirge, and each to her neighbor a lament.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

After years of trying to organize Negro Baptists, Nannie Helen Burroughs stood on the floor of the National Baptist Convention in 1906 and proposed that a special Sunday should be set aside every year that would give women the opportunity to sharpen their public speaking skills and offer them much needed training in leadership. Ms. Burroughs herself was a mere twenty-seven years old when she lobbied and succeeded in persuading the Negro Baptist male preachers in attendance of the wisdom of her idea. Negro Baptist women went to work that year making Women's Day a reality in their local churches. Exactly how and when Women's Day ceased to be about empowering women and came to be associated with big time money raising in the church is not clear. But we do know that ten years later Burroughs wrote women leaders throughout the church complaining that contrary to its original purpose which was to lift women,

Women's day had degenerated into some kind of rivalry to "beat the men raising money for the local churches."¹

A century later Women's Day remains a major fundraising day in black churches everywhere. But, we also have Women's Day to thank for giving many women who otherwise would never have had the chance to learn to how speak in public and organize fundraising campaigns. It also gave them the opportunity to focus on causes important to them and lift up scriptural passages important to women's spiritual formation.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Jeremiah 9:17-20

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Were it not for the special Women's Day services lots of women entering ministry over the past decades would not have had much opportunity to preach to God's people. Women's Day provided women clergy a platform for sacred utterances and working out their calling by God to minister. With all the planning and organizing that goes into executing church events, Women's Day also gave non-clergy women in the church opportunities to test their leadership and organizing skills and contemplate their own sense of vocation. As long as the church remains a patriarchal institution with men holding the lion's share of the decision making power in the church, Women's Day will likely continue to play an important role in raising up new generations of women leaders in the church.²

Further, Women's Day services historically give women in the church an opportunity to broadcast loudly to the world who they are and what they care about. From the scripture to the theme to the social cause they lift up (or not), women of the church get to say what issues matter to them. Women who see helping the poor, joining breast cancer walks and tutoring adults in reading as an extension of their Christian faith are likely to use Women's Day as a chance to inspire other women to see justice work and alleviating the suffering of the world as part of their Christian duty. Women who do not have alleviating suffering on the mind are likely not to use Women's Day as chance to address issues of justice and power.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Grief, anguish and weeping permeate the book of Jeremiah. Much of the prophet's preaching directed as it was at the public sphere of policy making – the policies and preachments of kings, priests, scribes, the ruling elite, merchants, and other prophets – Jeremiah's imaginary audience was male, those who had a certain relationship to power and decision making could appreciate some of the assumptions about rights, duty, power, violence, shame and honor embedded in such imagery. The bulk of his preaching was directed at those whose social, economic, political and religious rankling placed Judah at risk abroad. But, in the end, his belief in corporate responsibility would force him to conclude that everyone is guilty from the least to the greatest.

How can the prophet be expected to contain his own emotions in the face of this trauma? Poems referred alternately by commentators as "Jeremiah's confessions" or "Jeremiah's laments" are

scattered throughout the book, portraying him as a prophet besieged by anguish, loneliness and grief (Jeremiah 11:18-12:6, 15:10-15:21, 17:14-17:18, 18:18-18:23). Beyond the “confessions” are other materials scattered throughout the book: it is this material that lends weight to his image as “The Weeping Prophet.” Mourning women are called upon to lead the nation in weeping over the nation’s disaster (vv. 9:17-19). Bereft of her offspring, who have perished by sword and pestilence or languish in exile, Rachel weeps inconsolably (Jeremiah 31:15). Even the earth and its creatures shed tears at sight of the heap of ruins that is now Jerusalem (v. 9:10). How can the prophet be expected to contain his own emotions in the face of this trauma?

It is quite possible, as many have surmised, that the reason these laments have been included among his oracles was to enhance his reputation as a true prophet in the tradition of Moses; someone who neither sought the prophetic office and suffered greatly for his obedience. Jeremiah calls women to their senses.

*Consider now! Call for the wailing women to come; send for the most skillful of them.
Let them come out quickly and wail over us till our eyes overflow with tears
and water streams from our eyelids.
The sound of wailing is heard from Zion;
How ruined we are! How great is our shame!*
(Jeremiah 9:18-20)

Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann describes a three-dimensional character of conflict and distress reflected in the genre known as the lament: 1) there is a social dimension—trouble from some outside source; 2) there is a theological dimension—complaint is made against God; and 3) there is a personal dimension—the internal crisis of the lamenter. “Whatever the suffering lamented, the whole of one’s being comes into expression in these three dimensions”—social, theological, and personal. In Jeremiah 9, it’s clear that destruction and invasion are the outside source behind this lament. Taking the chapter as a whole, it’s clear that Jeremiah directs his harshest criticism against God for seeming to abandon the tiny nation and giving them over into the hands of the Babylonians. The internal crisis is that Jeremiah is as stumped, as disappointed and outraged as God. The passion of his poetry proves that it is not always clear who was speaking and to whom. Sometimes Jeremiah and God are one, and it is not clear who is speaking, Jeremiah or God.

In chapter 9, Jeremiah employs the image of professional mourning women to dramatize the calamity of the coming destruction. He summons the professional mourners to come and wail. But the dead in this case is not an individual corpse, but an entire nation. He enlists the help of women mourners because in wartime women and children tend to suffer disproportionately. Women are kidnapped and raped and, depending upon how much resistance they put up, women are killed by invading soldiers. Children are ripped from their mother’s arms, and those not outright killed are left orphaned. The book of Lamentations, which for centuries was tied to the prophet of Jeremiah, gives us painful insight into the cruelties of war.

Women banding together in circles professionally or spontaneously keening and mourning over their dead is a familiar sight in almost all parts of the world. From India to Africa and Australia

to China women are well-known for crying at funerals. In North America, the death of a loved one is the one acceptable time when men are permitted to break down and women are permitted to cry their hearts out over their loss. Public laments become a way to speak up and say that something has gone horribly wrong in society. After all, it is precisely the dominant power's inability to feel, care, empathize with and be touched by the pain of its citizens, the outcries of those it has colonized, that makes it treat its citizens unjustly.

Jeremiah expects women to get it. "There is no such thing as a just war." "If they come for one group in the morning, they will return for another group in the evening." "Our children are paying for our sins." We don't always get it, of course. Not all women, that is. Some women are as invested in not seeing, not feeling, and not repenting as the men. But Jeremiah holds out hope for one group of women, those women who are professional mourners. They feel deeply because they see deeply what's going on and know how to use their talents and gifts as women to say what the men cannot bring themselves to admit. We are ruined!

The reality of human suffering raises serious questions for believers. "Is the Lord not in Zion?" (Jeremiah v. 8:19), they wanted to know when word spread that the Babylonians had breached the city walls. If God is truly active in the world and if God is loving and just, why should people suffer? The God they sought was the God of war, battle, retribution and vindication. In other words, "Where is God?" is a question African Americans have lots of experience asking in their long and torturous history as exiles on these North American shores. Prophet after prophet has risen and tried to answer the question for each new generation of black people born in this country who have had to face racism in its changing mutations over the centuries. Those prophets are to be commended for their efforts. But what they had to say has all but been forgotten. It is the music of African Americans that has had the most lasting impression: the slave songs, the blues, the spirituals the jazz sessions, the rhythm and blues tunes, the protest songs, the rap music, the gospel music that have been enduring as generation after generation has sought solace in music in the face of such unanswerable questions as: Where is God?; How Are We To Make It?; Now what?; How long?; What's Going on?; Where is the Love?; or Does God Care? Of course, in the dominant culture, no tears, no groaning, no public wailing is allowed. And real men don't cry. Ours is a world where grief is treason, a failure of nerve, a flaw in leadership.

Much of the prophet's preaching was directed at the public sphere of policy making; the policies and preachments of kings, priests, scribes, the ruling elite, merchants, and other prophets. Jeremiah's imaginary audience was male. Especially those who had a certain relationship to power and decision making and could appreciate some of the assumptions about rights, duty, power, violence, shame and honor embedded in such imagery. But when he wanted to pierce the stone-faced facade of patriarchy, and get to the heart of the matter, he called on women to join him.

In a generation where justice is a savvy catch phrase, the church must be willing to give a voice to injustice and brokenness of the world by seeking the deliverance of God. The precursor to the justice of God being revealed is recognition of the injustice that exists.

“A God who must always be praised and never assaulted,” says Walter Brueggemann, “correlates with a development of a False Self, and an uncritical status quo. But a God who is available in assault correlates with the emergence of genuine self and the development of serious justice.”³

We are admonished in scripture to “weep with those who weep. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law” (Gal. 6:2). There are times that we must weep for ourselves, too; and times that we must weep for the world. Our crying can be acts of solidarity with other women around the world: women who are the victims of genocidal rape in Darfur; women who are killed by their Muslim husbands for not being virgins on their wedding night; girls who are held down by other women during female genital surgery in their village; girls who are kidnapped and held as sex slaves here in the US. It’s easy to share another’s joy, but...sharing their sorrows calls for greater intimacy, empathy, vulnerability and love. Jesus himself was deeply moved in spirit and troubled when he saw the sorrow of Mary and Martha weeping over the death of their brother Lazarus. His weeping in sorrow models for us his own loss of words, and his own giving over to the prayers of his body—his tears.

Challenge

When was the last time you wept? Did you cry when Baghdad was bombed? Did you cry at the sight of thousands crammed into the superdome in New Orleans. Did you cry when you heard about another girl gone missing or being raped? Do you cry at the failure of the health care reform?

Some Christians have felt that there is no need for Old Testament laments now that Jesus has come. But even Jesus wept. He wept over the hardhearted. Women should find it heartening to know that even our Savior Jesus was unafraid to shed tears in public. Jesus wept. Not only did he weep over Jerusalem, but he was courageous enough to utter his own anguished lament there on the cross just before his death: “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

Another way to view this material thousands of years later is to see the oracles of weeping and gnashing of the teeth as a reminder of the anguish God feels watching the rebellious actions Judah exhibits (Jeremiah 5:9, 29) leading up to her destruction in 587 BCE and the grief God feels in the face of Judah’s destruction (Jeremiah 8:18). The truth is that many times it’s not quite clear who is weeping: the prophet, the inhabitants, or God (Jeremiah 8:18-21; 9:1-3). What we should take away from all of this is notion that God is not immune to human suffering and human loss. The prophet’s pain is God’s pain. Conversely, God’s pain is the prophet’s pain. We can only imagine the reaction Jeremiah met with from his audience. The ridiculous notion of the Sovereign God weeping probably only added to Jeremiah’s reputation as a crackpot of a prophet. Our emotions are not embarrassing to God. God does not call us to hold it in, button it up, suck it up, and keep up the façade. Even God weeps. Even Jesus wept. Our ability to cry is what makes us human and is what makes us able to empathize with others who suffer too. Let us never allow others to make apologize for tears. Let it move us to never accepting cruelty as normalcy.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The loud piercing keening of women who will not be hushed into silence; the sound of a woman screaming for help; a mother buckling and falling to the ground when told some bad news; the sound of women following Jesus to the cross (Luke 23:27), begging him not to do it; and

Sight (Imagine in your “mind’s eye”): You may want to ask your congregation to contemplate *What does a crying man sound or look like?*

III. Additional Material that Preachers and Other Can Use

There’s a favorite mourning scene found in Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon. Ignoring tradition, Pilate bursts through the church door of her granddaughter’s funeral shouting “Mercy!” and begins walking toward Hagar’s coffin, shaking her head as if that will help the reality of Hagar’s death not be real. Reba, Hagar’s mother and Pilate’s daughter, joins the older woman at the coffin singing “Mercy” in a call and response ritual that everyone in attendance joins in.

In the Darkness. Mercy
In the morning. Mercy
On my knees now.
Mercy. Mercy. Mercy. Mercy.

At the close of the ceremony, Pilate identifies Hagar as her baby girl, repeating the words for all the attendees. In the end, Pilate proclaims loudly to the heavens and everyone in attendance, "And she was loved."

Notes

1. See, Alice Gantton’s article on Nannie Helen Burroughs. Online location: http://www.nccusa.org/nmu/mce/womens_day.pdf accessed 10 January 2010
2. See, Weems, Renita J. “Holy Ground.” Listening for God: A Minister’s Journey Through Silence and Doubt. Simon & Schuster, 1999.
3. Brueggemann, Walter. “The Costly Loss of Lament.” JSOT 36 (1986): 65.