

Journeying with Jeremiah, Part 5: "Pathos"
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for September 18th 2016 (18th Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Jeremiah 8: 18- 9:1

*Oh that my head were waters,
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
that I might weep day and night
for the slain of the daughter of my people!*

It can be more than difficult to determine—with any sense of precision—difficult to determine the context against which many of the writings of the prophet Jeremiah ought to be heard. That's certainly true of this morning's prophetic utterance which, in so many ways, represents something of a cry from the heart. Our best guess...and it's a reasonably good guess...is that this morning's lament is in some way connected with events that unfolded roughly 600 years prior to the birth of Christ: that time when the armies of the King of Babylon were reinforcing their control over the city of Jerusalem, including the exiling of Judah's King and many of the city's elite. For those living through the experience, it was hard to discern whose fate was the more humiliating and difficult: those who were reduced to the life of an exile far from home, or those who were left behind as part of a vassal people, in thrall to the vastly superior strength of Babylon. Either way, it is hardly difficult to imagine the impulse that created the three-way dialogue we hear in this morning's reading: a dialogue in which the people first ask God why this has been allowed to happen:

Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King not in her?

„,with God then responding by inviting the people to recall the way in which **their** betrayal provoked **His** anger...

*Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images
and with their foreign idols?*

...and finally, with Jeremiah all the while, bemoaning the state to which his people have been reduced:

*Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there??
Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored?*

A three way dialogue....although, to be honest...one of the great challenges in reading much of Jeremiah, is that we can often find it difficult to be certain when it is Jeremiah doing the speaking...and when it is God speaking through Jeremiah! Hold that thought.

* * * * *

The name Gilead...courtesy of the famous Gospel hymn we sang a few moments ago...the place-name Gilead is well known to us, along with the fact that it appears to have been famous for the balm produced there. That balm—although its identity clearly cannot be specified with 100% certainty—is likely to have been a resin from balsam or some other tree found in the Gilead region: the hill country north of Jerusalem and to the East of the Jordan river: in other words, the hill-country now located in modern day Jordan. I was struck, this past week: struck by the fact that Gilead first appears in the Bible in connection with the story of Jacob: specifically Jacob's return from the household of his uncle Laban. Also of interest is the river that runs dead-centre through Gilead, namely the river Jabbok: lo and behold, the very river at which Jacob is said to have wrestled with God. Given the extent to which some scholars draw a connection between the writings of Jeremiah—and the section of Genesis that describes the adventures of Jeremiah's ancient ancestor the patriarch Jacob—don't be too quick to dismiss the connection between Jacob's Gilead and Jeremiah's balm. At any rate: hold that thought as well: hold the thought of Jacob wrestling at the Jabbok smack dab in the midst of Gilead and its balm. Hold that thought side by side with the thought that there are times—numerous times—when Jeremiah cries out on behalf of his beloved people where it can be more than a little bit difficult to know when it is Jeremiah crying out...and when it is actually God crying out. And as you hold those twin thoughts, ponder this: ponder one essential word, the word **pathos...pathos**.

There, once again, is a photo of Jewish theologian, the late great Abraham Joshua Heschel. As you may recall from last week, Heschel was the author of a highly regarded study of the Hebrew prophets. Last week...last week I made the point that Heschel, in his study, expands our understanding of who these prophets really and truly were. If it is the case—and I believe it is—that the Israelite prophets, first and foremost, were those entitled to speak the solemn formula: "Thus saith the LORD"...Heschel deepens that understanding by stressing that the prophets, in addition to speaking God's Word, were both blessed and cursed with the capacity to see what God sees, including all of the things to which you and I regularly shut our eyes. However: Heschel's defining contribution to our understanding of the prophets goes further and is defined by that one small word: pathos!

And yes: those of you who are up on your Aristotle, will know that pathos is the word Aristotle used to describe the sense of pity—the sense of sympathy, the sense of fellow-feeling—evoked in us when we view a great tragedy. For Heschel, when he adopts that word for his own purposes, pathos becomes a way of designating the close connection between the "heart of the prophet" and the "heart of the God" on whose behalf the prophet speaks. As Heschel puts it: "Together with receptivity to the word of God, [the prophets] were endowed with a receptivity to the presence of God." Far from serving merely as untouched

transmitters of messages from God to God's people—the equivalent of a FAX machine!—the prophets were living, breathing human instruments through whom God experienced the joys and sorrows, the triumphs and betrayals of God's people. Above all, what the divine pathos entails, is the reality that human sin and human brokenness—our casual cruelty and our studied indifference to one another's pain—those are things that don't merely break the prophet's heart. No: such things also break the heart of the God on whose behalf the prophet cries out in distress.

And it is ever so important that we don't confuse "pathos" with "passion". It's not only the Buddhist tradition that warns of the dangers that await when passion leads us astray. Much of the Christian spiritual tradition preaches the same sort of detachment that Buddhism is known to preach. And so, when we speak of the pathos of the prophet—or even more daringly when we speak of the pathos of God—what we are not suggesting is that God is subject to the kinds of mood swings and irrational actions we might associate with a four year old having a temper tantrum...or, for that matter...with a 65 year old having a temper tantrum! God forbid. Nevertheless: what it most certainly does mean when we speak of the pathos of the prophet and the pathos of the God of the prophets: what that most certainly does mean is that this God, our God, is not some detached, indifferent observer of the human scene, any more than the prophet is a detached observer of the human scene. This is the God who is utterly committed to the human project; this is the God whose own future is intimately connected to the human future.

As Heschel insists: "Never in history has humanity been taken as seriously as in prophetic thinking! The human is not only an image of God; the human being is a perpetual concern of God. The idea of pathos adds a new dimension to human existence. Whatever a human being does affects not only her own life, but also the life of God insofar as it is directed to humanity. The human is a consort, a partner, a factor in the life of God." Which helps to explain why we sometimes find it tough to know where the voice of Jeremiah ends, and the voice of God begins! Which also helps to explain why it is far from impious to claim that God might be willing even to get down into the dirt, in order to wrestle with a rascal like Jacob. And yes, yes, yes: why it is also far from impious to claim that God, in the fullness of time, chose to enter into an association so intimate with humanity, that this very God—the God whose heart-cries can be heard in the heart-cries of the prophets—far from impious to suggest that such a God might reach so far....might stoop so low...might risk so much...as to take flesh...and make a house-call to our broken, hurting human world! Living and breathing, teaching, preaching and healing...struggling side by side with us as one of us and—in the end—offering his life that others might have life...and have it in abundance.

* * * * *

There you have it: a pretty clear indication as to why Abraham Joshua Heschel, and his notion of the divine pathos, has rung such a cordial bell among his Christian readers. I would, of course, not wish to claim that Heschel was a closet Christian; he most certainly was not. And yet, it is pretty hard for a Christian not to notice something of a connection between the God who cries out in the words of the prophets, and the God who cries out from the Cross. Nor is it much of a leap for Christian theology to make the claim that in the life and death, Cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we find the pathos of God most powerfully manifested. And I must say...this much I must say.

I find it more than a wee bit appropriate that this morning's text represents the half-way point in the lectionary's journey—and therefore our journey—through this small selection of writings from Jeremiah. Frankly, were Jeremiah simply a scold...and Jeremiah's God simply an unfeeling manufacturer of ancient laws and customs...I am not certain I would have the stomach to inflict nine of these texts upon myself, let alone this congregation. Thankfully, that's not the case. Surely: when the prophet yearns for tears to flow—when we see something of God's own tears in the prophet's tears—is it not the living Christ to whom we thereby bear witness? And yes: when the prophet insists that there is balm to be found in Gilead...when Jeremiah and Jeremiah's God reminds the people that there is healing to be found in the tough but tender love that surrounds them: is it not the living Christ to whom we are being directed? Above all: when Jeremiah and his fellow prophets point us to a love that demands so much of us...but also of a grace that seeks to reclaim us even in our abandonment of that very grace: is it not, in fact, the arms of Christ that seek to embrace and renew and encourage us?

For good reason, we call that potent brew of comfort and challenge the Gospel: the **good** news! May we know its healing balm! May it flourish in our midst! This day...and always. Through Christ. Amen!