

Sustenance from Jeremiah

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [October 24, 2001](#) issue

This preacher was grateful for the lectionary during September. I often argue with the choices of texts for particular Sundays. But when the events of September 11 replaced all other agendas, including my carefully planned preaching topics, I turned to the lectionary with gratitude. What I found, of course, was Jeremiah, trying to make sense of tragedy, trying to say an honest word while the world as he and his people knew it was coming to an end, trying to say something about the future when the current moment looked hopelessly grim.

I recalled how J. Coert Rylaarsdam, professor of Old Testament at the University of Chicago, loved Jeremiah and taught that Jeremiah's fierce, uncompromising love for God and his nation motivated him to do and say extraordinary things, things that often got him in trouble. Listening to the professor, I concluded that Jeremiah must have looked a lot like Rylaarsdam: short, wiry, balding, energetic, with bushy eyebrows and brightly fierce eyes.

As I thought about trying to say an honest and helpful word, and tried to cope with my own feelings, I was helped by Jeremiah 8. "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick . . . Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?"

Jeremiah does not hesitate to lay the blame for Jerusalem's dilemma and imminent demise on the people themselves—more willing than most of us are to assign blame.

But there is a turn in the middle of Jeremiah's lament in which Jerusalem's grief becomes his grief. "Hark, the cry of my poor people . . . Is the Lord not in Zion? . . . For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me."

In the mysterious way of God's spokespersons, God's own voice speaks through the prophet. God is hurt, God mourns alongside the people. That was, and is, a healing word for all of us.

And then, in Chapter 32, we read that Jeremiah purchases a field at Anathoth just as the nation, economy and political structure are about to disappear. Is there a more

defiantly hopeful gesture? In the midst of his people's humiliation Jeremiah invests in the future. "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."

So the cleanup continues for us, as well as the sorting out of our own experiences and feelings. Now it is time to deal with the reality of international terrorism, but also with the equally important tasks, in Jeremiah's terms, of self-examination, of repentance for whatever responsibility we bear as a nation for our suffering, and of rebuilding for a future in God's hope when "houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in the land."