

Moving through bad days (Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28)

Jeremiah's ministry bleeds into his humanity.

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Chamomile tea with honey and lemon. Put on some Nina Simone or Beautiful Chorus or John Coltrane or Beverly Glenn-Copeland or Lizz Wright. Make sure the windows are cracked and there is fresh air. Slowly, deeply breathe in: one-two-three-four. Exhale: one-two-three-four-five-six. Journal and keep writing until you see your way through the thicket of this. See and hear and write. Say and say and say some more until you can empty the despair from your belly. Feel all of it. And pray if you can. If not, sigh long and deep sighs and trust that God knows how to interpret.

It's not an exhaustive list, but on the days that the weight and ugliness and hardness and hate of this world fill me with bitterness that causes me to grind my teeth, rail at the heavens, and do everything but bless the affairs of humankind, I remind myself of some of the things that help me to move through terrible days.

Whether I am finding myself overwhelmed by what seems to be the never-ending gun violence against elders and children and generations in between or reeling from the impact of the continued marginalization of Black and Brown bodies or the lack of honesty and integrity in leadership on national and local levels or the refusal to care for the environment in the face of certain and not-so-far-in-the-future destruction . . . these are the kinds of days that give me plenty of opportunities to practice the art of lament.

Lament means giving voice to grief and sorrow and despair. It is a helpful tool for contemporary believers—and one that was utilized by psalmists and prophets of old.

Jeremiah was well acquainted with the art of lament. He often gave full and painful expression to the despair and grief caused by the heartbreaking behaviors of the people of God. His ministry did not afford him the luxury of standing off to the side or being perched high on a balcony overlooking the wayward behaviors of a chosen people. He was a prophet to and among the people, and he experienced the agony of the nation firsthand.

This is the burden of prophets: to hear and proclaim the heart of God through one's own lenses, experiences, emotions, concerns, anxieties, and fears. The prophet finds one's body straddling the frailty of humanity and the omnipotence of God, and in the midst of such a pull there are moments in which the weight and anger of it all erupt.

This is what we hear of the prophecy and lament in Jeremiah 4. God has had enough of the shortsightedness, disobedience, and corruption of the people. Even nature bears the mark of their defiance. Judgment is imminent. Destruction and desolation are on the way. God is full of disgust, and apparently so is Jeremiah.

I am encouraged by the ways Jeremiah's ministry bleeds into his humanity. So often we ministers portray ourselves as purely objective, offering a word of encouragement or correction from a pure heart and with a divinely washed agenda. Nothing could be further from the truth. Even on our best day, who we are as vessels and as human beings are intentionally and inexplicably connected.

God relies on this. To do work in the world we must be affected by the world. To sense the heart and intention of God we must be moved by the heart and intention of God. And as we navigate the hard parts of this prophetic project, on the days that the weight and despair threaten to overwhelm us, we must find ways to feel all that we can—and make full use of disciplines like lament to help us give voice to the hard things and see our way through to the other side.

We also might occasionally need Coltrane and chamomile tea.