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“Unabashedly Desperate for God”

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25nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Jeremiah 8:18–9:1; 1 Timothy 2:1–7; Matthew 5:1–12

Do you ever wonder what we would have done with someone like Jeremiah today?
He whines, he mourns, he laments, he cries, he is crushed, he is gripped by horror.

He describes his head as a spring of water,
and his eyes as a fountain of tears.

He weeps continuously, night and day,
making no attempt to hide the extent of his despair.

Do you think a physician today might label him severely depressed,
and insist that he see a counselor, a comforter, immediately?

Do you think the modern-day balm in Gilead might be Prozac or Zoloff,
Topomax or Abilify, or a cocktail of all of the above?

And what shape would God's people be in today if we drugged our prophets
and modified their messages from God with mind-altering substances?

Just a thought.....

...because Jeremiah is at his most desperate in today's text.

He is at emotional ground zero, reaching up towards a Comforter who can heal
his people's sin-sick souls, and his.

And he makes no bones about it.

To his credit, he claims his state of being. He cries openly and unabashedly.

He states his case clearly: my heart is faint within me.

And he reaches up to the higher power of his Comforter,

Yahweh God, who appears to be out of town
at the moment, or on vacation, anywhere except in Zion's midst,
where the need for God is code orange.

But I have to admit some confusion in Jeremiah's poem:
who's doing the speaking here?

"O my Comforter", "*my* heart is faint", "listen to the cry of *my* people",
"*my* people are crushed", "Why is there no healing for the wound of *my* people?"

On one hand, it seems very clear that the prophet Jeremiah
has pulled out his handkerchief, and is lamenting the
fate of "his people", Judah, the southern kingdom of God's people Israel,
socked far away from home in exile in Babylon,
where many have lost their lives.

There are tears in his beers.

Moreover, we hear the plaintive wail of *my people* themselves,

"Is the Lord not in Zion?

Is her King no longer there?" (Jer. 19b)

But even beyond these, a third voice registers, that can only be the voice of the Lord.

"Why have they provoked *me* to anger with their images,
with their worthless foreign idols?" (Jer. 19c)

And at some points Jeremiah's own voice sounds like it could be God's voice, too,
sharing the anguish and pathos that comes with the people's failings and plight.

So, who is lamenting, really? Who is doing the comforting?

And who is reaching out to whom?

Mary Karr, in her memoir, *Lit*, tells the story of her own sickness, and her healing,
from a lifetime substance-abuse habit.

On one hand, it is the story of her failings and plight:

her inability to balance her successes,

as a poet, writer, teacher, and published author,

with her responsibilities as a wife and mother.

And on the other hand it is the story of God's descent to meet her there,
at the nadir of her life, as she struggles to stay sober,
to hold her marriage together, to remain a good mother to her son,
to handle the stress of being a gifted writer.

She had thought that liquor might be her savior, her comforter,
the one balm that would salve her aches and loosen the knots that
bound her so graciously.

But when she found herself at rock bottom, needing to kiss the bottle good-bye,
she committed herself to daily AA meetings: 90 meetings and 90 days.

She compares her disease to cancer, and those AA meetings to chemo.

"It's not a luxury," she says. "It's not a help.

It's what stands between you and going insane or winding up in the boneyard."

(Karr. *Lit*, p. 216).

But the higher power thing that her AA sponsors suggest is difficult for her to swallow.

Her higher power had always been poetry, which I can totally understand.

Poetry was "one of the sole spiritual acts in our mostly godless household,"
she admits.

"Such a small, pure object a poem could be, made of nothing but air,
a tiny string of letters, maybe small enough to fit in the palm of your hand.

But it could blow everybody's head off". (Lit, p. 59)

Poetry may have been her higher power for a while,
but it could not be the balm that would save her.

And so she steps away from the alcohol, and tries numerous disciplines first,
before someone suggests that she simply try, as an experiment,
kneeling every morning and every night,
and praying into the void, to something higher than herself.

The voice of Mary Karr swore that she didn't believe in God at that point.

But when I read her memoir, I think I heard the voice-over of God
just beyond her own words, saying... *but, I believe in Mary.*

And so, she starts to pray, as she says,

"not with the misty-eyed glee she'd seen on *Song of Bernadette*,
nor with the butch conviction of Charlton Heston playing Moses
on the *Ten Commandments*...

but with belligerence, at least once a middle finger aimed at the light fixture -
(her)my own small unloaded bazooka pointed at the Almighty....
saying, *Keep me sober*, in the morning, and, *Thanks*, at night. (*Lit*, p. 79)

And I imagine I heard that soothing, divine voice-over again,
similar to the hidden one in Jeremiah's lament,
saying, *That's a good start. Let the healing begin.*

And then, wonder of wonders, Mary Karr manages to stay sober
for more than a period of weeks at a time,
but still she remains an agnostic.

Nevertheless, she continues her life-experiment towards her so called
"baffling odd sobriety", expanding it somewhat to include a brief
litany of thanks.

"I started mouthing rote thank-you's to the air," she says,
"and right off, I discovered...an entire aspect of my life that I'd been blind to -
the small, good things that come in abundance...
(instead of the bad news, the uber-realistic worldview to which I had clung
so desperately for its rationality; instead of the magical force for evil,
I'd always believed." (*Sinners Welcome*, p. 83-84)

And so, to make a long, three-volume memoir short,
those mouthed please and thank you petitions lead Mary Karr to God eventually,
and God leads her to church,
with a journey "fueled by some massively freakish coincidences
which proved over the years that any energy seeking God paid off
a hundredfold," she relates. (*Sinners Welcome*, p. 77)

And I read Mary's memoir, fascinated by what she describes as blathering
her way towards God, unabashedly desperate for help.

And it reminded me of another blathering figure in Scripture, Hannah,
described in 1 Samuel as so unabashedly desperate
that she and her husband might conceive a child,
that she shows up at the Temple regularly
with a head like a spring of water,
and eyes like a fountain of tears,
mouthing prayers like some dithering dipsomaniac.

So much so, that the priest, Eli, thinking her to be drunk,
castigates her publicly for her inappropriate Temple behavior.

To which she responds, "Not so, Lord. I am a woman deeply troubled.

I have not been drinking wine or beer, but was pouring out my soul
to the Lord." (1 Samuel 1:15)

And in that outpouring, that blathering, that particular praying into the void,
again, voices start to get confused,
and God's voice starts to mimic the petitioner's own pain and anguish,
and God's healing balm is dispensed.

Who's the one lamenting?

Well, on the surface it's Hannah,
but it also seems that God becomes the one lamenting
the petitioner's angst and hurt.

Who's the one doing the comforting?

Well, we envision God as our Comfort;
that maybe God climbs down the stairway of our grief,
to touch and heal us in the basement of our heart.

But maybe God, also, is seeking our comfort,
as people unabashedly desperate for God's counsel.

And who's reaching out to whom?

Maybe God is reaching out to us constantly, looking for the access points
of unabashed desperation, the gates of beauty, where God might
enter into our pain with soothing salve.

Theologian Dan Migliore says it this way:

“God's accompanying of the creatures in their suffering is sheer grace,
unexpected companionship in the depths of affliction.

The presence of another in the experience of suffering is a gift;
the presence of the compassionate God in the experience of suffering
is a gift precious beyond words.

In God's companionship with sufferers, they are affirmed
in their dignity and value in spite of the assault on their being
by disease or their victimization by others.”

(Daniel Migliore. *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p. 117)

A secular song that made it to #1 on the Billboard Charts in 1986,
was *Higher Love*, by Stevie Winwood: an old song now, but a great song, still.

It could be the song of someone sitting in a church basement,
where we typically relegate space for support groups of people
who seem so unabashedly desperate
that they need to come to church during the week, too. Imagine that!

I wish that I were that needy for God, don't you?.

It could be the song of someone who is having a difficult time
making it through the month of September,
or who falls to pieces on the 23rd of each month,
and who needs to ground himself or herself daily in prayer.

I wish I were that faithful in prayer, don't you?

It could be the song of someone who doesn't even believe in God, yet,
but who is willing to fire off petitions into the void,
with fingers aimed at the light fixtures,
just in case a higher power stands waiting in the wings.

I wish I were that honest about my doubt and anger,
but still able to keep praying, don't you?

The song says:

World are turning and we're just hanging on,

*facing our fears and standing out there alone.
A yearning, and it's real to me,
There must be someone who's feeling for me.
Things are so bad everywhere
In this world, what is fair?
We walk blind and we try to see
falling behind in what could be.*

*Bring me a higher love.
Bring me a higher love.
Bring me a higher love.
Where's that higher love I keep thinking of?*

Blessed, Jesus says, are the needy, the grieving, the sad, the disappointed,
the disillusioned, the hopeless, the crushed, the fearful, the unashamed,
the unabashedly desperate, for they will be rewarded in kingdom life.
Blessed are those, like Jeremiah, like Mary, like Hannah, like those in our basements,
like those on our streets, like those in our hospitals,
like those in our pews and pulpits,
like those who seek a higher love, a need-based love,
distributed by the Great Physician on a first-come, first-serve basis;
who mouth their prayers like drunkards,
for to them the voice of God co-mingles with their own,
and the gate of beauty is open for healing.
Blessed are those unable to heal themselves,
for to them, Jesus comes down to the basement of their hearts
as healing balm. Amen.