

**Pentecost C18****September 18, 2016****“Tears”****Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair****David Noble****Jeremiah 8:18 - 9:1**

<sup>18</sup>My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. <sup>19</sup>Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: “Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?” (“Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?”) <sup>20</sup>“The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.” <sup>21</sup>For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. <sup>22</sup>Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?

90 that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!

Every week someone in every church plans the service of worship for the coming Sunday. A passage from the Bible is chosen, hymns are selected, prayers are written, anthems are rehearsed, a sermon is prepared, baptism and communion liturgies are created. A whole hour or two, or maybe even three, is generated to guide the worship of the congregation.

Part of the planning for worship involves feelings. Think of the Bible stories you hear in worship- the birth of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, the triumphant crossing of the Red Sea, the magnificent love of the Good Samaritan, Moses delivering the Ten Commandments, the calling of the disciples to fish for people, the healings and miracles of Jesus.

These are positive stories that create positive feelings. Churches that I have known generally concentrate on these positive passages, skipping over the ones that are angry or sad. It is often said that one should leave worship uplifted, enriched, assured. Some say that Americans, especially, expect uplifting worship that will put a spring in their step and give them a reserve of hope and confidence as they take on the world for another week. I often hear these words, “I come here to worship to fill up my tank for the week ahead.”

And no wonder Christians these days appreciate uplifting worship when you think about the world we encounter when we go out the door.

One morning last week I was watching a news program. The Libertarian candidate for president, Gary Johnson, was being questioned about world events and he was asked what he would do about Aleppo. He said, “What do you mean? What is Aleppo?” My jaw dropped. The interviewer said, “You’re kidding, right?” But Johnson said, “No I’m not. What is Aleppo?”

The reality out there is pretty stark sometimes. We’d prefer to hear the good news, rather than another story on Aleppo, a disaster among many disasters in the Middle East.

I was fortunate to visit Aleppo once, along with Damascus and Homs and Palmyra, all in Syria and all in the news lately. I was visiting Aleppo with members of my congregation from Detroit and we were exploring the places where the Apostle Paul traveled, along with a few extra special

places like Aleppo, Syria's largest city. The leader of our trip, a Syrian from my congregation, had secured an invitation for us to visit a friend of his family there. They celebrated our visit by preparing a feast for us. It was the most food I've ever seen on one table. Platters piled high with salads and chicken and hummus and pita and fresh tomatoes and baklava. We didn't know each other's languages, but we smiled a lot and ate together. That was then.

Now Aleppo has been destroyed by 5 years of war. A lovely city with generous people trapped in the ruins, with no place to go. No water, no food, no homes, no hope, no doctors. This has been the center of the war between the Syrian rebels and the Syrian government. Barrel bombs, snipers, even chemical warfare have killed tens of thousands in those streets, with hundreds of thousands seeking refuge. Recently there was a picture from there of a little boy in shock, sitting in the back of an ambulance, covered in dirt and blood after a bombing.

A ceasefire in effect today seems to be shaky with shootings and bombings continuing and aid stuck in trucks at the Turkish border. It's a dismal time in Aleppo.

How does a congregation at worship address a situation like this where there is no end in sight, no balm to soothe the pain, no peace waiting at the door? My inclination, and I think the automatic reaction of many Christians is to preach hope and peace and justice and God's power that will save us from any more suffering. An uplifting message.

"God is on the way," we might say. "The weak will be saved and the mighty will fall."

But Jeremiah did not preach this to his congregation who were about to be conquered. He said, "the harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." How true that is now for Aleppo- even if the aid arrives, even if the ceasefire holds, the dead will not return, and little boys and girls who have been pulled out of the rubble will never be the same.

"My joy is gone out of me," Jeremiah says, "my heart is sick. Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land."

Jeremiah's people think God has abandoned them. God has left them to their pain and suffering. Who could blame anyone in Aleppo today for asking "Where is God?" We should do something about it! We should organize help or insist our leaders get involved to stop the killing, heal the wounds of body and soul, make things better. We would ask God to do that right now, fix the awful situation we human beings have created.

But God says, "O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!"

For people of action like us who expect our churches to offer help and support and healing, for congregations that expect uplifting messages in times of difficulty, it may be a little surprising that when God's poor people are at the end of their ropes, God begins with weeping.

When God's poor people are caught in a no-win situation, God feels something, God sits in solidarity with them and cries. When a theatre is bombed, when a marathon is blown up, when a

nightclub is attacked, when an ancient city is destroyed block by block, God is not absent but is weeping along with those who hurt.

That's a God who is paying attention, who cares about us, who knows when the doctor's diagnosis is bleak, when loss is our daily bread.

What is our calling when the world falls apart and we can't put it together again, at least not right away? How do we endure when God seems too slow, when rescue doesn't come?

Jesus said, "weep with those who weep." Weep with those who are hurting and are waiting for a balm that has not yet come. Paying attention to what is going on around us in other's lives is a kind of spiritual practice. It's something we can learn to do better and better. I'm sure you've seen on the train how many people are lost in a world supplied by their earbuds or whose attention is riveted on a screen of photos and texts. And standing right in front of them is someone who desperately needs a seat but who can't find anyone who even notices.

We have a potential resource that our neighbors need, that our world needs- the resource of our attention, our mindfulness of what others are going through. As our technology leads us more and more into ourselves, dominating our attention with a virtual reality, we will need to be intentional about staying in touch with the actual reality around us.

I had a colleague in a church whose beloved husband died because of a mysterious illness. She was devastated by her loss. Her friends in the church noticed and committed themselves to share her tears as long as it took to see her through. They paid attention, they prayed when she couldn't. They lamented with her until the healing finally came.

What a gift it is to be noticed, for someone to notice the pain and suffering and then share some tears, and lament to God, and with God, that the hurt is real and deep and lasting. Jeremiah wants us to know there is a strange camaraderie in tears. Surprising connections develop between God and sufferers when they weep together. Connections develop when we share tears with Aleppo far away and those just around the corner from us.

When the balm of Gilead eludes us, when we wait for healing to come, "we cry out, like Jeremiah, with prayers and laments and tears as the suffering world comes into our hearts."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://store.sermonsuite.com/content.php?i=788040804> by Mary Austin