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Heartsick God

Jeremiah 8: 18-22

As you just heard this short passage from the prophet Jeremiah you could sense there must be a great deal of background that has led to these statements. Leading up to this, much has happened in the life of God's people and most of it is not good. Though no timeline is ever given in the book we believe that this was written during the reign of Jehoiakim. It was during his tenure that the armies of Babylon came from the north and attacked the people of Judah and the city of Jerusalem. The attack came about 600 BC and within 13 years all of Judah was in ruins. Jeremiah predicts their fall and, just before our passage today, he informs them that there is no way to stop what is going to happen to them and, not only that, this terrible fate is their own darn fault. Their families will be torn apart and their homes taken from them because they have been unfaithful. They deserve all the tragedy that is on its way.

It should be noted here that, in the history of God's people, there have always been pastors who have settled down and served congregations and there have always been prophets who were never allowed to stay in one place too long. We see here the reason why!

This first part of the book of Jeremiah gives us a window into a very specific context, a very different one from our own. We must be careful and watch our tongues when we find ourselves comparing its apples to our oranges. It is almost impossible to ever say who deserves judgment or even to say who is, currently, being judged. That is God's affair and our own opinions and biases can cloud us from seeing those affairs clearly. Even though Jeremiah's context is unique there is a question that rises from it which is common to our lives today. When doom is upon them the people want to know: "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?" which also means Where is God and who is God if these kinds of things are allowed to happen? If God is so powerful why aren't I safe?

When bad things happen to us or around us we can be caught asking just the same thing? Where is God? Who is God? I thought God was with me but I must have been wrong because I have been hurt or wronged or broken and that doesn't happen to you if you've got God. This story in Jeremiah, and hundreds of other places in scripture, shows us the real truth of it: God's power does not put some bubble around us that keeps any negative thing from penetrating. No, God's power looks a lot more like letting go. God does not keep an iron grip on creation; does not keep an iron grip on us, puppeteering us through our days. God has given up that control, that power.

In doing this God risks everything. In giving us a say, God risks whether or not we will have a relationship with him because we may not want one. God risks getting hurt when these relationships fail. By putting us in charge God even risks creation itself; watching as we use and misuse the gifts we've been given. We have passage after passage in the scriptures that point to this truth and our passage this morning is no exception. The people have flagrantly wronged God and devastation is their consequence. When it is finally God's turn to speak we are expecting rage. Under such circumstances we could understand some anger. But anger is not what we get. We get sorrow and pain. We meet a God whose heart is sick with grief for the people. God says, "For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt,

I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me." Later God adds that there are not enough tears for his weeping.

This is the picture of our God who has risked it all and been terribly hurt in the process. It is an image that we are not as comfortable with as others we have gathered over our years. Give us a good smiting, some fire and brimstone. God's wrath we can withstand but God's pain is another story. For God's anger could be boiled down to a hot-headed streak but God's pain relates to us. God's sick heart is sick because of us and can only be healed by us. Talk about power! This gives us tremendous power in our life with God; tremendous power and tremendous responsibility. In this risky God we see what true power is: the power of letting go and risking the consequences.

In the actions of our risky God we learn that our faith will not make us safe. How can it when it has not even kept God safe? We trust in and worship a God who is sometimes heartsick over us; who laments over our losses; who even suffers death at our hands. Relationship with this God cannot promise any safety. But it can promise joy and it can help us fulfill who we are, who we were created to be. As any parent knows and as God, the Parent of us all, teaches us, letting go is not a weakness. Stepping aside and watching your children struggle is no weakness at all. This kind of letting go seems a great deal more like the real power of God.

A writer, Nicholas Wolterstorff, spent a great deal of his time and energy discerning where God's power lay after the accidental death of his young adult son. In his suffering he felt he understood God better and better. As he grew closer to seeing God he kept thinking about that biblical understanding that you can't look upon God's face and live. "I always thought," Wolterstorff says, "That this meant that no one could see God's splendor and live. A friend said perhaps it means that no one could see God's sorrow and live. Or perhaps, he reflects, the sorrow is the splendor." God's great power is God's sorrow and God's great sorrow is God's power: the power of risking everything to gain his children's love. Amen.