

Entering the Tragic Gap

Fifth Sunday in Lent
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The tragic gap. Author and educator Parker Palmer uses the term “the tragic gap” to describe that gap between *what is* and *what could and should be*, the gap between the reality of the given situation we find ourselves in and that alternative reality we hope to be possible. We who struggle to live by faith each day know that there is a gap, a breach that cannot be filled or crossed without extreme difficulty or potential risk. We see the suffering of millions across the globe, and our attempts to feed the hungry or shelter the homeless or bring hope to the despairing seem but a drop in the bucket. We find ourselves in conflict with others at work or home, relationships strained or severed, and how to step across that chasm between us—well, even if we knew how to reconcile with each other, sometimes we don’t really want to. Then there’s the tragic gap in our own faith life. The gap between *what is*—how we actually respond to God’s love and our baptismal call (which some days is with indifference, complaining, and opposition)—and *what could be and should be*—our living faithfully, joyfully, obediently as God’s children.

I find that image of “the tragic gap” to be a powerful one. Now, Parker Palmer says we have a choice. We can strive to stand in the gap in a life-giving way, witnessing by our own lives to this other, alternative mode of being that exists—or not. Many times we choose the latter.

But when we hear stories of those who choose the former, who choose to stand in the gap, we are moved by their witness. Palmer himself was moved by an interview he heard on National Public Radio about a year ago. A reporter interviewed an Iraqi who worked as an interpreter for American troops. Basim took the job because he believed Americans represented the best hope for his country. But when reports of the abuse of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib came out, his role as an interpreter was perceived by some of his fellow countrymen as consorting with the “enemy”—those American troops who could be as brutal as Saddam’s police. This interpreter, Basim, began to receive death threats from his own people—all because of his efforts to bridge the two cultures. Eventually, he and his family had to flee Iraq. When asked if he had been simply too naïve to believe one could stand in the middle as he did, he answered without hesitation, that, no, it wasn’t naïve. If reconciliation was going to happen at all, Basim said, there must be people who are willing to live in the tragic gap and help the two sides come together.

Well, our lessons today deal with “the tragic gap” and the One who dares to stand in it for our sake. We start off with Jeremiah’s prophetic words. Now, most of the book of Jeremiah is gloom and doom. He first speaks the word of God in Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel, when things seem to be going well under King Josiah, at least on the surface. But over the years,

the people—and subsequent kings—disobey God’s commands, turn to false gods, fail to follow the Law the Lord God gave to the people as covenant between them. The people essentially thumb their nose at God and the relationship God desires to have with them. So Jeremiah throughout much of the book is commanded by God to prophesy words of judgment and punishment, words about the consequences of disobedience. Jeremiah certainly stands in the tragic gap, here, doesn’t he? And the people persecute and denounce him. They insult him and nickname him “Terror is all around!”—which were similar to words that he had spoken at God’s urging. It was not easy to be God’s prophet. But his words show their truth as the years go by, as the people of Judah corrupt their worship, abandon God’s Law, then are overwhelmed by the Babylonian empire, deported into Babylon, and Jerusalem and its Temple are destroyed. Jeremiah lives through this time, still prophesying, in exile along with his people.

But the passage we hear today is part of what’s called Jeremiah’s “little book of consolation.” Instead of judgment, Jeremiah is now commanded to voice a vision of hope. And what he describes is the Lord God’s plan to fill “the tragic gap.” If there is this gap between *what is* (in this case, Israel’s disobedience, faithlessness, suffering in exile) and *what could be* and *should be* (Israel’s living out its faithful relationship under God’s rule, Israel’s being a light to the nations showing the glory and truth of God) then Jeremiah tells his people the Lord God is going to fill that gap. Of course, the gap didn’t just suddenly appear as if by magic. No, Jeremiah makes clear the gap is due to Israel’s sin. The Lord God, through Jeremiah, reminds the people his relationship with them is so deep that God is, in a sense, like their husband, only they have broken that deep relationship. They have caused a rift to exist, in spite of all that the Lord God had done for them over centuries of time. Just like Basim, that Iraqi interpreter, the Lord God knows someone must stand in the tragic gap in order to reconcile the two sides—God and his people. Someone must enter the gap in order to bring them together once more, as God has always desired.

And since the people couldn’t seem to obey the law of the Lord God even if it was written on stone tablets that they could always refer to—remember those Ten Commandments that Moses received on stone atop Mt. Sinai?—or even if it was written on their doorposts or in pieces of parchment they wore on their bodies . . . since the people failed to obey even when the Law was written down in such a manner external to them, Jeremiah says the Lord God will write his law on their **hearts**. He will make a way to have his law internalized in the people themselves. If it’s inside them, written on each heart, which is the seat of their will, the place wherein human potential resides, then they will stay faithful to God. He will make certain the people can uphold their end of the covenant, and they will live in deep relationship with God once more.

So with that promise from Jeremiah’s mouth, God says he is entering the gap, taking responsibility for the people’s ability to trust God and obey Him. God will take the initiative here, since his people cannot, and God will change the people inside out.

Now, Jeremiah was not the only one in Israel to recognize the need for God to do this work within us. The Psalmist whose verses we read together this morning also recognized that only God could step into the gap. In Psalm 51, the writer looks at his own heart, and the hearts of his people, and implores God to cleanse their hearts, make them new and upright. Remember the

last line we read today—that’s verse 12—the psalmist pleads, “and make me willing to obey you.” Boy, those words leap out at me!

After all, the stories in the Old Testament, and our own stories, are filled with experiences that shout out this contrasting sad truth: The Spirit may be willing, but the flesh is weak. This truth envelops everyone, from King David, to whom this Psalm is attributed, whose adultery and deceit nearly brought him to ruin . . . down to you and me in our own individual life experiences where we might say we want to do what is right, we might pay lip service to obeying God, but we still go astray with our selfish desires, petty grievances, sour dispositions, and stubborn inclinations. So we speak that Psalm verse in our own great need: *Make me willing to obey you.* In other words—God, step into that gap between what is the reality of my failures, and what could and should be my relationship with you. Then change me.

Perhaps we should call these few chapters in Jeremiah not the “little book of consolation” but the “book of *little* consolation.” That’s because the prophecy in its literal sense did not come true. It didn’t during Jeremiah’s time, or after. The law was not written on the people’s hearts, even once they came back home from exile in Babylon and were given the chance to start all over again. Sure, there were some who lived faithful lives in response to the Lord God. But our sinfulness still rears its ugly head from one generation to another.

Yet unlike Basim, that Iraqi interpreter, who stepped into the tragic gap but eventually fled when the risk became too great, our God steps into the tragic gap. . . and stays there for us. Listen to Jesus’ words this morning: “*Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*”

How could our Lord be referring to anything but his own compassionate life and death? His own generous self-giving? **He** is the single grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying, bearing much fruit. When Jesus goes to the cross, that’s God stepping into the tragic gap. The One who is crucified offers a perfect, selfless love to fill the breach, to heal the rift that divides us from God, to transform *what is* into *what could* and *should be* the relationship of God and his people. John told us in the 1st chapter of his Gospel that Jesus is the very word of God—a word once spoken through mouths of prophets like Jeremiah. Only now in Jesus, that word is made flesh. Why, it’s obedience and faithfulness clothed in skin and bone and blood. This is **God’s** initiative—not ours—to heal our broken relationship.

Perhaps God’s commands are still not fully and indelibly written on our hearts, at least this side of the kingdom. You and I experience the reality of our sin all too often. Ah, but the word of God that speaks life and goodness, forgiveness and love **is** written on the heart of Jesus Christ. And because we know Jesus promised that those who followed him and believed in him would receive the power of his Holy Spirit, we also know that Jesus did not intend our own hearts to be untouched. Jesus did not leave us to remain the same as we were.

A chaplain at a medical center in California named Susan Cosio describes how Jesus’ Spirit directs her: “*The guiding light of my life is the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit. (But) in our hectic noisy world, I have to slow down or withdraw in order to hear it. Prayer, I have discovered, is less about what I say and more about what I hear.*” What Susan has learned is

that spiritual truth is not about religion as much as it is about **relationship with God**. It is not how she intellectualizes God's commands, but how God's truth is **internalized within her heart**. Susan says that when she takes long walks, she prays, and these are examples of things that start happening when she walks and prays: *“On my daily walks I've recognized how to parent my children through difficult situations, been prompted to call a friend I hadn't heard from in a while, and felt compelled to reach out to strangers—who soon became my friends.”*

Those are the kinds of things Jesus promises his Spirit will empower us to do. Well, His Spirit now dwells in us, and flows through us. Should we trust it, this Spirit will move us forward in faith, making us bold to step into the tragic gaps of this world, where we can love and care for our neighbor. And all the while God is in that gap with us, ever filling the breach and healing the rift. **AMEN.**