

GOD'S GOT THAT

Jeremiah 31:1-6

Intro

I have to admit that the following passage does not feel like a traditional Easter scripture reading.

Yes, it does speak of God's love, but it does so in the context of the wreckage that currently exists. My guess is that most people would look at that sort of a declaration and think, 'great...that does me no good: I'm still stuck in ruin.'

The interesting thing about God is that even when we doubt, even when we question, even when we get snarky, the promises abide. Hear these truths again: the absence of turmoil does not necessarily mean that God smiles upon the circumstances. And conversely, the presence of pain does not mean that God has abandoned.

Here these words and be reminded of the circumstances that were faced by those who followed Jesus in the events that followed his triumphal entry through the gates of Jerusalem.

Hear these words be reassured of the promise that was maintained even then,...especially then. The scripture reads this way.

Jeremiah 31:1-6

¹At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. ² Thus says the Lord: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, ³ the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. ⁴ Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers. ⁵ Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit. ⁶ For there shall be a day when sentinels will call in the hill country of Ephraim: 'Come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.'

Matthew 28:1-10

Intro

The people who had been walking with Jesus have gone, in rapid succession, from the mountaintop-like experience of the triumphal entry, to the betrayal and rejection of Jesus on Maundy Thursday, which manifested itself in his 'criminal's' death on Good Friday. They thought that the promise that God had made so long ago (like we have heard in the prophet Jeremiah) was finally coming to fruition...and then everything was annihilated...again.

We can very much hear the whispers of, 'God, where are you now?', as the women make their way to a tomb that, at least according to Matthew, is actually being guarded so as to make sure that nothing...disruptive takes place. The Roman authorities are just looking for the people that they control to settle down.

Do you hear them? ‘God, where are you? Why would You let this happen? Will you never fulfill your promise? Was it all just a lie?’

As we approach the grave through scripture again this year (especially as we hear them through the prism of the escalating events in our world and even our lives that too often feel so very broken), my question is this: what question are you asking of God? The scripture reads this way.

Matthew 28:1-10

28 After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” ⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

“God’s Got That”

That feeling that is intimated in Jeremiah, that of feeling like we are stuck in the wilderness, alive but not exactly sure if we are really going anywhere, we feel that in our lives today.

Maybe you feel it because world events in Syria, North Korea, Russia, China, Somalia, South Sudan, Great Britain, Sweden, Egypt. And that’s just the past month (and fails to mention Iraq or Afghanistan).

Maybe you have that wilderness feeling in regard to our own country where the only sort of discourse that seems to take place anymore is mutual grandstanding that avoids the prospect of hearing the other, or dealing with our problems through the use of violence, violence that so very often turns innocents into victims.

Maybe you have that wilderness feeling about stuff that happening inside your own family as you deal with hardships and realities that range from finances, to medical treatments (or lack thereof), to struggles with relationships of all shapes and varieties.

We feel that wilderness, ...and so did the women as they went to the grave of the one they thought was the fulfillment of God’s promise. They were sure that Jesus was the one. They had heard him teach the truth of God, they felt him share God’s love in ways that were redeeming, and saw him perform the impossible, even to the point of raising people from the dead.

But now he was dead, and almost all of those who had professed their loyalty were in hiding, or at the very least behind locked doors.

Is it any wonder why they would be asking the sorts of questions that they had to be asking: ‘God, where are you? Why would You let this happen? Will you never fulfill your promise? Was it all just a lie?’

What about you? As you look at your world, in all of its machinations, what questions are you asking of God? Are you even asking anymore because the doubt seems to be stronger than the promises?

We need to acknowledge these sorts of feelings because all of us, in a multitude of ways, experience some variation of those realities.

And that's okay.

The faith that we are invited to journey through is not a story of mountaintop experience to mountaintop experience. There are dips; there are vacillations; there are worries, doubts, and concerns, and all of it is shown to be held by God.

Why do I believe this?

Because of these stories that we recognize as being of and from God. The stories that we are told relay to us example after example that we are able to look at and think, 'well, yeah, I've felt that way too.' And while many of these feelings are able to relate to joy and success, there are also a preponderance of stories that articulate pain, sadness, and loss.

And God is there to hold all of it.

For example, can you imagine how confusing it would be for anyone who experiences trial and heartache, let alone death, to deal with stories that portray a world that is simply gumdrops and lollipops? That doesn't mean that they haven't had those positive experiences...but they haven't only had that sort of experience.

If God was only able to walk with you in the bright and sunny days, what does that mean for us when we're dealing with the reality of storm clouds?

Exactly: not good.

The two Mary's came to the tomb and the storm clouds were still thick. Again, those who were closet to Jesus were in hiding or behind lock doors. Yes, the viciousness of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday had passed...but they are still dealing with all the storm damage that had been caused.

This reality doesn't get rewritten to make it feel like a happy, happy story where nothing bad happens or where the God follower doesn't experience loss.

And it is expressly because of that fact that this story allows all people, who are experiencing the pantheon of emotions to gather in and find their place in the presence of God.

It allows you, who are carrying whatever you may be carrying with you this morning, to be held by a God who emphatically declares, 'I will never let you go.' Yes, the variations of the theme of worldly brokenness that we experience in this particular day and age may feel unique, but when you start to remove the culturally trappings, what we discover are two women walking to a tomb to care for an innocent who was killed for seemingly no reason at all, only to realize that they were being cared for even as they endured pain.

I get it, you hear that last statement and there is the reaction of, 'right...and then the earthquake happened...then the angel...then the empty tomb...and then they come face to face with the person whom they were coming to the tomb in the first place...except he's alive. When do I get some of that?'

The short answer is, I have no idea.

And neither did the generations that waited for the fulfillment of the promise heard in Jeremiah. They had no idea either. And then, after generations, ...the dawn did break and the beginnings of the promise fulfilled began to be revealed.

God didn't go away in those intervening years: He didn't check out on humanity then, He hasn't checked out on humanity now, we won't leave you...ever.

What questions do you bring with you here today? God will hold all of them. God will hold you.

As for the fulfillment of the promise in our own respective lives, I don't know how your particular resurrection story will manifest itself, I just have faith that, in God's time, it will.

Hear the story again. Only this time allow yourself to be a part of it. Allow yourself to hear this story not as a story from so long ago...but your story as it continues to reveal itself, with all of it being held by God.

After all that had taken place, the betrayal, the pain, the sadness, you didn't know what to do beyond the things that seemed like they should be done...even though none of it seemed to matter anymore.

So you went. You did.

Then suddenly there was a shaking of the foundations of the world and that which seemed impossible started to reveal itself. It didn't seem possible but the very reason for the doubt, the confusion, the pain, all those clouds start to lift. None of it makes sense, it doesn't seem possible, and yet there it is. It's almost as if you can hear the words, "Do not be afraid; I know all that you carry, ...and that is not the end of the story! See this break of light? Know that it is real and that it is for You, and not only for you but for others to see through you. Look for the light! It's there!"

And it is, and this is no matter the circumstance we may currently face, or the questions of doubt that have embedded themselves. God is with you, as He was with those who heard the promise of Jeremiah, as He was with all those who awoke that first Easter morn.

God is with you and will hold all that you carry. A promise has been made and we are a part of that story, God's story. It was true then...it continues to be true today...no matter what.

After Sermon Prayer

God, we carry so much with us...so many questions. And yet, you are able to show time and time again that you are able to carry them, that You are able to carry me, now and forevermore. Help us to trust this reality even as we seek out Your light through all of our days. Lord, hear our prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.