

"Healing Tears" A sermon based on Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 delivered on September 21, 2025 at the First Congregational UCC of Onkama, Michigan by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young.

*"You who are my Comforter in sorrow, my heart is faint within me. Listen to the cry of my people from a land far away: . . . 'Is the Lord not in Zion?' . . . 'Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. Is there no balm in Gilead? . . . Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people? Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people.'" (Jer. 8:18-9:1)*

Jeremiah, prophet of God, speaking for God, is in agony. He sees his people ready to be hustled off into exile and his heart is breaking. As he speaks, he weeps. He sheds a fountain of tears. These are God's tears. It is God's grief which is "with" the grief of the people and of Jeremiah that is expressed here. God, then, is not separate from our grief. God does not cause our grief, God cries with us and for us, and it is God's heart that is sick along with Jeremiah's over the destruction and dispersion of the chosen people.

God heartsick? God crying? Is this an image that we can embrace concerning the Almighty God? Does it fit with our theology? Isn't it easier to think that God is the cosmic taskmaster punishing the people with exile for their sins, and that God could not possibly be so weak as to cry? Tears and crying in our society have somehow become a sign of weakness. Somewhere along the line we have lost the ability to allow people the strength of their emotions, to allow people the freedom to weep and shed tears both in sorrow and in joy.

There is a classic story about a little girl that was dying of leukemia. She asked her nurse for a "crying doll." This puzzled the nurse, and so she asked the little girl why she would want a doll that can cry. The little girl replies, "Because I think Mommy and I need to cry. Mommy won't cry in front of me, and I can't cry if Mommy doesn't. If we had a crying doll, all three of us could cry together. I think we'd feel better then." (cited in CareNotes #20 "Letting Tears Bring Healing and Renewal"). What wisdom is contained in this simple story! I have lost count of the times that I have heard people say that they do not come to church, because they are afraid, they will cry there. In worship, they say, they might hear a sermon which touches their grief or emotions, or they say that the place holds memories of a loved

one who is gone. This is not right. For it is precisely in church and in worship that it is totally appropriate and right that we shed tears. This is the place for it! This expression of emotions—tears—is one that is not foreign to God and certainly not foreign to Jesus, Im-manu-el, "God with us," for one of the most powerful passages in the Bible, as well as the shortest, is John 11:35, "Jesus wept." So stark in its simplicity, this scripture reminds us that tears need to be shed and that, when they are, they can lead to healing. We remember that immediately after this passage in John, Jesus heals Lazarus by resuscitating him. Jesus weeps, then seeks to give back to his beloved friend, Lazarus, his life spirit, and the entire impetus for that healing was Jesus' tears. Tears are healing!

In our Jeremiah passage, we hear the prophet crying, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" (8:22a). Is there no medicine to heal the sin sick soul in this land, Jeremiah is asking; and then he answers his own question when he 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." (9:1) Weeping is the medicine, the balm, Jeremiah is implying. It has even been proven medically that crying is good for us.

Gregg Levoy in an article in [Psychology Today](#) makes note of this when he writes that the amount of manganese stored in our bodies affects our moods. The body, he says, stores 30 times as much manganese in our tears as it does in our blood serum. And Levoy goes on to quote Biochemist William Frey who says the lachrymal gland, which regulates the flow of our tears, concentrates and removes manganese from our bodies, which in turn elevates our mood, (quoted in CareNotes #20 "Letting Tears Bring Healing and Renewal").

Tears do literally heal, then! There is no quick fix for as society gone wrong, but tears, honest tears of grief can be the ointment for a hurting soul, because the bottom line is the fact that, all medical considerations aside, as we shed our tears we know that God is weeping right along with us. William Sloan Coffin, Jr. when he was the senior minister at Riverside Church in New York City, now famously remembered and often quoted, preached the Sunday after his twenty-four year old son, Alex, died in an automobile accident while driving in a storm. Some of his thoughts about this event may help us to understand

something about the existence of pain and suffering In the world. Rev. Coffin tells of sitting in the living room of his sister's house outside of Boston when a woman arrived with food. She said to him, "I just don't understand the will of God." whereupon in the heat of his grief, he replied, "I'll say you don't lady!" He went on to ask her, "Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper of his, that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm, that he probably had a couple of 'Fosties' too many? Do you think it is God's will that there are no streetlights along that stretch of road, and no guardrail separating the road from Boston Harbor? The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, 'It is the will of God.' Never do we know enough to say that! My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all of our hearts to break."

God, then, is not a cosmic taskmaster visiting sorrow on our heads. God is there with us in our pain. God weeps with us, and, because this is true, we need to pay strict attention to our tears. We need to ask what our tears are trying to tell us. In what way do our lives need healing through these tears? In his book Whistling in the Dark, Frederick Buechner speaks to this in a section entitled, very simply, "Tears:"

You never know what may cause them. The sight of the Atlantic Ocean can do it, or a piece of music, or a face you've never seen before. A pair of somebody's old shoes can do it. Almost any movie made before the great sadness came over the world after the Second World War, a horse cantering across a meadow, the high school basketball team running out onto the gym floor at the start of a game. You can never be sure. But of this you can be sure. Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention. . . ." (p. 105)

When my mother died, I did not cry. There was too much to do. As the middle child, I was the designated responsible one. I was the one to make sure all the arrangements were set and everyone had a place to stay. My sister's were heaps of sorrow, and I just could not give in to it. Someone had to be the "strong" one, I thought. But this was a mistake in some ways. One morning sometime later, I woke up and for no apparent reason began to cry uncontrollably. I could not stop. It was a terrible, helpless feeling. What was going on here, the rational part of me wondered? What was this all about? It wasn't until I was done with the weeping and had time to catch my breath that I realized it was the anniversary of my

mother's death; it was exactly a year to the day since my mother had died. Unconsciously, I had finally begun to grieve, and the grief, so long in coming, was overpowering. There is strength in crying, not weakness.

There is healing in crying, it is not a sickness. We need to remember this, especially here, in this holy place, where the words of scripture and the sharing of the sacraments speak to us of sorrow and brokenness, as well as of hope. It is here, in this holy space that tears should never be far away. Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his now famous book, When Bad things Happens to Good People has much to say on this subject in speaking about his family's struggle with the untimely death of their son, Aaron, who was born with a disease that aged him too early.

In the introduction to the book, he speaks about crying and anniversaries. He tells the story of an Israeli mother who year after year on her son's birthday would leave his birthday party and go into the privacy of her bedroom to cry. She said she did this because her son was now one year closer to compulsory military service and thus possibly one year closer to being killed in battle. Rabbi Kushner remarks that he knows exactly what she meant. He says, "Every year, on Aaron's birthday, my wife and I would celebrate. We would rejoice in his growing up and growing in skill. But we would be gripped by the cold foreknowledge that another year's passing brought us closer to the day when he would be taken from us." (p. 4)

Crying, then, is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength. It is a sign that we believe that in and through our tears, God is there crying **with** us. The tears act as a balm, a source of healing, because they are the outward sign of our need to be with God. Our modern sensibilities tell us differently. "Be a big girl (or boy)," we are told, "don't cry!" But our ancient ancestors knew better, and their modern counterparts still stand at the "wailing wall" and cry unabashedly to and with their God. We could and should take a very important lesson from them. Amen.