

## “God and Boo-Boos”

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When I was a kid and got hurt or injured, it was usually because I did not listen to my mother and ignored her admonishments to be careful or not do a particular activity. There was the time she warned me about not bouncing up and down on the logs we had nailed to trees to make a tree fort. The result: a broken foot. Another time I was climbing trees she had told me not to climb. Results: a fall that nearly broke my back, a jagged stick that pierced my back from landing on a fallen tree below the tree I was climbing, and—once again—intense physical pain. Another time she warned me not to slide down the long stairs to our deck. Result: a large and jagged splinter located you know where. I spent about an hour lying across my mother’s lap on those same stairs, my backside exposed to the world, with her picking the large splinter and about a thousand small ones out of me with tweezers.

The worst experience was when I roller skated to my grandmother’s house on the road after my mom told me not to. I snuck out of the house and through the woods, with the roller skates tucked under my arm. I put them on down the road from our house and skated happily away, congratulating myself on getting my own way. As I skated along, I felt a twinge of guilt that I had not listened to my mother. But the feeling of the wind in my hair as I zipped along the tar wiped that feeling from my mind. The road between the houses was typical of Down East Maine—broken tar, gravel at the edges, and no room on the tar if a car drove by. There was a small hill where I picked up speed, and then a car came from behind. I was going too fast to stop and get out of the way, so I moved over to the edge as far as I could. My skates hit the loose gravel and over I went. Results: torn jeans; bashed-up knees with blood, gravel, and chunks of tar in them; bloody and torn palms; bruises on my legs and arms; and torn-up elbows and face.

As I limped the rest of the way to my grandmother’s house, I was crying from the pain—but also from shame and fear, because I would have to face my mother. Nanny said we had to call my mom, and as I waited for her, imagining all the ways I was in trouble, my fear and shame competed with my physical pain. When Mom drove into the driveway, I imagined the yelling that would ensue. I imagined her being angry at me, but more importantly, I imagined her disappointment. I had disobeyed and lied to her.

But when my mother flew through the door (she could move fast when one of her kids was in danger or hurt), the expression on her face wasn’t anger. Instead, Mom was afraid and worried. When she saw my bloody, scraped-up body—her baby was clearly in pain—her face showed fear, deep worry, and sorrow. Mom was unhappy that I had not listened to her warnings. She was unhappy that I had been injured. She was unhappy to see me in pain, and sad that I hadn’t listened to her. I had deceived her.

Despite everything, my mother never left me. She held me close as I cried. She gently cleaned my wounds, and once again used tweezers to pick foreign objects out of my body. She kissed my tears away and soothed my bruises with touches and more kisses. Despite my not listening to her, my mom never left me. She never stopped loving me or caring for me, and she continued to teach me the right way to live—and, she hoped, make better choices for myself.

The people who can best understand Jeremiah 8:19–9:1, this morning’s Scripture passage, are the father or mother whose child goes astray and has an accident or other experience that injures them. Parents try to help their children be safe, make good choices, and avoid unnecessary pain and suffering. Parents warn their children of the possible risks and consequences if they don’t take their advice and make poor choices. At some point, children begin to make their own decisions and set their own course by those choices. When they veer off into dangerous territory or get hurt, their parents try to persuade them to return to safer paths. But sometimes children refuse that advice and run into problems, and parents know there is no joy in seeing a loved one fail and suffer pain—only grief, sadness, and heartbreak.

In Jeremiah 8:19–9:1, the prophet laments that the people of Judah have not turned away from their sinful ways and toward God. They have ignored the pleas of Jeremiah and God. Jeremiah knows the devastation about to be visited on Judah, and as he anticipates that his warnings will go unheeded, he is heartbroken. In his heartbreak, he cries out to God, who hears him and is heartbroken too.

Jeremiah’s response to the condition of his people is one of deep sadness and he laments for their condition. Jeremiah begins with expressing his grief and has deep empathy and compassion for them, despite their bringing on their own misery by not listening to his previous pleas to return to following God. He repeats the cries he hears from them and then there is a question asking the people why they did not listen and continue to behave in ways that anger and sadden God. In this question is the suggestion that the people’s behavior and choices are the causes of their pain and misery. The passage continues with Jeremiah’s ongoing lament on behalf of his people. Their pain and sorrow become his pain and sorrow. As he grieves, he cries out to be able to go even further and cry and grieve more deeply for his people.

Why would Jeremiah ask for more tears and a deeper grieving for his people? The speaker(s) are asking the questions, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Are there no doctors there? Why, then have my people not been healed?” There is a debate among scholars as to whether it is Jeremiah or God who is asking these questions and even asking to be able to cry more tears and grieve more deeply for his people. Throughout this verse it is unclear of who is speaking, when, but there are clearly voices of both God and Jeremiah. Jeremiah is a prophet of God and prophets have historically been seen as spokespersons for God. Given this, it is considered appropriate to

assume that these verses express the feelings both of God and Jeremiah. If Jeremiah is feeling and speaking on behalf of his people, himself, and God, his sorrow is compounded by the weight of all this pain and emotion. Jeremiah and his people are looking for ways to soothe their pain and sorrow and even God is searching for ways as these questions are asked.

Gilead was famous for its healing balm. The balm came from the resin of a balsam poplar tree, and it was used to heal and sooth. It was considered so powerful that it was a major commodity of trade in the ancient world and the Queen of Sheba made a gift of it to King Solomon. Today the Balm of Gilead is a substance used in perfumes and in multiple medical applications. It is used to sooth ailments of the mucous membranes and if taken internally it can ease coughs and respiratory infections. It can be helpful with treating laryngitis and sore throats. It can be combined with willow and rosemary to help with reducing fevers, muscle aches and arthritis pain. Externally it is used to help with bruises and skin irritations.

Asking these questions, knowing about the infamous healing properties of this balm, would indicate that there is no earthly thing that can heal Jeremiah's people. Because the answer is Yes, there is balm in Gilead. Yes, there are doctors there, but their knowledge and medicine cannot heal the people of their ailments. The people of Judah are beyond the reach of what the healers or the Balm of Gilead can do. They, like us, need someone who can bring healing that goes beyond the ailments of the body and mind. The healing that is needed is one that that goes into their deepest depths. Only God could bring such healing to Jeremiah's people and to us.

There is a collective quality to these verses and the sorrow and heartbreak are felt by both Jeremiah and God. There are the voices of the people crying throughout the land and Jeremiah crying because the people are suffering. Everyone is filled with grief and heartbreak and although there is healing in the land, the medicine is nothing that will heal these wounds. In these passages we see that we are all in this together, Jeremiah, his people and God all experience collective sadness and grief. The interchanging voices and the unsurety of who is saying what shows a trinity that is interwoven. In the interconnectedness lies both our pain and our hope. We are all connected to each other and to God. Pain and sorrow that happen to one, happens to all and conversely so does healing. Loving and caring for one person and then another. Standing up in defense of the helpless or shedding tears in grief with another. In this collective trinity we are the hands and feet of Jesus. We are the healers and helpers and are of God. These things and us are the balm that heals us all. God is our great physician and the ultimate healer. Like balms and band aids, God provides tears, prayers, compassion, and love to heal us.

Jeremiah is known as the "Crying Prophet" because of the verses of Jeremiah 8 as well his speaking and feeling with deep emotions about the sufferings of his people and the pain and suffering they experience. Tears have a healing and cleansing quality and the collective pain of the people, and the sorrow felt by God are felt by Jeremiah who asks for more tears.

Researcher William H. Frey collected tears from people as they cried at sad movies, and compared their chemical composition to tears from the same subjects brought on by an onion being pulverized in an open blender. What the research showed was that emotional tears are different from other kinds of tears. They are not only unique to humans, but they are also a unique kind of tear.” Frey found that tears of emotion contain reliably and significantly higher levels of adrenocorticotrophic hormone, a neurotransmitter released in response to stress, as well as elevated levels of endorphins. Frey hypothesized that these proteins were not merely a byproduct of tears, but that tears allow the body to reduce the levels of cortisol in the brain. Frey stated: “Emotional crying alleviates stress. And one of the things we know is that unalleviated emotional stress can damage the brain.”

Jeremiah knew this way before Frey and his researchers came on the scene. There is healing in tears. Healing that is for the individual and for the collective whole of humanity. God gives us tears as a balm for the healing of our souls.

In a recent meditation from the Center for Action and Contemplation they ponder tears, pain and suffering and healing and divine love; “Could it be that this earthly realm, not in spite of but *because of* its very density and jagged edges, offers precisely the conditions for the expression of certain aspects of divine love that could become real in no other way? This world does indeed show forth what love is like in a particularly intense and costly way. But when we look at this process more deeply, we can see that those sharp edges we experience as constriction at the same time call forth some of the most exquisite dimensions of love . . . qualities such as steadfastness, tenderness, commitment, forbearance, fidelity, and forgiveness. These mature and subtle flavors of love have no real context in a realm where there are no edges and boundaries, where all just flows. But when you run up against the hard edge and must stand true to love anyway, what emerges is a most precious taste of pure divine love. God has spoken [God’s] most intimate name.”

They go on to say; “Tears express that vulnerability in which we can endure having our heart broken and go right on loving. In the tears flows a sweetness not of our own making, which has been known in our tradition as the Divine Mercy. Our jagged and hard-edged earth plane is the realm in which this mercy is the most deeply, excruciatingly, and beautifully released. That’s our business down here. That’s what we’re here for.”

Our Psalm reading for today reminds us to pray and to praise God and be thankful. In that prayer and praise is awareness and healing. We are reminded that despite God being in the heavens, God bends down to see us and knows our pains and sorrows. God sees the poor and needy, the marginalized and the sadness of the childless woman. God sees the injustices in the world and can help ease our pain and sorrow. The image of God bending down, like an adult getting low to

the ground so they can look at a child on their level, reminds us that we are not alone, and that God sees us and hears us, suffers with us, and wants to be near us in our suffering. God offers us a divine love and mercy and gives us the chance to offer the same to ourselves and others. This world is full of pain and suffering but through that we can access and experience a depth and breadth of love and healing that comes from the growth that life offers.

Like my mom, God does not leave us. Despite our not listening, God holds us close as we cry. God rejoices when we are joyful and grieves when we are in pain. God gently cleanses our wounds and will use the tweezers of Mercy and Grace to pick the foreign objects from our souls. God will kiss our tears away and soothe our bruises with love and healing touch. Despite our not listening to God, God will never leave us. God will never stop loving or caring for us, and will continue to teach us the right way to live and love as we journey through this life.