

AFFLICTION
Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

The late great Reformed theologian Karl Barth once said, and I paraphrase: “As believers we know that we are called to say something about God. But as human beings, we know that we really cannot say anything about God. We cannot speak, yet we must speak. This is our affliction.”

Today, I find myself afflicted by the same dilemma. As a pastor, I am called to say something, to find words of comfort, healing and peace in light of the horrific tragedy in Uvalde, Texas, last week, and in light of the recent tragedies in Buffalo and California. There are almost too many mass shootings now to name in this country. But I also know that words can be cheap and can add to the burden of the grieving rather than alleviating their suffering. I agree with Karl Barth. Not only is this a dilemma, it truly is an affliction. And it is an affliction that doesn’t just befall “professional Christians” like myself. As all of us belong to the priesthood of all believers, all of us share this affliction as beloved children of God, baptized into Christ’s death and raised with him to the newness of life. What can I say this morning? What

can any of us say to our children, to our grandchildren, to our friends, to ourselves, much less to God?

I stood in this pulpit the Sunday after 9/11, searching for words of comfort and healing, perhaps of hope, and I am not sure I found them. Today, more than two decades later, the task has not lost its edge. And since I don't trust my own words and my own prayers, which would be tainted by my emotions, my anger and utter frustration—since I am not sure how helpful or hurtful my words might be—I turn to the words of Scripture, to the word of God and the words of God's prophets. I imagine Jeremiah would not change one word if he were to address us this morning, instead of the people of Israel thousands of years ago:

"My joy is gone! Grief is upon me! My heart is sick! Listen to the cry of my people ... in Uvalde, in Buffalo, in California. Is the LORD not there? The harvest is passed, the summer is over, and we are still not rescued. Because the people in these communities are broken, I am broken. I mourn, and horror has seized me. Is there no balm in

Gilead? Is there no physician there who can heal? Why then has the health of my people not been restored? 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 all the women, and men, and all the children that have been slain.”

Later in the *Book of Jeremiah*, God adds God’s own voice to the prophets lament:

“A voice is heard in Ramah (and in Uvalde ... and in Buffalo ... and in California)—

Lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children (we are weeping for our children, for all of God’s children). She refuses to be comforted for her children (we refuse to be comforted for the children)—because they are no more!” These are their names:

Nevaeh Alyssa Bravo, 10

Jacklyn Cazares, 9

Makenna Lee Elrod, 10

Jose Manuel Flores Jr., 10

Eliahna Garcia, 10

Uziyah Garcia, 10

Amerie Jo Garza, 10

Xavier Lopez, 10

Jayce Carmelo Luevanos, 10

Tess Mata, 10

Maranda Mathis, 11

Alithia Ramirez, 10.

Annabell Rodriguez, 10

Maite Rodriguez, 10

Alexandria “Lexi” Rubio, 10

Layla Salazar, 11

Jailah Nicole Silguero, 10

Eliahana Cruz Torres, 10

Rojelio Torres, 10

Like Jane, whom we baptized this morning, each and every one of these children received an everlasting promise from God, which gives me hope. In the words of the Psalmist:

“For it was you, God, who formed our inward parts; you knit us together in our mothers’ womb. I praise you, for we are all fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. Our frames were not hidden from you, when we were being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld our unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for us, when none of them as yet existed. How weighty to us are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! We try to count them—they are more than the sand; We come to the end—we are still with you.”

The prophet Isaiah put it this way:

“But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. ... Because you are precious in my sight and honored and I love you.”

And finally, from the New Testament, the *Book of Revelation*, God’s eternal promise in spite of the tragedies of life which befall us all. From his exile on the Greek island of Patmos, John writes:

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and be their God. God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God, and they will be my children.”

This is the word of the LORD. Thanks be to God!

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