

September 18, Ordinary 25C (Jeremiah 8:18-9:1)

Jeremiah has to learn to name the reality that is right in front of him.

by [Audrey West](#) in the [September 2022](#) issue

There was no balm that year and no more water for tears. I was young enough to believe that God’s presence would prevent tragedy yet old enough to know better.

That June my grandmother died of a heart attack. That loss hit close to home—literally, as she’d lived next door for my entire life. Two months later, we received news that my other grandmother had also died. My family grieved those deaths deeply, though they were not unexpected. Death frequently comes as the long, slow consequence of age.

One month later, we were crushed by grief—along with our city and nation—when death arrived in a horrifying instant. Flashed on the news in dreadful detail came images of a flaming jetliner, flattened houses, and a field of debris with no survivors. More than 100 died, including Matt.

Matt (I’ve changed his name) was a “favorite dad” of our youth swim team, frequently serving as meet director or head timekeeper in an era when two dozen parents held stopwatches at the end of the pool. Matt had an encouraging word for every swimmer who stood on the blocks, even as he cheered loudly for his own kids. News of his death rocked our world. As we gathered at his funeral, it was impossible to imagine any greater grief.

It took only two and a half weeks for tragedy to bring us together again. One of our swimmers drowned after climbing the fence of a neighborhood pool for a solo, late-night workout.

A month after that, more than 900 souls perished in the Jonestown massacre in Guyana. We knew none of the victims, but many had lived in our region. Our tears, it seemed, would never end.

Even so, little of what we experienced that year compares to the devastating losses around the country and the world in recent months. Then and now, we could have written the words of Jeremiah and his people: “No healing, only grief; my heart is broken . . . the summer has ended, yet we aren’t saved” (CEB).

Where is God in all this grief? “Isn’t the LORD in Zion? Is her king no longer there?” The questions hide nearby like a thief in the shadows of the alley, looking for a way to shatter a community’s faithfulness.

Jeremiah was called to a particular people in a specific time and place. Nevertheless, he speaks across generations during months of unmitigated grief, when nation rises against nation, a virus retains its threat, and guns extinguish innocent lives. Jeremiah speaks to those who wonder whether God has abandoned the world altogether.

To be sure, God’s call is for Jeremiah to proclaim the hard truths about his people’s idolatry and the destruction that is about to befall them as a result. But even more essential is the calling for Jeremiah to be honest about what he perceives and to accompany his people as an agent of God. Twice at Jeremiah’s commissioning, God asks him, “What do you see?” (Jer. 1:7-13). The question draws Jeremiah closer to God’s fundamental call: Look around. Speak the truth. Do not be afraid. God is with you.

This is where it all starts for Jeremiah: learning to name the reality that is right in front of him. Jeremiah refuses to turn away from his people’s anguish, even if their distress is a result of human failure to love God and love neighbor. He hurts with their pain and mourns with their grief. The time will come when Jeremiah’s task is to call out the sins of the people—a task to which God still calls prophets 2,600 years later. For this day, however, Jeremiah’s role is to acknowledge their agony and share their sorrow.

When there is no balm in Gilead, perhaps it is time to give voice to the summers of broken dreams, the realities of sorrow and loss. To start not by pointing fingers but by acknowledging griefs both small and large—those that hit close to home as well as those that appear in our news feeds from far away. Tell what you see, people of God, that we might weep day and night for the wounds of all the people.