

## “Where are You God?”

I remember so vividly how I felt the night of August 19th. I had just sat down on the couch to watch some TV when I saw that American journalist James Foley was beheaded by a member of the Islamic jihadist group I.S.I.S. I was shocked. I literally felt sick to my stomach. The rest of the evening my wife and I sat there on the couch listening to the commentary both, in a strange state of disbelief, trying to process just what it was we were seeing and hearing. A journalist; a man who had dedicated a large part of his adult life to documenting the civil and religious unrest in Syria was not only kidnapped and held captive for many months but executed in one of the most barbaric and brutal ways for all to see in the name of a religion.

I was angry and upset. Maybe you were too. Many of us still are because this was an act of madness; this was an act of evil. It's the kind of thing that can cause us to just throw up our hands and scream to God, “What is this?” “What is happening in our world?” It's so hard to understand how people acting in the name of "god" have gotten to the point that they believe there is virtue in carrying out such violence and force against innocent people who don't share their beliefs. Sometimes this kind of thing even causes those of us who confess our faith in the one true God- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to ask- where are you? This world is a mess. Where are you God?

It's a question we have all probably asked at some point in our lives isn't it? Maybe even some of you who have been attending church your whole life are still asking that question. Perhaps there are even those of you who are new to the faith or those trying to come back to the faith in pursuit of some real change in your life and you are asking that question because it still seems like things are the same whether you confess God is part of your life or not. Whatever the reason, if you have asked the question “where are you God,” know that you're not alone.

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah asked that question in his own poetic way. Now I know when I say the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, some of you may be thinking, here we go- another sermon about an old prophet I don't know that much about; or another sermon about a guy whose book in the Bible I've never really read; or another sermon about a guy whose life has nothing to do with my “real” problems. Maybe you're even wondering what this ancient prophet's words have anything to do with us and our faith today.

Jeremiah is no easy read. For those of you who have read it, I'm sure you agree. It can be painfully hard to get through. But as tough as it is, every time I open to those pages in my Bible, I gain a little more insight into how we are to operate in this world especially in relation to our callings before God. And perhaps most importantly, I gain from this prophet, whose words were captured around 550 BC, a greater understanding that all of us at times, no matter what our callings in life, will question whether or not God is really there for us. And like all of the OT prophets, there are real and applicable comparisons to our Christian lives today.

For instance Jeremiah lived during troubled times! Do we not all live during troubled times?

His entire book is set during the politically tumultuous years following the the fall of the Assyrians and the rise of the Babylonians. We too live in some politically tumultuous years don't we? Just turn on the news!

Jeremiah had a difficult life. Many of us have and will continue to have difficult lives!

Jeremiah witnessed multiple deportations of his people to a foreign land and the destruction of Jerusalem including the temple. Christians today are being exiled from their homelands throughout the middle east and Northern Africa. Jerusalem is once again at war.

Jeremiah's message of repentance was not well received. In fact, if you read the whole book, you will find that this faithful prophet and preacher only had two converts- his scribe and an Ethiopian eunuch. Our Christian message of repentance is not well received especially in our post-modern society, is it? Today people actually get offended at the notion of being told that God has something to say about sin and on top of that, he actually demands our repentance.

The fact is, the ancient prophet Jeremiah speaking to you and me through the power of the Holy Spirit was a real person chosen by God as his spokesperson and even he, one who was chosen by God, still wondered at times where God was in his life.

Our reading today proves this! It comes right after Jeremiah had delivered the bad news of God's judgment to the people of Judah even though they were experiencing

prosperity. This news though, as was the usual case with Jeremiah's ministry, fell on deaf ears. Our verses this morning pick up with Jeremiah making his case before God, telling him how he had done what he was told to do. Telling him how he was loyal to his words. Telling God how he accepted being a lonely outcast and the persecution that came with his call to preach repentance. But then it seems the doubt sets in and in his confusion and lament, Jeremiah questions God. He questions if God is really there for him. He asks why his pain is unending; why he feels so abandoned. He asks God if "He will be to him like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail." Jeremiah might as well of asked the question, "where are you God?"

What's so important for us today is to hear God's answer. Beginning with verse 19, God answers Jeremiah saying that he will restore him. He will make Jeremiah to "those people" a fortified wall of bronze. "Those people" will still fight against him but they won't prevail because God is with him. God will deliver Jeremiah out the hands of the wicked and redeem him from the grasp of the ruthless.

After hearing this, we really do have more in common with Jeremiah than we may have thought don't we? He was chosen by God and yet we too have been chosen by God as his children through our faith in Christ. We may have our doubts and wonder where God is in our lives but even through the pain, the doubt, the questions, God has not left us. Because through his grace, we, just like Jeremiah, have around us a fortified wall. And ours is even stronger than bronze. People will still fight against us and evil will do all it can to break through but even death can't penetrate our wall.

Why? Because as Matthew writes in our Gospel today, The Lord went to Jerusalem, suffered, was killed, and on the third day was raised. God was there ( point to the cross). We must remember that contrary to all other religions, the one true God revealed himself to us- not in some awesome display of glory- but on a wooden cross where they executed criminals on the outskirts of town; on a wooden cross where he suffered and died for all people. This is so different from those who believe that people must suffer and die to please the god they worship. Our Lord died for the sins of all people including the sins of the ones who kill in the name of a religion that didn't begin until hundreds of years after his death. That's how big our Christian faith is. God is not only for a few but for all people!

This stuff is hard isn't it? But as hard as it is everyday, we Christians we have a choice. We can either ignore what has been revealed to us on the cross and keep questioning,

or keep complaining about how much our lives still stink or our how we don't feel God's love and forgiveness or how we want more from our faith as if the Gospel isn't enough **or** we can do all we can to grow in the one true faith and allow the Spirit of God to strengthen us through his Word and Sacraments so that we are confident of where he is in our lives even when things get complicated and difficult. And of course it's not just about us is it? We must continue to pray that God change the hearts of those who don't know His saving grace in Christ as the only true way to salvation.

We will never understand why things are as they are or why things happen as they do and yes, we will all continue to have those days, just like Jeremiah, when we need God's assurance. But take note.

God never promised a life free from pain or suffering or terrorism, or doubts. But just as he declared to Jeremiah, he declares to you and me. "I am with you; I will save you; and I will deliver you out of the hands of the wicked." That's what he has done for us in Christ and will continue to do to life eternal. Trust in him and may his truth prevail.

**Amen.**