

"Living in Prophetic Tension"  
Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
January 8, 2017

*The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.*

Readings:

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

My joy is gone, grief is upon me,  
my heart is sick.  
Hark, the cry of my poor people  
from far and wide in the land:  
'Is the Lord not in Zion?  
Is her King not in her?'  
'The harvest is past, the summer is ended,  
and we are not saved.'  
For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt,  
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.

Is there no balm in Gilead?  
Is there no physician there?  
Why then has the health of my poor 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 the slain of my poor people!

selection from "Transforming Despair," an interview with Joanna Macy

"People in every walk of life, from every culture, feel grief over the condition of the world. Despair is [a] constellation of different feelings. One person may feel more fear or anger, another sorrow, and another guilt, but the common thread is a suffering on behalf of the world or, as I put it, feeling 'pain for the world.'

In American culture, we are conditioned to try to keep a smiling face and remain chipper at all costs. A lack of optimism somehow indicates a lack of competence. Feelings of despair are treated reductionistically as a function of personal maladjustment. This doubles the burden individuals carry. Not only do they feel bad about their world, but they feel bad about feeling bad.

Feeling the pain of the world is not a weakness. This is God-given or, put another way, an aspect of our Buddha nature. This openness of heart that characterizes the caring individual is a function of maturity. Don't ever apologize for the tears you shed on behalf of other beings. This is, in its essence, not craziness, but compassion. This capacity to speak out on behalf of others, because you have the right to, because you can suffer with them, is part of our spiritual nature."

## SERMON

This month we explore the theme of "prophecy." We consider, what does it mean to be a community of prophecy?

Prophecy feels like it's a pretty loaded and burdensome word. We usually think of a prophet as someone who is set apart and exceptional - Jesus was a prophet. Mohammad was a prophet. These men started enduring worldwide religions. That's not something just anyone is going to do in their life.

The word "prophecy" or "prophet" might also conjure images of ancient times, of angry, bearded men shouting their condemnations and predicting God's judgment. Again, not an image or idea that is easy to relate to.

The Unitarian theology, James Luther Adams, was well-known for promoting the idea of the church community as a "prophethood of all believers." He wrote, "The prophetic liberal church is the church in which persons think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in the light of their faith, to make explicit through discussion the epochal thinking that the times demand."<sup>1</sup>

In the tradition of James Luther Adams, we are called to think and work together to see and interpret the realities and signs of our time in light of our faith and our values and to make a claim, through our words and our deeds, on the thinking that our times demand.

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<sup>1</sup> James Luther Adams, "The Prophetic Liberal Church."

The biblical scholar and theologian, Walter Brueggemann frames our prophetic work in a different way and argues in that the three urgent prophetic tasks before us are Reality, Grief, and Hope. To pay attention to and articulate the reality we live in. To perform and process grief. And, to articulate hope in response to despair.

So, first, the reality.

Profound changes have already begun in our social and political landscape, and the realities and signs of our times offer both reasons for deep concern and also some reasons for hope and encouragement.

Reasons for concern come most acutely from the national level where the change of administration and new congress has ushered in national political leadership that is intent on rolling back health care reform, taking away protections for the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender community and for our environment. And, we continue to see a disregard for the basic integrity of our democratic system.

Here in Vermont we can find some solace and encouragement in the fact that basic political civility is still in tact and also that our highest elected officials have re-iterated the state's commitment to welcoming and protecting the freedoms of all Vermonters.

We have local signs of hope like the gathering yesterday hosted by Net Zero Vermont to see and hear about designs for a sustainable Montpelier and to participate as a community in visioning together what that future might look like.

Yet, here, in our community, pain and suffering are also present.

Our UCM Community Lunch has been consistently serving over 100 meals each Monday. Social service agencies are stretched thin.

There are many people in our midst who are hungry, who can't find housing, and who struggle to get their basic needs met.

As we reflect on this reality, amidst the small signs of hope, we also have real reason to feel grief.

Grief shows up in a strong way in the Judeo-Christian roots of Unitarian Universalism through the tradition of prophecy of the biblical prophets of Ancient Israel.

Jeremiah was one such prophet. Jeremiah lived during a time of empire in which the Jewish people had to live under the rule of different groups. It was a time of great transition as the hands of power changed. Jeremiah, like prophets that had gone before him, spoke out against his people's social injustices and false worship, and many of his scathing criticisms were directed at the kings of his time as well as to his people in exile.

Jeremiah the prophet also often expressed deep grief over what he was witnessing. We heard some of that grief in the reading I shared.

"My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.  
'The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.  
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.  
Is there no balm in Gilead?"

The grief and lament found in the writings of the prophets is as instructive as their admonishments to change course.

This sense of grief and words of lament can be found all throughout the biblical prophetic writings.

While those ancient prophets were so often deeply critical of the powers that be, they also expressed deep anguish.

As we grapple with what it means to be a "prophethood of all believers," I think we have to give due attention to our own grief.

Walter Brueggemann says this about grief: "...real criticism begins in the capacity to grieve because that is the most visceral announcement that things are not right. Only in the empire are we pressed and urged and invited to pretend that things are all right...And as long as the empire can keep the pretense alive that things are all right, there will be no real grieving and no serious criticism."<sup>2</sup>

To grieve is to face the current realities honestly and openly and to allow ourselves to feel that sense of loss.

Months before the election, I had shared with Jared that I wanted to go on a tour of the White House sometime before the change of administration. He put in a request to

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 11

Welch's office, we waited for a while to hear anything back. And, the week before Christmas, we learned that we had been approved for a tour on January 4 - this past Wednesday.

Well, we just couldn't figure out the logistics of getting down there, so my mother-in-law and her husband, who live just outside Washington D.C. ended up going without us. We were talking with my mother-in-law over FaceTime the night before and explaining to Liam what grandma was going to do the next day and why it was so important. I said to him, "Grandma is going to the White House. That is where the president lives. President Barack Obama. He is only going to be president for another 17 days." And, at this point, I broke into spontaneous sobs. Completely unexpected. Completely unbidden.

The next day, I was driving Liam to daycare, and said, "Oh, hey, Liam, remember where Grandma's going today? The White House! Isn't that great?"

"No, mama," he said. "Don't talk about that." "

Why not sweetheart?"

"Because that makes you sad. No talking about it."

I laughed out loud at this. On the one hand, I was quite impressed with my three year-old's emotional intelligence. And, I also thought, well, if only we could live in a three year-old's emotional world and just not talk about those things that make us sad or that are hard to face.

Denial is something that comes so easily in our grieving process. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross names this as one of the five stages of grief.

As Kübler-Ross and others have said, the grieving process isn't linear. We move from one stage to the next and then back again.

Grief and our grieving process is complex.

The grief and pain that we feel from personal losses intermingles with the grief and pain we feel about the world at large.

It is probably not coincidental that the day I had my outburst of sobbing talking about the White House and the president was the day of the second anniversary of my father-in-law's death.

Grief lives inside us in palpable ways. It is core part of who we are. The griefs we carry tell much about our journeys, the things we care about, the people we love, the hopes we have.

Grief is not something to be denied, nor is it something to be conquered. It stays with us, though, as we acknowledge it and as we allow it to move through us, it transforms.

Joanna Macy, whose words I shared in our reading, encourages us to not turn away from pain and grief but to recognize that this is part of our spiritual nature. It is compassionate to have feelings of despair in the face of all that is seemingly lost.

Macy also encourages us to recognize how that pain and grief can be transformed into hope and into action.

She says, "the kind of apathy and closed-down denial, our difficulty in looking at what we're doing to our world stems not from callous indifference or ignorance so much as it stems from fear of pain...we are called to not run from the discomfort and not run from the grief or the feelings of outrage or even fear...if we can be fearless, to be with our pain, it turns.

It doesn't stay static. It only doesn't change if we refuse to look at it. But when we look at it, when we take it in our hands, when we can just be with it and keep breathing, then it turns. It turns to reveal its other face, and the other face of our pain for the world is our love for the world, our absolutely inseparable connectedness with all life."<sup>3</sup>

"The other face of our pain for the world is our love for the world."

Our grief reveals a love that can move us into prophetic action, but only if we first accept it.

As we move into this new year and into the ever-changing landscape of our public life together as a faith community, I encourage us to do so first with a willingness to acknowledge our grief and our despair.

To breathe with it, and move with it, and to let it move through you.

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<sup>3</sup> "A Wild Love for the World," On Being Interview with Joanna Macy, August 10, 2016, [http://www.onbeing.org/program/joanna-macy-a-wild-love-for-the-world/transcript/8868#main\\_content](http://www.onbeing.org/program/joanna-macy-a-wild-love-for-the-world/transcript/8868#main_content)

This is where our own spiritual practices become important. Perhaps it's just showing up here on Sunday mornings. Perhaps it's engaging more deeply in your meditation practice or your yoga practice.

Find those ways you can continue to notice your pain and your grief. To name it to yourself and to others.

Because, on the other side of that grief, there is something we need to hold onto even more - and that is our love for the world, our absolute connectedness with all life.

From that place, we can find that place of hope that can inspire us to act.

A friend recently shared the story of visiting the new National Museum of African American History and Culture where he had the honor of spending a few moments with Representative John Lewis of Georgia. Rep. Lewis, of course, was a key leader in the civil rights movement and is the last living speaker of the 1963 March on Washington. He has been a dedicated and courageous public servant and prophet his entire life.

Rep. Lewis told my friend at the museum that day that he has cried every day since the election because he has "never seen anything like this." But, then he said, "we must fight."

Rep. Lewis' example shows us that we can move through and with our grief and live with prophetic courage.

I'll close with one last story from Rep. Lewis. A story about courage.

One stormy day during his childhood in Alabama,  
he was outside playing with playing in his Aunt Sevena's dirt yard with his cousins.  
The wind started to pick up and lightning began to flash.  
As the sky darkened, his aunt rushed all of them inside her one room wooden frame house.  
The wind whipped and howled all around them.  
And the planks of the floor began to bend.  
Then a corner of the house began to lift away from its foundation.  
The storm threatened to lift the entire house toward the sky.  
That's when his Aunt Sevena told them to join hands. To line up. And to walk towards that corner of the house.  
They did as they were told and kept the house from lifting away.

And as the rain beat down on the tin roof and the storm raged on  
they walked to the next corner of the house as it lifted ominously toward the sky.  
And back and forth they went, walking with the wind, and holding the house down with  
the weight of their small bodies.

We, too, are in a storm.

A storm of injustice and suffering on a global scale.

Of threats to the health and security of so many of our sisters and brothers in our country  
and in our community

and to the sustainability of our planet.

So, let us join hands in the storm.

Walking with the wind

Moving towards hopeful and prophetic action

for the world we dare to create.