

Sermon (Jeremiah 31: 27-40, 10/16/16):

What happened? Who's at fault? What went wrong?

These are the first questions we tend to ask following most any catastrophic event. It's our way of trying to satisfy the need to make sense of the mess and, unfortunately, it's happened more times than we can count.

A commercial airliner drops off the radar never to be heard from again. Immediately, the search begins. What happened? Are there survivors? Educated guesses are made of the path the plane traveled. Wind and ocean currents are taken into account to estimate where debris from the plane might be found. Planes, ships, land vehicles, and even people on foot scour every inch of territory they can as fast as they can in the hope of finding survivors or, at least, clues that might explain the tragedy. How frustrating it is; how utterly upsetting it is when all searches come up empty handed. The mystery remains impenetrable. The questions defy answering. Families struggle.

A train flies into a train station in Hoboken, NJ, jumping the tracks, tearing through walls, collapsing pillars holding the ceiling in place. As the cars crunch up against one another, it's difficult to imagine that the loss will not be great. One life is lost-a woman who was standing on the train platform. Hundreds of people are injured. It could have been so much worse, we say, trying to find some comfort. Once the passengers are safely carted away, the search for answers begins. Great care is taken to leave the scene untouched so that, like pieces of a puzzle, a telling picture might emerge. Was it a mechanical problem? Human error? What went wrong? What happened?

The spokesperson of the investigation says they are looking for the 'black box'. I didn't know trains had black boxes.

Apparently they do. Every inch of the wreckage is combed for clues. The engineer, who survived, is interviewed again and again. Passengers on the train are asked to tell their stories. Did they notice anything peculiar? Do they remember what happened just before the crash?

We're pretty good at searching for answers. DNA tests, a keen eye for the minutest of details. Just watch television shows like CSI (Crime Scene Investigation) or Bones! Within an hour, all is figured out! Who's innocent. Who's guilty. What happened.

To no surprise, I've heard that, in real life, it's not as quick and exciting as they make it out to be on those television shows. In fact, it's a lot more tedious, frustrating and even boring than they lead us to believe including a lot of false starts and dead ends. None the less, it is truly amazing what they are able to do these days.

Why this thirst for answers? Why this obsession to figure things out?

Well, of course, the first and foremost reason is to learn from our mistakes. If we can figure out what went wrong maybe we can do something to prevent it from happening again. Perhaps we can prevent similar tragedies by installing new technology that automatically deploys a train's brakes as soon as it detects a problem or by fixing a design flaw on airplanes so that one catastrophe is not followed by many more or by addressing a defective procedural protocol to avoid the repetition of an error.

Last week we mentioned Jeremiah's letter to those who had been carted off to Babylon as Prisoners of War. As this Hebrew community settled into this foreign land, it would have been easy for them to fall into an abyss of despair and resignation. They had

lost so much. Surely, I can picture myself going there. They had been separated from all they held dear...family, friends, their homes, their land, their God. They floundered for answers. They struggled to figure out what to do.

I am guessing their situation had some similarities to what is going on in Haiti right now, following hurricane Matthew. A reporter in Haiti tells the story of how people he interviewed insisted he write their names down in his notebook. 'It's their way,' the Reporter explained, 'of reminding the world not to forget them.'

As harsh as Jeremiah's message from God was to the Hebrew people before the invasion of Babylon, Jeremiah now makes it equally clear that God has not forgotten them. God remembers their names, their families, their plight.

Last week, Jeremiah told them to build houses in this foreign land they had been forcibly taken to. Plant gardens and nurture their families. Seek the welfare of Babylon for in seeking its welfare they will also find their welfare.

In some ways, I'm guessing those words from Jeremiah were disappointing. The sting of what had happened was still fresh as these exiles deeply pined for their homeland and all that was. In some ways, I'm sure Jeremiah's words sounded like defeat, giving up, accepting there was no returning to what was. Making a transition like this is not easy. While probably not to the degree of these exiles, I'm sure many of us can relate to just how hard it is to let go of what was forcibly taken from us by investing one's self in the new of what is. As Jeremiah urged them to make this move, I'm sure they still had many questions about the catastrophe they had just lived through. It's what we do. We ask questions in the struggle to make sense of the mess.

Israel was such a strong and powerful nation. It was the apple of God's eye. The Hebrew people once lived with the assurance of God's protection and blessing. They were once God's chosen people. How could God let this happen? How could God desert them? What did they do that led to this catastrophe?

It's what we do. We ask questions. We search for answers. We hope to discover the problem and maybe, thereby, rectify it.

Like that of the Official at a news conference explaining what their investigation had yielded about an accident, in today's passage Jeremiah explains why this mighty train called Israel had derailed so horrifically and completely.

'Remember...' The passage begins. Remembering is such a key ingredient to uncovering truth. Sometimes that remembering is most revealing only in hindsight. Sometimes that remembering is selective. Sometimes we just plain forget important details and we need the help of others to remind us such as Jeremiah did for the exiles.

'Remember...' Jeremiah says, 'Remember when God led your ancestors out of Egypt, holding their hand like a parent holds a child's hand when crossing a busy street. Remember the pillar of clouds God put between you and Pharaoh's army. Remember the dry land God led you across after the waters parted, holding you tight in his arms?'

'Do you remember?' Jeremiah asks, knowing that in this remembering an important and critical clue resided. And the important thing is that these people knew well this story of their ancestors. It was and continues to be the central story of their faith and a pivotal story of our own Christian faith. But, as with all things, familiarity breeds contempt or, more accurately, a disconnect of the heart.

The words of Jeremiah give us plenty of important clues as to what happened— ‘took them by the hand, led them out of Egypt, covenant making (not unlike a marriage covenant between lovers), I was their husband’. That’s the stuff they forgot. That’s what led to this catastrophe. That’s where things derailed. That’s where things went wrong.

It’s what God wanted from the start. It’s what God still searches for. It’s what we still have a tough time getting right.

When Jesus summarized the commandments originally given by Moses, he said: ‘Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind and love your neighbor as yourself. Upon these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.’

Love, relationship, something internal, something deep, something so personal, so real it motivates all that we do by something so much more than just fear of the almighty other. It moves us to do good things, to make sacrifices, to be tenacious and steadfast. It moves us to confess, to say I’m sorry, to want to be something better than we are. It moves us to dream holy dreams and reach for holy possibilities. It moves us to feel the plight of neighbor, to listen to their story with our hearts as much as our minds. It moves us to seek God in the hope of feeling and knowing God’s presence. It moves us to feel angry, frustrated, and even frightened when that Holy presence is hard to find. It moves us to show up in this place not because we must but because it’s good to be here, to remember, to feel the presence of God among the people of God.

One of the biggest things I miss about my kids not being in our house is their presence – the sound of their footsteps in the bedrooms above ours, their sitting in the same room I’m in, my setting a place for them at the dinner table. It’s internal stuff, love

stuff, hard to explain stuff.

I fear sometimes we have not learned much from such catastrophic stories like the one Jeremiah is a part of. We are good at talking about God, learning the rules, wanting people to tell us what do and not to do, making faith look and sound easy so we can avoid the hard work that building a personal relationship with God requires. It seems to be what so many want... simplify the complicated, clear out the fog of mystery, make it light, maybe even entertaining. We're good at keeping God at arm's length.

Is that the way relationships of depth and meaning come to be, though? From my experience, relationships of depth are hard...they demand much from us, they are filled with mystery and nuances, they require patience and fortitude, they sometimes even require a good ole wrestling match of wills so that the blessing of deeper intimacy might be found.

Being in relationship with God is hard work and it's one of the reasons I appreciate our mainline faith tradition which values loving God with our whole being – heart, soul, and mind. As such, I see my role as a Pastor not to be one of telling you how easy and simple it is to know God. It is not my role to simply tell you what you should think and what you should do. Instead, my role is to teach you *how* to think and *how* to wrestle with these glorious texts from the Bible like Jacob did with God in the desert. My role is to help you understand that somehow in the wrestling, there is blessing and, foremost among those blessings, is a relationship with the Holy that is not superficial but deep and powerful and life giving.

‘But this is the covenant, the promise that I make with my people going forward.’ Jeremiah said in his prophetic revelation from God. ‘I will put my law within them, and I will write it on

their hearts, and I will be their God, and I they shall be my people.’

And so may it be.

To God alone be all the glory. Amen.

Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray...

Loving God, we are reminded today that it always has been and always will be a heart thing. A love that runs deep, filling your heart with delight after taking in all that you created. A love that runs deep, causing you to come back again and again to the people you are determined to call your own. A love that runs deep, giving us your only Son who showed us in ways nearly too magnificent to comprehend what is at the core of this thing called faith. We admit, loving God, our equally magnificent failure to seek you as you have sought us. We are ashamed by our nature to keep you at arm's length-something external to analyze, figure out, attempt to control, and even live in fear of.

Gracious God, this day we are reminded of how much we long to get it right. We are weary of the superficial and long for your holy presence. We are weary of the shallow and long to connect our heart with yours. We are weary of the emptiness and long for lives filled with the great hope of your enduring glory. We are tired of living with acquaintances and long for a family that truly loves us even when we are fully known.

Come to us this day. Seek us, we ask, even when we seek the easy and convenient. Embrace us, we pray, even when we squirm and try to escape.

We ask this, O Lord, knowing that the longing in us, in those whom we love, and in those whom we might not

even know is great. We pray for those who long for healing, for relief from worry, for escape from oppressive situations, and hope. We pray for those who long to have their tears dried and for those who are frantically trying to find their way. We pray for those who fear they will be forgotten and discarded. We pray for those who long to be remembered as they try to survive in places of war, violence, abuse. We especially ask you to consider these requests we now make in our silence or aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.