

“When It’s Hard to Love God”

Jeremiah 20:7-12

4th Sunday after Pentecost

June 21, 2026

Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

I’m going to ask for some help as I begin the sermon today.
Don’t worry, I’m not going to call on you.

The person I need help from...is our splendid organist, Todd. I gave Todd a heads up about this before the service, and asked him to consult with Marlon, because I need two favors.

Favor number one:

Todd, could you play the note on the organ that you and Marlon believe to be the HIGHEST note that a member of our choir here at Westminster can sing?

[Todd plays...]

Now, not everyone can get that high, but at least one person in our choir, according to Marlon and Todd, can hit that note.

Favor number two:

What’s the lowest note that a member of our choir can sing?

[Todd plays...]

Any of you in the pews think you can hit either of those notes?

The very high octaves, the very low octaves...most of us in the pews don’t stand a chance of getting up that high or down that low, when it comes to singing on Sunday morning.

Now, what I'd like you to do is keep that image of high octaves and low octaves in mind, and let's move out of the world of music, for a moment...and into the world of our text.

Our text from Jeremiah today certainly reaches one of the LOWEST octaves found in all of scripture.

“O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock...

“For the word of the Lord has become for me a...derision all day long.

What in the world is going on with Jeremiah?

A little history here:

In chapters 18-19, Jeremiah has pronounced a massive word of judgment—against the nation, against the religious authorities, against the powers that be. So at the start of chapter 20, a priest named Pashur, who was in charge of the temple police, decides to do something about Jeremiah's meddling ways.

First, he beats Jeremiah.

Then he puts Jeremiah in stocks.

Then he keeps Jeremiah in the stocks overnight.

It's the persecution of God's prophet.

A public act of pain and humiliation.

And our text for today is Jeremiah's response. But what's fascinating is that in our text, Jeremiah is NOT complaining to God about Pashur.

He's complaining to God about God!
O Lord, you have enticed me...

Another translation of the Hebrew reads:
O Lord, you have deceived me...

Now why would Jeremiah accuse God of deceiving him? One commentator calls these verses the most blasphemous complaint in all of scripture.

Well, go back to what God said to Jeremiah in Chapter 1.

It's the call of Jeremiah, and do you remember how Jeremiah first responded, when God called him to be a prophet?

Lord, I don't know how to speak!
I'm only a boy.

But God replied:

"Do not say, 'I am only a boy', for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak, whatever I command you.

"Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you," says the Lord.

So, some 22 years later, Jeremiah is speaking, all right...
 He's doing what God has called him to do.
 And he ends up in the stocks.
 And God is not delivering him.
 There's no evidence that God is still with him.

Jeremiah feels utterly betrayed by the Almighty,
 and he cries out, "O Lord, you have deceived me..."

Now I know, some of you may be thinking, what in the world was Ben thinking when he chose THIS text for Father's Day, the first day of summer?

Summer means vacation, the beach, let's take things light and easy...

But stay with me.

You see, what makes Jeremiah so compelling,

I believe, are the OCTAVES...

the octaves that this prophet isn't afraid to reach.

In a novel by the late author John Updike, one of the characters comments:

“Westerners have lost whole octaves of passion.”¹

But not Jeremiah!

Those octaves are throughout the entire book.

Take chapter 15, verse 18:

“Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.”

And yet, at the very same time,

one of the most memorized scripture passages—

at least, in each of the four congregations I've served—

it comes from Jeremiah:

¹ I first heard this quote in a lecture by the Rev. Dr. Craig Barnes at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary's Midwinter Lecture series in February, 2012. Subsequently, I found the book: John Updike, *Roger's Version*, New York: Random House, 1986.

Chapter 29, verse 11:

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

Do any of you know that verse?

Some of you know it by heart.

Or how about the season of Advent?

We hear from Jeremiah nearly every year when we light the Advent candle:

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah...No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest...”

Can you hear the RANGE?

Can you hear the octaves?

Those octaves are what I want to focus on, because I think Jeremiah’s theological range, if you will, gives us many gifts.

What are those gifts?

In the interests of time and a three-point sermon, I’ll name my top three!

Let me get at the first one like this.

Has anyone else here seen the first two seasons of the Hulu tv show, “Paradise”?

It's a political thriller about what happens when a cataclysmic, end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it event takes place, and how about a dozen billionaires have prepared for this scenario by constructing an underground city in Colorado for themselves and 25,000 other Americans.

It's a show that borders on science fiction, but what's not fiction is how the world's current billionaires are actually doing something not too terribly far from all this.

Reportedly, if Elon Musk can't make his space venture to Mars work out, he "has...designs for a 'cyberbunker'...and has referred to his personal plans for an 'apocalypse resort.'

Others "like Mark Zuckerberg have reportedly spent hundreds of millions of dollars building underground homes with their own water and food supplies."

Do you see what's happening there?

People with inordinate amounts of money are trying control their future. But that leads to the first gift Jeremiah gives us...

CONFESSION.

The confession that you and I have NEVER been in control of our future.

But it's at that very moment, when Jeremiah feels like all hope is lost, that he does something else. In verses 11-12, he writes:

"But the Lord is with me...

O Lord of hosts...to you I have committed my cause."

Do you see what's happening there?

Jeremiah can't see God at work in his life at that moment.
He doesn't feel God surrounding him at that moment.
But he still places his faith in God at that moment.

You see, I think Jeremiah has something to teach us this morning not just about what it means to be honest about our faith, but about what it means to have hopeful faith.

I was captivated by an interview given recently by Rachel Goldberg-Polin.

Rachel's son, Hersh, was a 23-year-old Israeli who was abducted by Hamas on October 7, 2023. He was held in captivity for the better part of a year before tragically, at the end of August of 2024, he was murdered by Hamas.

His mother, Rachel, has just published a book about her family's ordeal, called "When We See You Again." Rachel Goldberg-Polin and her husband, Jon, are modern Orthodox Jews, and in a recent interview about the book, Rachel was asked about her faith.

Did the practices of her faith, especially the Jewish guidance around grieving the loss of a loved one, help her through this time?

Rachel responded that those practices were "indispensable."

"...there is a whole structure for how we mourn" she said.

"The seven closest relatives—mother, father, brother, sister, daughter, son, spouse—there is a whole structure of how we mourn for them..."

“But what I get more groundedness from is the prayers that are prescribed for all of us [each day]. So, for example, upon waking, many [of us] say, as soon as we open our eyes, ‘Thank you, God, for giving me back my soul. You have tremendous faith in me.’

“That’s an incredible line,” Rachel remarks. “I’ve been saying it since I learned it when I was a girl...I think I said it somewhat robotically as a girl. And then at some point, it started to make sense to me.”

“Thank you [God]...You’ve given me back my soul today because I am not [yet] done.”

“And there is power in that...so, when I was saying that, especially when Hersch was still alive, and I was feeling [such] angst and misery and torment. It was extremely grounding to say, ‘No, no. God has given you back your soul. Get up, get out there...Don’t you curl up in a ball...Hope is mandatory.’”²

That’s the SECOND gift that Jeremiah gives us:
CONFIDENCE...that hope is never something
we can give ourselves.

It always comes from God.
It is God’s gift to us every day.

“Thank you, God. You have given me back my soul today because I am not yet done.”

What a remarkable prayer.

² From an interview with Yonat Shimron, Religion News Service, April 29, 2026, [Rachel Goldberg-Polin on her Jewish faith and her slain son's spiritual quest](#).

It's a prayer that brings me to the THIRD gift Jeremiah gives us this morning.

And that's a calling.

Jeremiah moves us from confession

(that's it ok to waver in our hope)...

to confidence

(because it is God who gives us hope)...

to calling.

And what is that calling?

To be a HOPEFUL person.

Now that's not the same as optimism, mind you.

I would not exactly describe Jeremiah as an optimistic person, a glass is half full kind of prophet.

But he was certainly a hopeful prophet!

Do you see the difference? Between optimism and hope?

I wonder if any of you know the name Etty Hillesum...

As the columnist David Brooks describes her, Hillesum was "a young Jewish woman who lived in Amsterdam in the 1930s and 40s. Her early diaries reveal her to be immature and self-centered.

"But as the Nazi occupation lasted and the horrors of the Holocaust mounted, she became more generous, kind, warm and ultimately heroic toward those who were being sent off to death camps."

"She volunteered to work at a labor camp called Westerbork, where Dutch Jews were held before being transferred to the death camps in the east. There she cared for the ill, tended to those confined to the

punishment barracks and became known in the camp for her sparkling compassion, her selfless love.”³

Now how did she do that??!!

She’s in a concentration camp.
She knows the fate of the Dutch Jews whom she was helping.
She knew what was coming for her and for her family.

How did she live so hopefully?

Perhaps Etty herself answers that question with these words from her diary:

“You have made me so rich, O God, please let me share Your beauty with open hands...”

“We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds.”

In other words, we should always be willing—
no matter our circumstances—
to live a hopeful life.

Our final hymn today is “There Is a Balm in Gilead,” which has its scriptural origins in the 8th chapter of Jeremiah, when the prophet asks the question:

“Is there no balm in Gilead?”

³ David Brooks, “How to Stay Sane in Brutalizing Times, The New York Times, November 2, 2023, [Opinion | Love in Harsh Times and Other Coping Mechanisms - The New York Times](#).

And the hymn, which, of course, started out as a spiritual, sung by the enslaved people of this country in the 19th century, the song answers that question in a brilliant fashion.

As the theologian Howard Thurman once wrote about this hymn:

The slave caught the mood of [Jeremiah's] spiritual dilemma and with it did an amazing thing. He straightened the question mark in Jeremiah's sentence into an exclamation point:

"There is a balm in Gilead!"

Here is a note of creative triumph.⁴

So moving back to the world of music, this is going to sound like the biggest non-sequitur ever, but do any of you remember the pop singing duo, Milli Vanilli? From the 80s, won all sorts of awards and then were outed for lip-syncing their way through the songs?

I know...some of you like to stand and do you best Milli Vanilli imitation on a Sunday morning. I confess, I've done it myself...lip synching my way through a hymn.

Don't do that.

This morning, I want all y'all to sing it.

And I don't care if your vocal range, like my vocal range, will never be able to hit all 12 notes in any octave.

And I certainly don't care if you, like me, are fairly confident that when you sing this hymn...there's going to be more than one note that you miss, and you'll be singing the hymn out of tune.

⁴ Beverly A. Howard, Baptist News Global, January 18, 2022: [Hymn stories: 'There is a balm in Gilead' – Baptist News Global](#).

I don't care.

And Marlon doesn't care.

And Todd doesn't care. And our choir doesn't care.

In tune, out of tune, just keep singing it.

And when you leave here today, just keep living it.

No matter where you find yourself in your life right now, keep sharing the hope that God has given you.

Why?

You know why.

Because God has given you back your soul today.

God has faith in you!

And you are not done yet.

Amen.