

Hearts of Stone Don't Have to Stay That Way

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[0 : 00] All right, so today I'm going to start actually with our scripture. So we're going to go to Jeremiah 31 through 40.

! I am going to read a lot of scripture from what is known as the Little Book of Comfort. So if you want to pull it up, it's Jeremiah 30 through 32. Feel free to do that. It might help you to kind of get a sense of the chapters and what's around what I'm reading.

So this is 31, 31 through 40. 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.

It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. A covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord.

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

[1 : 11] 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, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

As I've said, these are the words at the heart of one of the most famous portions of the book of Jeremiah, a portion known as a little book of comfort.

And that's where we're going to focus our attention today. Now, if you've been around at all, you know that for the past few weeks, we've been moving through the literary turmoil of the book of Jeremiah in our series, Surviving Saturday.

We've explored lots of different scriptures in which we've attempted to see what practical lessons we might glean from a book. A book that is about exile, about national catastrophe, about national collapse, about spiritual disorientation, about grief.

A book in which folks inside of it are attempting to make and to find and make meaning against the background of rubble.

[2 : 27] It's a book that can help us survive the long Saturdays after the profound loss of Friday and before the eruptive joy of Sunday morning.

A book made for us who experience the very same things as the folks writing this book. A sense of exile. A sense of disorientation.

A national collapse. A desire to find and to make meaning out of the unexpected and disastrous moments of our lives and the times in which we live.

Most of the book of Jeremiah addresses the emotional wreckage and physical displacement of the Israelite community before and during the Babylonian exile.

And one indicator of that devastation is that the people in this book seem to only be able to look at the disaster out of the corner of their eyes.

[3 : 31] It's not until chapter 20 of this book that the cause of the destruction is named Babylon. And it's not until chapter 39 and then again in chapter 52 that you get any sense of the facts of what has actually happened.

The people seem utterly overwhelmed. And the accounts produced about this experience feel fittingly overwhelming.

Yet the man Jeremiah helps us to consider what faithfulness looks like in the monstrous times that are described. So we've talked about Jeremiah's call as a boy.

His challenge to avoid the kinds of denials of reality that religion can too often harbor. We've talked about the way that Jeremiah held up the Rechabites as an example of the commanded life.

What it means to live not as crowd conditioned as Eugene Peterson puts it, but as God formed. We've touched on the necessity of long obedience.

[4 : 39] And last week we pondered what it might mean for us like Jeremiah to become people who survive and are revived by our commitment to prayer. Today, even as we stay with the book of Jeremiah, we're going to start to actually zoom out.

So from here until Palm Sunday, we're going to zoom out a little bit. I think it's all well and good to have really practical lessons. But how do we talk more fully about the terrain and geography of trauma and loss?

See, Jeremiah is a book for survivors, and yet surviving is just the beginning of what we're about. Taking practical lessons is just the tip of the iceberg. What is too often submerged from view is a deeper work of moving from hearts of stone to hearts of flesh.

In a season in which we are moving towards spring, in which the snow is finally, well, okay, it was finally melting. It might return. We'll see what happens today.

Stay safe out there. But in a season where there is snow, there we'll see that. We're going to talk about what it means for our hearts to thaw, to begin to shed the effects of the winters of our lives so that we can be available to God and to the people around us.

[6 : 08] Merriam-Webster can help us here. It defines the word thaw like this. To go from a frozen or liquid state. To become free of the effect such as stiffness, numbness, or hardness of cold as a result of exposure to warmth.

To abandon aloofness, reserve, or hostility. To become mobile, active, and susceptible to change. In light of family drama and disconnection, political frustration, spiritual displacement, to thaw, to allow our hearts of stone to become hearts of flesh, is extremely difficult work.

And luckily, it is the season of Lent. And Lent is for doing hard work. It is for taking stock of our lives.

We're assessing our idolatry and inhumanity in the loving light of Jesus and shedding whatever protective strategies we think are keeping us safe, but are actually keeping us stuck.

[7 : 24] Now, some of you might remember that a few weeks ago, I confessed that I know less about the Lord of the Rings storyline than any pastor living in America is supposed to.

Don't make it an idol, y'all. I'm just saying. I'm just saying. But, but I am familiar with an equally memorable movie that is also based on a classic work of literature.

And I highly recommend this. Thank you, Becky. That movie is The Lion King. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

Hallelujah, yes. Now, if you have not seen the original 1994 version of that Disney movie, the altar will be open. And now, you know, forgiveness is available.

Antonio. But, but more seriously, ever since my first youth pastor got a sanctuary of about maybe 600 people to sing spontaneously Hakuna Matata, I've been intrigued by this movie.

[8 : 42] And its power. And what the deeper meanings are there. So when I started to turn this movie, this idea of thawing out over and over in my mind, I thought about the animation in The Lion King.

And the way that it starts with these bright colors and moves to a grayscale, and then moves again by the end of the movie to bright, vivid colors again. The movie is rooted in a relationship of a father to a son.

The son is named Simba. And Simba is the son of a king, the heir apparent to the Pride Lands. His father, King Mufasa, gently teaches Simba that everything the light touches is his kingdom and to beware of the Shadow Lands.

We watch Simba grapple with the lessons of what it means to steward the Pride Lands for the good of all the animals that live there and not for the intoxication of power. But then something interrupts this loving training.

[9 : 52] Mufasa, the father, is killed in a stampede that is orchestrated by his brother, Scar, who desires to be king. And in the aftermath of the tragedy of the stampede, Scar pretends innocence and instead encourages Simba to blame himself.

If it weren't for you, Scar says, he'd still be alive. What will your mother think? Run away. Run away and never return.

And Simba does run away. He believes the lies based in guilt and shame that Scar implants in his heart. He leaves the Pride Lands.

And in his running away, he begins to take on this philosophy of the friends he meets to Timon and Pumbaa that when the world turns its back on you, you turn your back on the world. Hakuna Matata, which means no worries, becomes his philosophy. Simba learns to be satisfied with the diet of insects, even though he's a meat eater, because he believes that he cannot have more.

[11 : 03] Lent is an opportune time to be honest with ourselves about how much of this story resonates with our lives.

We are children of a king called to steward everything that the light touches. But we are also susceptible to believing lies about ourselves, to forgetting our origin story in God, to wearing disguises that we believe will make us more acceptable, to living out stories that we think will conceal our pain, and ultimately to living far below the dreams that God has for us.

We are children of the covenant. And that is what the very center of the book of Jeremiah wants to convince us of.

That despite what has happened, no matter how jarring or unjust, we are still invited to steward with authority the world before us.

The new covenant that God calls the people to through Jeremiah is a continuation of the old, a continuation of the Exodus fidelity in which God says, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.

[12 : 34] Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. Dallas Willard sums up this verse by saying this, the basic idea here is that God calls us to a direct and fully conscious relationship with him as priests, in which we share responsibility with him as kings in the exercise of this authority.

Now, just like Simba, we have to learn that this is power with and not power over, but it is still power. So many of you this morning were honored in front of the whole community for your volunteer service to this church.

So many of you are doing the work that runs this church week in and week out. You are the leaders of this church. Yet more and more, I've begun to wonder whether you see yourselves that way. Whether you see yourselves as shepherds and prophets and teachers. I'm worried that too many of us don't believe that we have the superpower giftings that Paul lists in his letters.

But you do. I love this church. You do. And I wonder what kind of traumas and exiles and experiences of burnout and betrayal have left you feeling like you don't.

[14 : 17] What lies you were told and ways you still feel you have to protect yourself even in this church. But I can't shake the sense that we are called in this season to something deeper, to a kind of thawed out spirituality.

For some, that might mean genuine recovery from trauma or religious pain. The genogram, that's part of why we're doing it. We want to do some stuff around family in this church and be really honest.

For some of us, it just might mean we want to further healing. When it comes to shedding our false selves and being more awake to God. In the book of Jeremiah, we see a people reeling from experiences of profound disorientation.

Yet in the very middle of this book, and it's not a coincidence that it's in the middle, we encounter God calling them back. Trauma and disaster studies remind us that experiences like the one the Israelite community faced overwhelm the ability to cope.

In the words of Hebrew Bible scholar Kathleen O'Connor, disasters turn life upside down and shake the foundations of the world apart in unimaginable and unspeakable ways.

[15 : 39] They destroy daily existence and shatter its meanings. They leave people stunned, isolated, and hopeless. They force people into a new normal.

They steal a sense of safety and security. They leave fragmentation in their wake. And I do want to be clear. Most of us, most of us, have not experienced anything near what the Israelite community was experiencing at that time during the Babylonian exile.

I've got to say that. And there are many parts of the world in which I could preach this sermon and this would be directly relevant. I think about Palestine and Ukraine.

I think about Sudan and Myanmar and the Democratic Republic of Congo. And those are just the ones that are top of mind. As Westerners, Jeremiah can draw us closer, though, to the experiences of our many siblings around the world whose lives have literally come apart.

you can remind us that most of the Bible arose out of trauma, whether the far-reaching experience of exploitation by empire or the scapegoating and marginalization of a people trying to make sense of the crucifixion of their God.

[17 : 03] Though we don't live in a war zone, many of us still, in some way, these experiences that are spoken of in this book resonate with us.

In particular, for our community, I think one of the experiences that might resonate the most is the consequence of disaster, of becoming numb, becoming numb to protect ourselves, closing down because the world has become too much or because your past has become too much or because faith has become too much.

When people grow numb, when feelings disappear, when feelings are so riotous as to short-circuit the capacity to fill, then people cannot begin to recover from their losses.

That's Kathleen O'Connor. She says grief and anger become unreachable. And if you cannot grieve your losses, if you cannot feel just rage at systems that have wounded you, then you cannot begin to heal.

You can't have a vision for the future that genuinely feels possible and that is genuinely personal. even though most of this book explodes with a harsh language of people trying to make sense of catastrophe, people trying to figure it all out, the very middle of the book bursts with this kind of hope.

[18 : 40] It's called the Little Book of Comfort and it comes like a surprise. The language that you see later in the Bible of new creation, a lot of it is linked to this passage.

The essential promise comes in Jeremiah 33. For the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will restore the fortunes of my people. Israel and Judah, says the Lord, and I will bring them back to the land that I gave to their ancestors.

They shall take possession of it. Restore the fortunes. Return home. Those are the foundations of God's promises to God's people.

But then there's more in Jeremiah in these chapters in 30, 18 through 22. I am going to restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob and have compassion on his dwellings.

The city shall be rebuilt upon its mound and the citadel set on its rightful site. Out of them shall come thanksgiving and the sound of merrymakers.

[19 : 49] I will make them many and they shall not be few. I will make them honored and they shall not be disdained. The people are assured that they won't just have a reversal of fortune or return to the land, but they will have an experience of joy overflowing.

That they will experience authentic thanksgiving and worship of God in a community of faith that in which they can make sense of the world again. Jeremiah 31, 4 through 5 says, Again, I will build you and you shall be built.

Again, you shall adorn yourselves with tambourines and go forth in the dance of merrymakers and go forth in the dance of merrymakers and you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria.

The planters shall plant and shall enjoy the fruit. The people are promised that they will again have the joy of Miriam leading the Hebrew slaves with song and dance after they crossed the Red Sea.

And they are told that they will experience fruitfulness that they themselves can enjoy. This is gorgeous poetry and I hope that you read this, the whole little book, chapters 30 through 33 this week.

[21 : 13] But here's the point. God proclaims remaking among the people. God proclaims a future beyond their current state.

God makes the possibility of abundant joy thinkable again. God makes clear that numbness, pain, and loss will not be the last word.

In The Lion King, when Simba reunites with his childhood friend Nala, he has to confront his past. He's forced to face the lies that he believed and the self-protective strategies that have kept him safe but which no longer serve him.

He's forced to face the numbness in his heart and the ways that his heart has turned to stone. And the mandrill, Rafiki, he's a mandrill, not a monkey.

I didn't know that or a baboon. The mandrill, Rafiki, leads Simba to a pond in which he can see his own reflection and it's there that Simba begins to hear his father's voice again.

[22 : 25] His father says, Simba, you have forgotten me. And Simba denies this. But his father keeps going. You have forgotten who you are and so you have forgotten me.

Look inside yourself, Simba. You are more than what you have become. And then with great emotion, Simba asks, how can I go back?

I'm not who I used to be. And Muspasa just replies, remember who you are. You are my son and the one true king.

Remember who you are. God says to the Israelite community, the days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant with you.

But the truth is that the new covenant has unmistakable continuity with the past, with remembering who you are, with acknowledging that what you have become because of life's losses and recalling that you are still called to be a king and a priest, remembering that you are still called to steward everything the light touches.

[23 : 46] The new covenant is the community being called to a renewed intimacy with God and to an egalitarian distribution of power. They're invited to a revival of trust.

And that's not a small thing. Their ancestors had been slaves in Egypt and delivered. And now they themselves are slaves in Babylon.

So to be called back into renewed intimacy involves a risk of love and a risk of vulnerability. Yet the hope in these passages is that the people will know the Lord in a new way.

The language here is the language of sexual intimacy. It's the language of union. Of something that's intuitive, that is acquainted with the worst of the world and the worst of the self, yet does not hold itself back.

These verses are just the middle of the book. They're not even the end of the story. There will be questions that come in the dead of night and frustrations about protracted recovery.

[25 : 00] But the good news is that the covenant is forever. Further, in the passage God says through Jeremiah, and I'm going to sum this up a little bit, if this fixed order of the sun by day and the moon by night were ever to cease from my presence, then also the offspring of Israel would cease to be a nation.

Then further, if the heavens can be measured and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will reject all the offspring of Israel. The point? The fixed order won't cease and the world will never be fully measured.

So the invitation to covenant will always remain. And then finally, the new covenant passage ends with a kind of geography of restoration.

It's an odd ending to the chapter, but I sort of love it. As with Simba's return to the pride lands, it is as if vivid color returns to the world.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when the city shall be rebuilt for the Lord from the tower of Hananiah to the corner gate.

[26 : 16] And the measuring line shall go further out straight to the hills of Gerib and shall then turn to Goa. The whole valley of the dead bodies and ashes and all the fields as far as the Wadi Kidron to the corner of the horse gate toward the east shall be sacred to the Lord.

It shall never again be uprooted or overthrown. This is a vision of not only return and restoration, but of enlargement.

This is a vision in which all the destroyed places, the wounds, the seasons of disorientation and death are encompassed by the love of God and become sacred.

And it is a vision in which the people can never be overthrown again not because they want no sorrow anymore, but because they will know that God's desire for intimacy far surpasses any trauma or wound that could ever displace.

Friends, today you are invited to allow God to love you out of your numbness, out of the fragmentation and in which the world is always pulling all of us out of the ways of living that we've settled for.

[27 : 42] What I didn't say at the beginning of the sermon, but I want to say now is that the little book of comfort starts with these words. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you.

As we move into Lent, that's my challenge to you. Write down the vision of joy and hope that you feel God is calling you toward.

Write past the shackles, write past the numbness, write past the disorientation or the exhaustion as many of you named this morning.

What is it that God intends for you as a part of her royal nation and kingdom of priests? How can you claim a yet kind of faith that has passed your wounds, that says I may not feel comfortable praying in public yet?

I may not know how to interact with scripture yet. I may not know the steps to take in a world that seems to be on fire yet. I may not know how to interact with my family yet.

[29 : 05] I may not be able to step out of any number of stifling closets yet. But God's intent for me is that I will. That in remembering who I am, I can allow my heart of stone to become a heart of flesh.

I can know a further intimacy with God. May the one who made us to be kings and priests turn our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh.

May God restore and make sacred all the wounded places in our lives that we might be suitable stewards of everything the light touches.

Amen. Amen.