

Soul Tending: Presence

Jeremiah 31:27-34

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Perhaps you've had this experience in the not too distant past. I know I have. You are driving in your car listening to NPR or scrolling through headlines on the internet or sitting in your living room with the news on TV, and you find yourself getting more and more upset. Your anger or grief or bewilderment swell up inside you and you suddenly find you just can't listen anymore. It's just too much! So, you close the computer or turn off the TV or radio but then you feel vaguely guilty. You want to be well-informed. You realize that you live a privileged life and with that comes the responsibility to care about others. It's just that the whole thing is overwhelming.

I think a lot of us have been through this in the last few years, and with another election coming up, I suspect we will experience it again. Recently, I read the results of a study done by the United Way in March of 2022 - so just about two years ago - in which they surveyed 1022 Americans representing a variety of demographics and all fifty states. They asked people to rate their own level of empathy in 2019, pre-pandemic, and in 2022. The national average saw a decrease in empathy of 14%, 19% in women, and 8% in men. Age wise, the biggest decrease in empathy was in Millennials. In the same survey, 57% of Americans said that misinformation on social media has impacted their level of empathy, 61% said they have experienced empathy burnout regarding social justice issues, and 57% of women said they feel emotionally exhausted by watching the news.

I have had so many conversations over the last few years that included statements like "I don't want to hear about social justice. I can't deal with it", "I don't go on Facebook anymore - it's too overwhelming", and "I can't stand to listen to or watch the news. There's just too much bad in the world and I can't handle it."

Of course, other things can lead us to that sense of overwhelm, as well. Perhaps you identify with the mom in the old TV ad for bath beads. She is trying to cope with fighting children, a crying baby, a loud TV, and a ringing phone until she exclaims "Calgon take me away". (I was amused to discover that Calgon's website address is takemeaway.com). Or you might be in the situation at work where expectations and demands are getting so high you want to walk away.

Whatever the source of feeling emotionally overwhelmed might be, the experience is soul crushing. So, what do we do when we feel that sense of overwhelm? We can turn off the TV or radio, walk away or take a bath, but those are mostly ways to avoid what's happening. They don't address the deeper feelings that lead us to just shut down emotionally. How do we tend to our souls?

Our scripture reading today comes from the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a prophet during the Jewish exile in Babylon. The kingdom of Judah was controlled by Assyria and then by Egypt until Babylon defeated both and Judah became a Babylonian vassal. In 596, they revolted,

but Babylon destroyed the Jewish temple and the whole city of Jerusalem and took the king and many prominent citizens into exile in Babylon.

So, much of the book of Jeremiah is telling those people in exile that the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple was divine punishment because they had broken their covenant with God by turning away from the one God and beginning to worship pagan gods. I imagine that in the context of losing their homes and temple, being taken away to another country, and living daily with regret, those in exile might have gotten pretty overwhelmed, as well.

Yet, Jeremiah does hold out hope for them in this passage which has become an important one for Christians. He says that some day God will make a new covenant with God's people. Through Jeremiah, God says, "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." This covenant will be different from the old covenant because they will no longer need to be taught the law or reminded to follow the law, the law will be with them, in their hearts, as will God.

Of course, this is the covenant that we understand God made through Jesus Christ. We refer to it in our Communion liturgy when we quote Jesus saying "this is my blood of the new covenant poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins". We have inherited this covenant and so God's law - the law of love and compassion and mercy and grace - is written on our hearts. God's Spirit is at work within us to comfort and guide us.

Yet, it can be pretty hard to access that sense of God within when you are overwhelmed by the chaos and cruelty of the world. How do we open up that channel? How do we find love and compassion and peace when everything is just too much?

In an interview with Paul Holdengraber, author and environmental activist Terry Tempest Williams tells this story of her own experience of becoming overwhelmed. She says, "Just last week, I was so depressed. I cannot believe what is happening in this country. I've been in the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem for the last month and the state of Wyoming is now opening permits so that if grizzly bears get outside Yellowstone National Park or Grand Teton National Park, they can be shot. We tried to organize, buy out the permits, "shoot them with a camera, not a gun." All this is political, right? And I thought, stop, too much noise. Too much rage. And I went into the park and drove through Willow Flats. On the edge of the Snake River, I saw the willows move. And there in the clearing emerges this immense being—a grizzly bear. And I thought, first and foremost, above all politics, here is beauty on four legs. I just wept. My heart calmed, my eyes opened, and I found a compassion that I had lost...and I thought, here, now, this is beauty, this is the strategy for survival...I have to believe in those moments of beauty that take us to a place of transcendence where anything is possible. We have to hold on to that."

Like Williams, I believe that moments of mindful awareness when we focus on the beauty which surrounds us can be an antidote to the feelings of helplessness and weariness that accompany being overwhelmed by the world. There is something about beauty that opens our hearts to God and makes us keenly aware of the goodness that is God. Beauty clears the path back to God's law written on our hearts, inspires creativity and compassion, and somehow helps us to recognize our place in the universal order.

And it doesn't mean that you have to have a mountain top experience of beauty - seeing the Rocky Mountains or snorkeling in a beautiful coral reef. You can encounter beauty anytime

and anywhere, but it does mean stopping whatever you're doing and taking the time to notice. Spending a few moments gazing into a daffodil. Closing your eyes and listening to the birds sing and the squirrels chatter. Pausing on your way to bed to watch your child sleep. Going to a concert and letting the music wash over you. Reading a poem by Mary Oliver. In this poem, entitled "Mindful", she writes about how beauty not only calms the soul by connecting us to God but also can lead us from overwhelm to joy - if we let it.

Every day
I see or hear something that more or less
kills me with delight, that leaves me like a needle
in the haystack
of light.
It was what I was born for - to look, to listen,
to lose myself inside this soft world - to instruct myself over and over
in joy,
and acclamation. Nor am I talking about the exceptional,
the fearful, the dreadful, the very extravagant - but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,
the daily presentations. Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself, how can you help
but grow wise with such teachings as these -
the untrimmable light
of the world,
the ocean's shine, the prayers that are made out of grass?

So, here is my challenge to you. The next time you have the feeling that everything is just too much for you, when the news or work or home life like it's crushing you, stop. Stop, breathe, and seek out something beautiful. You shouldn't need to look far. When you settle on something, take the time to soak it in. Examine it as an artist would. Say a prayer of gratitude. Or just let whatever you've found calm you, soothe you, and lead you back to the law and love of God written on your heart.

May it be so. Amen.