



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## Jeremiah Speaks To Us Today

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

September 22, 2013

Tulsa, OK, Albuquerque, NM; Herkimer County, NY; Akron, Ohio; Federal Way, WA; Manchester, IL; Fernley, NV; Waynesville, IN; Santa Monica, CA; Clarksburg, WV; Hialeah, FL; Dallas, TX; Oklahoma City; Crab Orchard, TN; Washington, DC. If you are wondering what these places have in common, they have all been the scene of a mass shooting and killing this year. To qualify to be a mass killing, there must be four or more people killed, other than the gunman. There have been 16 since Newtown, more than one a month, and it appears to be escalating to the point of being commonplace. When I saw the map with these places indicated after Monday's shootings at the Navy Yard, I didn't even remember hearing about some of them. According to the Center for Disease Control, 24,580 people have been shot to death since that awful day at Sandy Hook Elementary School. And of course, since that number was published, others were added this week.

*Listen again to the words of the prophet Jeremiah;*

*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!*

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Jeremiah is the classic prophet. God reached into his life and heart when he was a boy and said, "You will speak for me." From then on, Jeremiah had to rage at his own people to warn them of what their behavior would lead to. He saw how the people had become enamored with luxury and forgot to care for those for whom it was out of reach. They made their glamorous city their idol and forgot God. As much as Jeremiah loved the people, he was compelled to excoriate them because he felt what God felt. Over and over again he warned of the destruction that lay ahead of them, imploring them to return to a righteous way of being. A common description of a prophet is one who afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted. When Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, he became the prophet of hope for the people. He promised them that Babylon's rule would end but their covenant with God was eternal and Israel would not disappear. It can't have been easy to be Jeremiah. The people hated him when he warned them and then they blamed him when he was right, yet he continued to love and to work on their behalf.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote the seminal work on these gloomy, angry messengers of God. *The Prophets* is a two volume explanation of who they were, what made them tick and the context for their fiery speech. Prophets are not easy to be around, they have an experience of God that changes them, makes them unable to tolerate injustice and they see it everywhere. They are highly sensitive to evil, especially to evil that has become commonplace. Their speech is explosive, combustible and we are scorched by it. To a prophet, few are guilty but all are responsible.

The prophet lives in near constant pain for he hears the cries that others do not. Rabbi Heschel, who must have been part prophet himself, describes this state in these words: "Perhaps the prophet knew more about the secret obscenity of sheer unfairness, about the unnoticed malignancy of established patterns of indifference, than men whose knowledge depends solely on intelligence and observation. The prophet's ear perceives the silent sigh."

I have felt quite like that a lot this week. It hasn't just been the gun violence. The kids have gone back to school and it should be a time of reconnecting with friends, Friday night football games and crisp fall air. But all week, I have been thinking of those kids who have had to go back to the places in which they were tormented last year by their classmates. Do they have any hope that the summer had so changed them as to make them unbulliable at best or at least invisible. And we say, yes it's a problem but it just is the way things are. For kids being bullied there is no balm in their Gilead. Do we even hear their cries?

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I have felt Jeremiah take up residence in my heart as the reports came out of Washington that elected leaders of this country, a country still in a recession in which there are at least three people out of work for every job available, these people sent to Washington to govern, have decided that just too darn many people are getting food assistance. The rationale given is that the food assistance program is so lavish that it makes people lazy, takes away their incentive to work; despite the fact that about 55% of the people who benefit from food assistance are under 18 or over 60. 41% of households that receive this meager help have jobs, but those jobs don't pay enough to afford basic needs. And then there are the people whose fulltime job is looking for work, you know how well that pays. It's hard to get a number that everyone agrees on, in my research this week, I saw a range of 38 to 50 million people in this country can't count on regular meals. Over 900,000 veterans are currently receiving food assistance but this new plan will deny it to 170,000 of them. "Hark the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land...For the hurt of my poor people, I am hurt."

But possibly the most painful thing recently is the proliferation of hatred. We have a new Miss America. A generation or so ago, her family came from India. As soon as the tiara was put on her head, a deluge of obscenity and bile flooded the internet and Twitter because she wasn't American or Christian enough. It was shocking. What have we become? And don't think it's not right here. Anonymous commenting brings out the worst in people. I experimented this week by posting a comment. I was the only person who actually identified themselves except for the administrator of the site who came on to say that he had deleted the comments that attacked me personally. There's a meanness that has broken out in American culture. It breaks my heart because it breaks the bonds of common humanity.

I'm sorry that this is such a downer of a sermon, but these things are in our midst. When we see so much of it, it can make life seem bleak. However, this is not the reality that Jesus teaches. The reality is that we are all one. We are all equally loved and valued; the hatred and division and violence simply obscure the reality of love. In every moment we are called to live this Christ reality and not get drawn into the illusion. It takes awareness, how are you responding to the things that you see? Are you bringing love to a situation or something else? Do you remember to see Christ in those who do violence with words or weapons? Do you work for justice and peace rather than accepting their absence as just the way things are? Love is a powerful thing, in fact, it is the most powerful thing. Apply it liberally and with it let the illusion begin to dissolve and reveal the Kingdom in our midst. Perhaps then old Jeremiah can finally retire.

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