

BETWEEN TRAUMA AND HOPE

Scripture Readings: Ezekiel 7:1-12, 1 Peter 3:13-16

Here's a note I received last week: "Dear Pastor Steve, could you begin your sermons with more allusions to Greek words that we cannot pronounce much less will ever remember?"

Thank you, Mr. or Ms. Mystified-in-Menasha. Here you go:

hapax legomenon

[hap-aks li-gom-uh-non, hey-paks] [SHOW IPA](#)  

noun, plural hap·ax le·go·me·na • [hap-aks li-gom-uh-nuh, hey-paks].

- 1 a word or phrase that appears only once in a manuscript, document, or particular area of literature.

"HAP-aks li-GOM-uh-non" is how it's pronounced and it refers to "a word or phrase that appears only once in a manuscript, document, or particular area of literature." The Bible contains several hapax legomena (plural form!) but that number has been reduced through the years as other literature from the Biblical era is uncovered and used that previously unique word or words. But that hasn't happened to Ezekiel. In fact, this chapter, chapter 7 of Ezekiel, contains more hapax legomena than any other chapter in the Bible or in any other literature, at least this side of Dr. Seuss.

What does that mean? Well, all the sentence fragments from this Chapter – "An end! Disaster after Disaster! It comes! See, the day! See, it comes!" – these are really untranslatable. Relying on context, the translators guessed at what these hapax legomena might mean. Perhaps they are made-up words Ezekiel used to describe the indescribable. Some scholars believe they are not words at all. Here may be a better translation of these verses:

Ughnnnn....

Ohhhhh....

Ahhhhh!!!!

What if these are moans and groans, inarticulate screams of agony, howls of sorrow, disillusionment, and distress? The Apostle Paul wrote about "sighs too deep for human words." Grippled by the trauma of his vision of the nation's destruction, Ezekiel takes us to a place beyond words, to feelings deeply lodged in us, in our guts.



In the face of trauma, Ezekiel called us to a place beyond words.

Ezekiel has been speaking to me this past week, speaking to all of us. *“Maybe not so much with the words,”* he’s telling me. Trauma first needs expression, outlet, a safe place where those emotions can be felt and shared.

You know what I’m talking about.

- The person who just lost a loved one doesn’t need our words to explain it all away but our comforting presence.
- The person who suddenly understands how their destructive behavior has hurt others doesn’t need a word of judgment but our loving support;
- The person who has been abused, lied to, bruised and battered doesn’t need us to blame the victim but to empower the survivor.

We make a mistake when we rush in with words rather than loving and listening, providing a safe presence.

The Chinese poet and philosopher Zhaungzi wrote during a time after Ezekiel but before Jesus; a time when China was filled with terror and trauma.



His writing was not overtly political but filled with paradox, parable, and humor. His most famous quote may be the one loved by Thomas Merton:

“Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him.”

It’s worth hearing again: *“Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him.”*

Where is that place beyond words where healing can begin?



I heard something this week that I had been ignorant of for my 62 years: When a runaway slave was caught and then returned to his or her master, often the master had the slave's toes cut off so that they couldn't run again. I've heard of similar kinds of horrors from our country's disgraceful devil's bargain with slavery, but this one caught me up short. I had no words. What I felt was a tingling in my toes, a cry in my mind, the faintest echo of the trauma inflicted on those human beings. Imagine if this was a story about your own great-grandmother or great-great-grandfather. Where would that trauma lodge itself? In a place beyond words...

You know why I'm bringing this up.



I know that you've seen these kind of images more than you wanted to. But I want to remind us of what we saw:

- a mob breaking through windows, forcing our elected representatives to hide under their desks.
- a mob surrounding U.S. Capitol security guards, who were outnumbered and overwhelmed, and made them fear for their lives.
- a mob marching through the Capitol buildings carrying Confederate flags and placing pipe bombs and Molotov cocktails on the grounds of the Capitol.

We are in the midst of a national trauma and words don't suffice to begin the healing.

One of the speeches made on Capitol Hill this past week urged us all to “*calm down...*” Is that what really should be said to us right now, to each of us, to a nation that's been traumatized? Is that what you say to a trauma victim? “*Just calm down... calm down.*”

No. No. **Don't** calm down. Feel what you need to feel right now and know that we will be here with you, holding care, holding vigil, sharing silence, feeling empathy.

“Where can I find a woman who has forgotten words so I can have a word with her.”

But too much of what we're getting right now are words, lots of words, lots of empty words: *"Calm down, forget the injustice, stuff your feelings, get over your trauma, don't worry about accountability and consequences. Unify and just calm down."*

These kind of messages remind me of what Dr. King wrote in his Letter from Birmingham Jail:

"... I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council-er or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action;" who paternalistically feels he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a 'more convenient season.'

Moderating words – *not now, just wait, hold it in, suck it up, not until the time is right* – words that have crushed so many spirits, tolerated so many evils, wasted so much time and so many lives.

No. **Don't** calm down. Beverly Harrison entitled an article *"The power of anger in the work of love."* This feminist theologian would tell us to feel our rage and let it power the work we are called to do as Christians.

With trauma, you have to start with honesty, be present with intense emotions with compassion and self-compassion, and be patient with experiences that only very slowly and carefully can be expressed in words.

Don't calm down.

And please know that on the other side of trauma lies **hope**.

As early Christian converts were being cast out of their families, losing their jobs, and persecuted by the authorities, First Peter was written to those traumatized people with words about suffering and a call to always be ready to **hope**.

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.

On the other side of suffering, of trauma's healing, lies **hope**. And that hope is our calling – to feel it, to share it, account for it, to act from it. No more fear. No intimidation. Acting from gentleness and reverence, we speak and act for hope.

It begins in inarticulate rage, grief, disappointment, and despair but it draws power from those experiences and acts from hope in love, hope **expressed** by love.

So don't calm down. Feel what you need to feel. Don't be intimidated by words and acts of hate. Open yourselves to begin healing in the place beyond words with those you love and trust. And



then hope – hope in God’s love, in Christ’s example, in the ancient vision of the Beloved Community.



Here’s how Ezekiel finally envisioned it: a dark valley filled with skeletons who had been mutilated – arms broken, legs shattered, toes cut off. And God gave Ezekiel words of hope to say:

”O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord: ... you shall live. God will lay sinews on you and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live...!”

After 37 chapters of embodying Jerusalem’s pain, living in inarticulate agony, finally, Ezekiel found hope.

Us too. Let us hope. Let us hope and then step out into the light to act for love. For as Dr. King said:

*Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.
Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.*

Amen.

