

When someone loses a loved one, I usually pass along a practical warning. It's not the most important thing I have to say, but it's helpful to know. I tell them: *Remember that people don't know what to say at a time like this, but some still feel like they have to say something, so don't be surprised if they say things that sound foolish or even hurtful. The people mean well – they do! – but they may not come across well, so it's best to be prepared for it ahead of time.*

Why do I make a point of telling them this? It goes back to a time early in my ministry when I was talking with a grieving mother. Her 20-year old daughter had just died of ovarian cancer. It had been a long, hard battle. And what a loss! What a painful, painful loss! In fact, it was hard to imagine that anything could make it more painful, but leave it to the well-intentioned! As we talked, this usually soft-spoken mother could hardly contain her outrage over some of the things that had been said to her – like: “*Well, you gave it your best shot.*” “*Guess it was just her time.*” “*Be thankful for the years you had!*” She said, “All those things may be true, but coming from someone else they feel like a slap in the face! And add to them some of the stupid things people have said – like, ‘*God just needs her more than you do*’ – and it's almost too much to bear! Who would have thought anyone could make the loss of a daughter more painful than it already is? But these well-intentioned know-it-alls...they sure have!”

To me, the lesson was clear: *there's a time to preach and a time to refrain from preaching.* And this doesn't just apply to preachers! Nor is it limited to situations like the one I just described. There are many things that can lay our lives in the dust. And never mind whether they are as painful as the loss of a loved one. They're still painful. Like when a person's marriage is shattered by selfishness or unfaithfulness. Or when a person's child wanders off into alcoholism or drug abuse. Or when a person's career is destroyed, and they have no idea what to do next. These, too, are painful losses. And what do we say when someone is going through them? Do we point out the lessons they can learn? No doubt there are some, but we're probably not the ones who should point them out. Do we go on and on about the potential blessings in the situation – how it can strengthen their character and sensitize them to the needs of others? All that may be true, but it probably won't help to hear it from us. Remember Job's friends, giving him advice, pointing out the lessons he needed to learn? How well-intentioned they were! And how useless! They just added insult to injury, made his pain that much worse. And we don't want to make the same mistake! No, there's a time to preach and a time to refrain from preaching.

The truth is: sometimes we just need to be our own preachers, especially in the painful times of life. For certain lessons will only hit home if we discover them by ourselves. Certain blessings will only become clear if we discern them for ourselves. And none of it is likely to make much difference at all unless we apply it to ourselves. So sometimes we need to be our own preachers. Now, I know

this changes the job description for pastors like me. Instead of just spelling things out, we need to “equip the saints” to figure things out. But it’s important that each Christian learn to do that. Whether it means examining our consciences and applying Law and Gospel to what we find, whether it means surveying our situations and sorting out what it means to follow Christ, or whether it even means looking at the ruins of a shattered life, and discerning what is left to hold onto, we need to learn how to preach to ourselves. No one can believe *for us*. No one can understand *for us*. No one can heal *for us*, grow *for us*, or mature *for us*. That’s homework all our own. A pastor can provide the raw materials – can teach God’s Word and *how* to apply it. But the actual application – discovering the lessons, discerning the blessings, figuring out how it fits into our relationship with God – that works best when we are own preachers.

And if that sounds risky, you’re right! It is! Human nature makes it risky, especially when we’re hit with something painful. For, human nature being what it is, there will always be temptations to deal with. In this case, self-pity will be a temptation, blaming God will be a temptation, assuming the worst will be a temptation; likewise, assuming nothing’s going to change. But if we know this about ourselves – and a Christian certainly knows this! – we also know better than to give into these temptations. Instead, we must put *faith* in the driver’s seat. Specifically, we must look past what we feel, past what we fear, and consciously focus on what we know about God.

So how do we actually do this? In our text, Jeremiah shows us. The year is 587 B.C. Perhaps he’s standing on a hillside, looking out over Jerusalem – or rather, what was Jerusalem, for all he can see now are smoldering ruins. The Babylonians have destroyed everything. Not one stone is left upon another. Why, even the mighty temple itself has been reduced to a pile of rubble. Worse yet, his friends and family are gone. Some are dead. Some have been taken away into exile. And even that’s not the worst. No, the worst part is knowing that this could have been avoided. There had been warnings. Jeremiah had given warnings. No one had listened. And now, see the bitter consequences! How lost and alone Jeremiah feels! **“My soul is bereft of peace,”** he says, **“I have forgotten what happiness is.”**

Quite a tragic scene, isn’t it? Jeremiah grieving over Jerusalem! And how can we not feel sorry for him? So as we picture the prophet standing there, imagine that we could talk to him. In fact, imagine that we could try to console him – with the best intentions, of course! How much good do you suppose that would do? For instance, maybe we’d say, *“Jeremiah, you tried to warn them. It’s not your fault this happened.”* But...maybe we shouldn’t. If he’s like us, that might backfire. He’d probably just start thinking of all the ways he could and should have tried harder. So maybe we’d say, *“Jeremiah, don’t be so tough on yourself. You gave it your very best shot.”* But again, maybe not. If he’s like us, that might depress him all the more. *“I guess my best just wasn’t good enough!”* So maybe we’d give it one last try. *“Jeremiah, we know this is hard to bear, but think*

*of all the good lessons you can learn from this. Think how this will strengthen your character! Think how this will sensitize you to the needs of others.”* And we would say this with the best intentions, of course. But here again, would this be helpful? If someone said it to us, would we find it helpful? Probably not.

So maybe it's just as well that we're not on the hillside with Jeremiah. No, he stands there alone. He surveys the scene alone. And as he does...well, he starts to look inward, doesn't he? And as he starts to look inward, he becomes his own preacher. First, he admits what he's feeling: **“The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall!”** And that's good! He needs to do that. What's more, he admits what he's doing with these feelings and what they're doing to him: **“My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.”** That's a fancy way of admitting: *I keep dwelling on all the negative stuff, and frankly, it's getting me down.* So what does Jeremiah's inner preacher tell him to do instead? Put *faith* in the driver's seat! Look past what he feels, past what he fears, and consciously focus on what he knows about God – which is what he does. **“But this I call to mind,”** he says. And notice, he must *call* it to mind! It takes conscious effort. **“But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness!”**

Now, how's that for a change in attitude?! One minute, all Jeremiah can see is rubble and ruins. Nothing is left! But then he makes himself take a closer look at his situation, and... *Hey, what's that?* It's as if, glimmering beneath the ashes of his hopes and dreams, he spots three nuggets of gold! Something is left after all, and it's something precious, for these nuggets of gold are the things he knows about God. Beyond what he feels, beyond what he fears, these are three things he knows: God is always loving, God is always merciful, God is always faithful. Always! And what a difference it makes for him to call these truths to mind – for him to call them to mind *himself*. Had we pointed out these truths, he might have just ignored us. Had someone else pointed out these truths, he might have been resentful. But searching on his own – see what he's found! Truths that will not change no what the situation may be. And as he calls these truths to mind, see how they give him strength! As he applies them to himself, see how they rekindle his hope! And see the crucial factor. Jeremiah discovers, discerns, and applies all this *himself*. What helps most is being his own preacher!

And that's a valuable lesson for us. Yes, we do need external preaching. Lots of it! Would you expect me to say otherwise? But it's true! We need to hear these precious truths preached again and again. God is always loving, always merciful, always faithful. Always! But *why* do we need to hear these truths preached? So that when push comes to shove, we'll be able to call them to mind and preach them to ourselves. That's what will put faith in the driver's seat. That's what will get us through the tough times. Calling to mind what we know about God deep inside and applying it to our own situation. Being our own preachers.

And that being the case, you know what? I think I've preached enough for now! So I'm going to wrap this up and let you take over. I put these truths into your hands. I invite you to apply them to your situation. See what a difference it makes to be your own preacher!

Yes, I'll admit that when I originally chose this text, I meant to give the usual three-point sermon. In fact, you can probably guess what the outline would have been. But there is a time to preach and a time to refrain from preaching. You know better than I do what's going on in your life. You know your own questions and struggles all too well. And maybe you're dealing with some pretty rough stuff. So instead of me telling you how to apply these truths to your situation, I invite you to do that for yourself. What can you tell your own hurting heart about the steadfast love of the Lord, how it never ceases? What can you tell your own battered spirit about the mercies of the Lord, how they're new every morning? And what can you tell your own questioning soul about the faithfulness of God, how it never does change? Believe me, the message will apply so much better coming from yourself to yourself! So as my sermon ends, let yours begin. Be your own preacher, taking Jeremiah's words as your text: **"This I call to mind and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness!"** Amen.