



BOSTON COLLEGE
School of Theology and Ministry
CONTINUING EDUCATION

Transcript of: Coping and Hoping With the Help of Jeremiah

**Presented on September 30, 2021 by
Jamie L. Waters, Ph.D.**

Dean Thomas Stegman: Good evening everyone and welcome to tonight's presentation, Coping and Hoping with the Help of Jeremiah. It's my distinct pleasure to introduce our speaker. Dr. Jamie Waters teaches scripture at DePaul University in Chicago, where she's Associate Professor of Catholic Studies.

She completed her BA in Theology and Philosophy here at Boston College. So she's a fellow Eagle - go Eagles. And I'm going to go off script but not rogue - within the last hour Dr. Waters and I had a chance to talk with Father Leahy in the President's Office. And he asked her, "Well, who are your influential professors?" And, I kid you not, the first name out of her mouth is one David Vanderhooft, and David, I'm so glad that you're here to join us.

After finishing her BA, she went on to complete a Masters of Arts and Religion at Yale University and got her Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies at Johns Hopkins University. Her expertise is in Hebrew Bible/Old Testament) and the Ancient Semitic Languages. In 2013, Dr. Waters joined the Catholic Studies Department at DePaul University where she has been able to merge her interest in ancient and modern perspectives of the Bible. Her research interests include sacred and liminal space, ancient Israelite religion, biblical law, and figurative language in the Hebrew Bible. Dr. Waters is published on the topics of sacred and liminal space in her book "Threshing Floors in Ancient Israel: Their Ritual and Symbolic Significance," which was published by Fortress Press in the Young Scholars Series in 2015. This work explores ancient conceptions of agrarian space, what we typically call farming, farm space, right. I have to interpret some of these words for this urban audience.

Her current projects elaborate on this phenomenon by researching the ways in which agriculture and the natural environment facilitate the human-divine intervention. She's also the author of a book called "What Does the Bible Say about Animals?" That's forthcoming soon from New City Press. And she's working on a commentary on the Book of Jeremiah for the Wisdom Commentary Series that Liturgical Press is producing. Her teaching emphasizes ancient and modern perspectives on the Bible. Topics of her courses include A Survey of Biblical Literature as well as more focused courses such as the Environment of the Bible, the Ten Commandments, Psalms, and Prophecy. We are so grateful that she traveled all the way from the Windy City to join us here tonight at Boston College. A warm welcome, and please join me in giving a warm welcome to Dr. Watters.

Dr. Waters:

Thanks very much for that warm welcome, and it is really great to be back here and to see all of you. So, thanks very much for having me. I've had opportunities today to connect with some of you, and I found the community to be really warm and welcoming. And I thank you for the hospitality you've already extended - and you can feel free to keep it up during my talk. You don't have to stop. Um, especially during that discussion at the end of the talk - the most hospitable thanks.

So, um, although this is my first visit to the School of Theology and Ministry, I am very familiar with Boston College and very excited to be here. As Tom mentioned, I'm a graduate of BC. Nineteen years ago I set foot on this campus as a political science major planning to go to law school, and 15 years ago I graduated with majors in theology and philosophy and was bound for divinity school. So you just never know what's going to happen. Obviously my four years here at BC have been life-changing and transformative. Professors Vanderhooft, Perkins, and Darr in the Theology Department were especially influential and supportive throughout my journey. And Professor Kerry Cronin in the Philosophy Department. Her course on Perspectives on Western Culture was foundational and where the major shift really happened for me. So, for my family who are watching at home, you can blame them or credit them however you see fit-- I'm not a high-powered lawyer, um. I'm a low to medium powered Bible Professor, so I'm happy to be here with you, really excited to be here.

Alright, so, for my talk tonight, I'm going to focus on the Book of Jeremiah. I've been doing research over the past year, and I've been sort of inundated and thinking a lot about Jeremiah, so I wanted to share a little bit of that with you tonight. Jeremiah lived during the 7th and 6th centuries BCE. His prophetic career coincided with a tumultuous period in the history of Judah - a time filled with instability, suffering, destruction, and exile. The book frames historical realities like the expansion of the Babylonian Empire, the Fall of Jerusalem, and destruction of the First Temple as consequences of people not keeping their covenantal obligations. And the book includes many critiques against corruption, injustice in society, and worship of other gods, among other violations. My work on Jeremiah has been done largely during 2020 and 2021. Reading about a volatile period in antiquity while living through this present time of incredible volatility, suffering, uncertainty, has been both challenging and informative. As you all already know, for well over a year we've been living through the COVID-19 pandemic, which has taken the lives of over four million people, including over six hundred thousand people in the United States. COVID-19 has wreaked havoc physically, mentally, and emotionally, causing a vast amount of suffering with many people enduring the traumas of the virus in isolation. The pandemic has highlighted the fragility of healthcare systems and has exacerbated health disparities that were already prevalent in the United States and throughout the world.

The pandemic has also highlighted the strength of our frontline heroes - our nurses, doctors, healthcare professionals, who have worked tirelessly to provide care and healing, putting themselves at risk for the sake of others. While living through this health crisis, we have also experienced the renewed engagement, conversation, and protest surrounding racial injustice and police brutality, sparked by the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Floyd's murder, which sadly and fortunately, I suppose, was recorded and viewed by millions of people, it has struck a painful chord in its grotesqueness. Many people were overcome with grief and rage at witnessing another instance of a black person dying during an encounter with a white law enforcer. As we know, Floyd is not the first or last. Like health disparities in this country, racial injustice has also been a plague, and both reached a breaking point in 2020.

Reading Jeremiah with those realities as my backdrop helped me to focus on the impact of suffering, vulnerability, and uncertainty on Jeremiah's community. Now, I don't want to give

the saddest lecture of the Continuing Education series. I mean, already as I'm reading this, I'm already overwhelmed, so I don't want this to be the saddest lecture. Um, I know we've all been going through a lot, so spending an hour on suffering and death and destruction might be a bit too much. At least, I can say it might be too much for me. So even though I've been wading through the pain of Jeremiah, I'm happy to say that there are hopeful texts that likely inspire Jeremiah, his community, and later communities after the exile. And these texts might inspire us today. So, that's where my focus will be for most of the evening.

We'll start first by exploring themes in Jeremiah's vision of restoration. Then we'll review some of Jeremiah's inner struggles--might be a little somber in the middle--but not to fear, Jeremiah will remind us of the power of praying as a coping strategy during difficult times. And finally, we'll end by reviewing a passage about healing in Jeremiah that has been inspirational and influential in music.

So, we'll start first with restoration. The Book of Jeremiah includes a variety of literary styles like sermons, poetic oracles of judgment, and prose narratives about the prophet's life. The book also incorporates collections of material with distinct literary features, and one of these collections found in Jeremiah chapters 30-33 is often called the Book of Consolation, or Book of Comfort or Restoration. In these chapters, especially 30 and 31, we get an idea of what healing would look like after destruction and exile. Walter Bruggeman notes that Jeremiah 30-33 has promissory materials that function in a few ways: the texts offer an explanation for how people survived exile, the texts have a pastoral quality that gives assurance and consolation that were needed as many people likely felt abandoned by God, and the texts reveal a theological concern that stresses a God who heals.

Some of the themes in these chapters include people returning to Israel and Judah, the rebuilding of the land, celebration and merriment, and inclusivity. And here I offer a small sample of passages. On multiple occasions in Jeremiah, the people of Judah were told that they would be scattered throughout the nations. Jeremiah 10:18, for instance, says that the inhabitants of the land would be thrown out among the nations. Jeremiah 18:17 threatens that the people would be scattered before the enemy. In texts on restoration we see a reversal, an interest in people being called home. "They will return from the land of the enemy. I will let them walk by brooks of water in a straight path. Your children shall come back to their own country."

We also have images of rebuilding, which was necessary after exile. The many oracles of judgment in Jeremiah highlight the damaging effects of invasion and destruction to the land itself and to its inhabitants. Judah is depicted as a wasteland, a desolate area, a heap of ruins with people, animals, and the earth dying.

The destruction of Judah reveals the interconnections of the people, the land, and the animals - who all suffer. So, it's fitting that the restoration and rebuilding involves all in the community. When the people return, they are told to rebuild: plant vineyards, and enjoy the riches of the land including the grain, wine, oil, and animals. Rather than a desolate wasteland, the land is now compared to a watered garden.

This image of rebuilding and planting in the land echoes the beginning of Jeremiah's prophetic career. In chapter one, Jeremiah is appointed over the nations and kingdoms, "to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." While much of the book focuses on the pulling down and the destroying language, chapters 30-33 reflect on building and planting anew. Hillary Marlow, in her work on the biblical prophets and environmental ethics, discusses the prevalence of vine and vineyard imagery in prophetic literature. The reference to planting vineyards in Jeremiah 31:5 reveals an optimism about restoration and stability. The land will once again be able to support and sustain vines and the people will be able to be

around to cultivate the land and enjoy the fruits of their labor. Marlow notes that, "encapsulated in that single agricultural task is the prophetic understanding of the blessing of YHWH and the settled and fertile life represented by living under his favor." The vision of the return home emphasizes that the home will be a sustainable one.

Restoration is confirmed by the sound of merriment, which is another reversal of past suffering. In chapter 9, when Jeremiah and his community were surrounded by destruction, YHWH instructs the prophet to summon the women mourners who publicly lament and teach the community how to wail and cry a communal lament over their collective loss. Jeremiah 31 reverses that image, replacing it with communal celebration filled with tambourines, singing, shouting, and dancing. It's party time. Sorrow's replaced with joy and the sound of merriment is another signal of a hopeful future. When describing who's at this festive community party, a few groups are highlighted: people who have difficulty seeing and walking, and women who are pregnant and in labor. The assumption might be that these groups could have difficulty traveling home from exile, so their inclusion highlights God's special care for people in need of assistance. In addition, these groups are sometimes overlooked or excluded from certain actions. The Hebrew Bible contains traditions that suggest that people who are blind and lame were excluded from cultic activities. For instance, Leviticus 21 prohibits people with various disabilities and diseases from entering the sanctuary. Blindness and lameness are on the list. This exclusion marginalizes and stigmatizes differences and a similar sentiment is found in the sacrament - sacrificial system, which considered blind or lame animals to be unacceptable for sacrifice. The Book of Malachi suggests that blind and lame animals were considered polluted or of lesser quality, which might offer an unfortunate parallel to how people with disabilities were viewed. But, despite these negative attitudes, there are texts that affirm divine concern for people with disabilities that are much more instructive.

In a vision of redemption and restoration after exile, Isaiah 35 emphasizes joy and singing, and the healing of people with various disabilities, including giving sight, sound, mobility, and speech. Isaiah 42 includes a hymn of praise for divine power with an image of God guiding people who are blind down unknown roads. Similarly, Psalm 146 depicts God as helper and advocate for people in need, including the oppressed, hungry, imprisoned, and blind. In the New Testament, this image of divine care and healing continues with Jesus frequently healing people in the Gospels. Jeremiah's vision of a renewed society after exile does not speak of healing the blind or lame, but rather, simply including them. By highlighting these groups who might typically be excluded or marginalized, Jeremiah offers a more inclusive vision for a restored society. As for women, women who are pregnant and women in labor are also signaled out during the restoration. Their inclusion could have a similar function to the reference to blind and lame people, as women also were excluded from various religious and social activities. Additionally, women who were pregnant and in labor are referenced in a variety of ways earlier in Jeremiah and they appear here in a different manner.

A pregnant woman is at the forefront of Jeremiah's prophetic calling, as he is appointed to be a prophet while in his mother's womb. YHWH declares, "before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you. I appoint you a prophet to the nations." Jeremiah alludes to this calling in utero as he struggles with delivering prophetic messages and curses his life, wishing he had died in his mother's womb. Likewise, when Jeremiah sees the suffering of his people, he compares it to the experience of a woman in labor. On the brink of destruction, Jeremiah is said to cry as a woman in labor, in anguish, as if giving birth to her first child. Jeremiah often references pregnancy and labor pains to represent individual or collective pain and suffering. The image of these women, though, in Jeremiah 31, is notably optimistic, as they're not in pain. Instead, they are present for the return home.

Implicit in referencing the women alongside the blind and the lame is an assurance that they can take comfort in divine assistance that will make the journey home possible, despite any physical challenges. Now thinking about this vision of inclusivity in light of the continued dialogue surrounding racial justice and equity offers a reminder of how these goals require inclusion. To heal a damaged society and to create a more just and equitable world, people have to be included - especially those who have been historically marginalized. By naming the groups who are often on the margins and highlighting their lives, Jeremiah takes a step away from thoughts of disabled people and women as less than, and instead offers an avenue of appreciation and inclusion. This attitude of seeing people and recognizing their presence is necessary as we continue to work towards social racial justice and, frankly, just justice in general in society. And we just explored some passages in the Book of Consolation, there's another collection of texts found within Jeremiah, sometimes called the Confessions of Jeremiah. These passages are also called the Complaints or the Laments, or what I would term more generally is just Jeremiah's Prayers. Because many of these prayers have elements of mourning and distress, Jeremiah has been labeled as the Weeping Prophet.

And he's often depicted in religious art in a position that evokes sadness and distress. Here we can see a few pictures. The center image is perhaps the most well known of the three. This is Michelangelo's painting of Jeremiah that's on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The painting on the left by Rembrandt is held in the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands. Both paintings depict Jeremiah in a sorrowful state, resting his head on his hand with slumped posture. It's difficult to see in the image, but towards the left of Rembrandt's painting is an image of the city of Jerusalem burning in the background. On the right is a lithograph by Marc Chagall housed in the Musee National Marc Chagall in France. Jeremiah again has a similar posture of sorrow. Chagall created several lithographs of Jeremiah weeping, experiencing personal hardship, or in a state of contemplation. While Jeremiah wept over the destruction of Jerusalem, Chagall's Jeremiah artwork has been interpreted as a statement of mourning and lament for the Holocaust.

Now the prayers of Jeremiah give an intimate look at the prophet's struggles and experiences. There are five passages that have been categorized as confessions of the prophet. Jeremiah 17:14-18 as an example that shows the turmoil of the prophet, and the ways in which he used prayer to express his desires and emotions, and to cope with difficult circumstances. Here are images that incorporate a verse from Jeremiah 17. Now just as an aside, I have a friend who frequently posts bible verses and other emotional quotes and images like these on social media. You might all have someone like that too in your lives, or you're that person for someone else. But these are some examples that I've seen online. And the one on the right, actually, I've seen on my friend's Twitter, I think, or Facebook - some social media. All right, so, one day during the pandemic, I saw this one on the right, "Heal me O Lord, and I shall be healed." Like many people, my friend draws inspiration from the bible, generally, and from passages about healing, more specifically. At the time, I imagined that she had in her mind the need for physical healing from the virus and the societal healing needed just to grapple with the traumatic loss during the pandemic. Jeremiah's clear and direct statement of belief in healing lends itself to a variety of contexts for which healing is needed. I have these pictures. I was unsure about putting them up. It felt a little bit like a Jeremiah bumper sticker, like I feel like this might be the modern equivalent of that. So it's sort of very simplistic, but I don't know it could evoke emotion so I just had to go with it.

All right, so, the context for this verse is Jeremiah praying for relief from people who persecute him for his prophecies. That's usually cut out from these kinds of images - but um, so he's being persecuted. He makes a negative prayer request by petitioning that his adversaries be punished and destroyed, an attitude that's reflected in his other confessional prayers as well. The style of this prayer shares characteristics with lament in the book of

Psalms in which the petitioner describes a hardship, prays for relief, and affirms God's ability to resolve the issue. Jeremiah calls God his refuge, his safe place in the midst of turmoil - a common image used in Psalms.

In addition, Jeremiah states that he should receive healing and salvation because he has not run away from his role as prophet. Despite at times bemoaning his calling and even his own birth, he's requesting a little divine favor on account of his loyalty and his commitment through it all. While verse 14, "Heal me o Lord and I shall be healed save me and I shall be saved for you are my praise," is a statement of confidence, the larger context of the prayer reflects Jeremiah's exasperation, frustration, and fear. Jeremiah's prayers offer a window into the prophet's thoughts, which at times are hopeful, and of the other times deeply troubled. Ronald Clemens notes these extremes saying, "Putting the two presentations of Jeremiah's inner self side by side, the private feelings of torment and despair and the public message of hope, gives us a powerful paradox, but not one that is unresolvable. The conflicts that are evident in the prayers speak to the prophet's spiritual journey, which was ongoing and evolving.

And his prayers reveal Jeremiah's way of coping in the midst of turmoil." Coping strategies are actions that people use to manage threats, stress, or trauma. Researchers, especially in the field of psychology, have found them to be important resources for people to effectively manage and reduce the impact of stressful situations. I'm sure you can think of things you do to work through difficult situations, like me right now trying to keep myself calm and take some deep breaths. So we do this all the time, we come up with ways to cope. Research on coping strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic has been illuminating for understanding how people deal with the multifaceted stress of illness, uncertainty, and abrupt changes to how we live and interact or don't interact with one another. In a review of psychological resilience during the pandemic, Leodoro Labrague analyzed 31 studies from 10 countries that described common coping strategies used by healthcare workers during the pandemic. Religious coping mechanisms, such as prayer and meditation, were highlighted as important methods in multiple studies. In a study of healthcare workers in New York, physical activity was the most common coping behavior. And the next most popular strategies were all prayer or prayer related: faith-based religion, spirituality, prayer, yoga, and meditation. Multiple participants shared that praying was "one of the most important ways to combat the mental and psychological burden of the pandemic." A study of health care workers in Palestine found prayer, sports, and physical exercise were tied as the most common coping approaches for healthcare professionals. And multiple studies in China found that participants focused on highlighting the good as a coping strategy, which isn't prayer, but it shares similarities with focusing on positive statements while minimizing negative ones. Researchers have noted that prayer is helpful for managing stress, reducing anxiety, aggression, and psychological distress. Moreover, it's been connected with enhancing optimism, hope, and quality of life. Jeremiah's confessional prayers in the midst of suffering reveal a method of coping that often articulates negative aspects of his life, while also confessing faith and positive outcomes. Now in addition to this verse on healing, there's another famous verse in Jeremiah that has been influential for prayers and songs, not only for coping, but for affirming that healing is possible.

And I'll turn now to the Balm in Gilead. As we've seen, Jeremiah has some texts that affirm that restoration would happen and that healing is possible. However there are many texts that reflect the prophet's uncertainty regarding his calling and the survival of his community. Often Jeremiah does not seem confident that healing is possible. In Jeremiah 8 and 9, destruction is palpable. The people of Judah are accused of being greedy, dealing falsely with one another, and creating a society filled with oppression, and these misdeeds are said to cause destruction. In the midst of these circumstances, we hear questions posed about whether healing is even possible. "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then

has the health of my people not been restored?" Based on this verse and its evocative questions, the Balm of Gilead has become a powerful biblical image used to represent divine healing.

Balm is a product of the earth, a resin or a gum from trees in Palestine and Jordan where Gilead is located. This substance was highly valued for its healing power, and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible it's connected with lavish gifts and traded goods. There's scholarly debate regarding what precisely the substance is, and these three pictures give you an idea. These are the primary candidates. So frequently the balm is interpreted as a resin called stercor or storax, pictured in the upper right corner, from bark from sweetgum trees. Another possibility is that it's balsam from a flowering plant pictured in the lower left, and that's related to frankincense and myrrh. Another possibility is that it's a resin that comes from the bark of mastic trees, which is pictured in the upper left. Each of these products was used for medicinal purposes, and likewise resins and balms were incorporated into body oils and perfumes because of their pleasing smell. So there are sort of the practical as well as the functional elements. The question posed about the balm in Gilead has influenced hymns, which often rephrase the question as a declaration. No need to ask if there's a balm in Gilead. Instead the question is answered. The negro or African-American spiritual "There Is a Balm in Gilead" is an important example of this. For centuries, spirituals were sung by African slaves, many of whom adopted Christianity and reframed biblical traditions to express faith in healing, hope, and freedom. There are multiple reasons that the balm in Gilead may have resonated with slave communities. Perhaps the most obvious is the powerful symbolic quality of a substance noted for its connection to God and valued for its healing properties. For people seeking healing - physical, psychological, and spiritual healing - the balm comes to represent divine healing. And likewise, the context in which the balm is referenced is notable.

In biblical tradition, the Exodus is associated with this enslavement and liberation, but Jeremiah's time living during the Babylonian invasion, captivity, and exile also offers parallels that might have resonated with enslaved peoples. After facing a series of attacks resulting in a destroyed land, many people in Judah went into exile. But even that phrasing to say that they went into exile almost sounds like they had power and agency, when the exile is an example of a forced migration. People were removed from their land and transported to another land with a different language, religion and culture. The parallels with the African slave experience are clear.

The lyrics that I have up here, these are the most common ones. But there are some variant wordings, such as the verse, "if you cannot preach like Peter", sometimes is song "if you can't pray like Peter." Also the last verse is not included in all versions. Similar to biblical traditions, the spirituals were first shared orally or aurally, through word or through ear, which explains variations, flexibility and adaptability of these songs. The composition of this hymn is unclear, although historians and ethnomusicologists typically date the earliest written version to the mid 19th century. Although the song may be considerably older - it was probably shared, adapted, and repeated in the collective memory of slaves. Despite a few variations in the verses, the chorus consistently affirms that the balm in Gilead "makes the wounded whole and heals the sin-sick soul." This affirmation is repeated slowly and methodically throughout the hymn. Regarding the change of Jeremiah's question to the slave's exclamation, theologian Howard Thurman says it well. "The slave caught the mood of this spiritual dilemma and with it did an amazing thing. He straightened the question mark in Jeremiah's sentence into an exclamation point. There is a balm in Gilead! Here is the note of creative triumph."

If you've heard or sung this song, you're likely familiar with the work done by William I. Dawson in 1939 for the Tuskegee Institute Choir. Dawson's arrangement and musical notations help to bring the pain and hopefulness of the text to life, using haunting and

dramatic effects to enrich the words of the hymn. Now we can't talk about music without listening to something, right? I'm spending this time talking about the song - and don't worry I'm not going to sing it for you, but I have set up to hear some good renditions.

(Break in video inviting you to use links in the description.)

This second version draws on the same biblical text and the same spiritual style, but it infuses Gospel and R&B musical style in to produce a more upbeat song, that's obvious. This version also changes the lyrics - I hope you notice there were some differences. There are three kind of key points I noticed: the there's still a balm in Gilead, that's remained consistent; the balm was medicine described in the bible, that's not explicit in the original lyrics but it's assumed; and the balm is Jesus - that's the most explicit difference between this second version and the first version. The original spiritual reference is Jesus, and asserts His love and sacrifice but he's not called the balm. Invoking Jesus and connecting Him with healing is not surprising considering that many healing stories in the Gospels and belief in Jesus's sacrificial death and resurrection, so it doesn't feel like it's not totally surprising.

As Boston College Professor M. Sean Copeland notes on spirituals, "Spirituals were reshaped, retold, conflated, and weaved together different characters and stories from both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, in ways that were evocative and compelling - especially for people who are oppressed and marginalized." So that's why you get this very sort of fluid back and forth between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament in both versions.

This modern adaptation makes an interpretive leap though that's beyond what the spiritual says, but it's in the same vein. This version, this upbeat version, minimizes the physical substance of the balm and instead emphasizes its symbolism. The connection it makes between Jesus and healing is unsurprising, but it is a bold and a more explicit statement. The spiritual and new adaptations and arrangements continue to be sung today showing the influence of the question in Jeremiah and the ways later traditions respond to and try to answer that question. So now here's a couple of key points - so what do we do in this presentation? In this presentation we explored some images, themes, and expressions of hope in Jeremiah.

Jeremiah's text on restoration stressed the return from exile, the need to rebuild, and the importance of celebration and inclusivity. These ideas are most prominent in Jeremiah 30 and 31. Jeremiah's prayers or laments show the prophet grappling with personal attacks and destruction in the land. His response is multifaceted. At times he affirms God's ability to heal, yet he also shows uncertainty regarding whether healing will happen. Jeremiah 17 is an example of the prophet's inner struggles, and Jeremiah 8 includes his question about whether healing is possible. Artistic and musical references draw on different aspects of the prophet's life. In art, Jeremiah is often portrayed in a state of despair, but musical performances tend to emphasize the text of hope. This might speak to what has inspired different types of artists and different modes of expression. When thinking about how the traditions of Jeremiah can speak to our present context, Jeremiah's texts on divine healing can offer solace, and his image of an inclusive national restoration may offer an instructive model when working towards racial justice and justice more broadly. The image of the community rebuilding the land together is a valuable ideal that should influence how we address our health and racial crises.

So thanks for being here. This maybe - this would be a good time for us to take a quick pause. I hope this presentation's giving you some food for thought, and what I'll do now, I'll put up this last slide. I want to give you a chance to sort of think about and reflect and talk about what I presented. I invite you, maybe for the next 10 minutes or so, to think about whether any of the passages, images, or musical performances resonated with you and your ideas

about hope and healing. So spend some time, think about this, talk to your neighbor, and then we'll reconvene in about 10 minutes, okay? Thank you.

(Time passes)

All right, it sounds like some good conversations. Does anyone want to share some of the things that resonated with you or things you talked about in your small groups?

Please.

Audience: Okay, I was thinking that the two renditions you gave were great, but you could sing the first one with exultation, "There is a balm in Gilead! Jesus heals the sin-sick soul!" and turns it into a real upbeat. But people too often get exasperated by the lamenting and don't think about the restoration that Jeremiah preaches, I appreciate that.

Waters: Yeah I like that. I think that you're right that the words themselves can be performed in a way that sounds very positive and upbeat. I think the sort of the slow, more somber approach is not necessarily to be sad, but just to be sort of contemplative and sort of like doing some self-reflection. I think you're right, it has the range, it has the power to be sort of arranged in a way that could be more upbeat absolutely.

Audience: Thank you very much for your lecture. One of the things that I liked in your presentation that I had not thought of before was that Jeremiah envisions an inclusive return, not promising so much healing as the very fact that the new community will include people of every kind. Including people who are previously unwelcome because of something that was not that they didn't choose, but it was a condition that they yeah that they were born with. I really thought that was remarkable. I never thought of it that way. I thought that it was kind of all healing all the time, but this is really I think a vision of community in the future that's different from what he was experiencing prior to the destruction and devastation. Which I think is a remarkable fact about his preaching.

Waters: Thanks.

Audience: I just want to say thank you for changing my whole attitude toward Jeremiah, because I grew up being told and taught that he was nothing but a relentless lament. I'm going home to reread 30, and 31, 32. So, thank you.

Audience: I really enjoyed your presentation, especially the videos. And just to sort of continue this point that Dick was making about that first choir singing and how the voices just sort of blend together. They create this sort of harmony, you know, and it's almost indistinguishable, you know, when they're singing together and that emphasis on community. You know, that really came out in that first image. The second video, the musical performance was quite different. They're a very different voice they're all participating but, you know, it's clear there's a sort of a lead voice you didn't have. It wasn't the same type of community. Certainly I think maybe the different historical periods too you know informing how the music or how the hymn was expressed you know. I think that would be really interesting. Could you say a little bit more about when that second performance - the dating of that? Is she the composer also as well as the performer?

Waters: Karen Clark Sheard, that's from 1997. I think, I don't want to officially say she didn't write it - I mean she may have credit for its composition, but I think there was an earlier version that was performed with the Sheard Sisters. Like so, there's another version, I think

from the 80's. It may go back that far, but that presentation that I showed was from '97. I think that it, uh, really reflects trying to build on the African-American spiritual tradition but also to infuse it - infuse it with much more the upbeat type of performance. I think you're right to the difference between a choir singing in a blended form versus having a soloist who's accompanied with a choir. I think that gives a different effect. Both, I think, are visions of what community is. I think the first one probably reflects definitely like much more closer to the spiritual style that we'd expect, but I think the adaptation offers, like, just a new approach - a new way to to rethink and reuse hymns, but use them in a way that might can be both lively and also sort of a little bit more innovative with one key singer with a choir in the background.

Audience: Jaime, this is going to be a very hard question.

Waters: Thank you, thank you for letting me know. *(Laughing)*

Audience: Dick and I were talking and we were thinking, we've never had technological glitches in our teaching but we're 20th century style guys, so uh, but no it's beautiful what you present. You kept talking about the chapters in the middle of Jeremiah, and as a New Testament person I go to Jeremiah 31 and a "new covenant." And I was thinking about that in connection then with how the first song brought in New Testament figures from - Peter, Paul, Jesus. And so my question is the New Testament use of Jeremiah 31, whether it's in Letter to the Hebrews or how Paul appropriates that, do you see any similarities going on between what you're talking about, the mixing of the testaments in a word - you mentioned kind of both - and what the New Testament authors are trying to do?

Waters: I think so. I think they're doing a lot of the same thing. Reading Jeremiah in light of the larger canon, in light of all of scripture. I think that what's happening in the New Testament is the same thing that I think slaves who were producing these hymns were also doing. And it didn't - I think it is just because they have the whole tradition available. They draw on the aspects that are most provocative and informative and hopeful, and the kind of weaving together traditions or blending them together.

It's not only - it's like that's the strategy, I think that's really the approach. I feel like maybe for the New Testament writers there's more intentionality, like in whether you're quoting or alluding to a certain language. Especially, I think, like the "new covenant" kind of language. But, I mean for the hymns I think that the New Testament just represents an opportunity to more fully understand what Jeremiah is doing. So I think that it happens very naturally.

Audience: Thank you very much, that was fascinating. I enjoyed it a lot and just kind of following up a little bit on Tom's question. I'm teaching the Old Testament in the New Testament this semester for the first time, and I was really struck by that second version of the hymn that the balm is Jesus. That's just a great example of a figural reading and really sort of a Catholic kind of spiritual exegesis of the text, of the Old Testament text. You know, and it's not an example of inner biblical exegesis - what we're doing - but I'm just curious. Like is that an original contribution of these spiritual writers - that is these hymn writers - or yeah, I don't know - do you have any idea where that got started, that association?

Waters: Oh that the balm is Jesus?

Audience: Yeah, that reading?

Waters: I mean I don't know that I could say that that's the earliest reference because even the early version doesn't have that so that feels like a very, that feels modern. I guess I'd say it's probably in the spirit of or inspired by the original version but it makes it like way more explicit. I don't know if I can say it's - I can't say that I know an earlier reference, but I wouldn't want to say that that's an original contribution. But what I do think just hearing your question reminded me - this might be a little off topic - but your questions inspired me to think about it a little more. I can imagine myself years ago saying "How can they have a song that says Jesus is the balm? That's just incorrect. They can't be, that's an impossibility. Jeremiah and his community are not speaking explicitly about Jesus hundreds of years later." But now I feel like I just approach that same issue in a different way. That this is a part of how the tradition not only makes sense of itself and interprets itself, but also enriches and provides a fullness and a more spiritual kind of approach. That doesn't mean that that's what the balm meant for Jeremiah and his community, but it does offer an opportunity to see how the tradition really gravitates towards a certain image and then really uses that as a way to more fully understand Jesus in the New Testament. So, I hope that kind of answered the question.

Audience: Hi, thank you for your presentation. I really liked it. This is kind of going off of the answer you just gave. You mentioned how the second song makes it clear that Jesus is the balm, and I'm wondering if you look at it in kind of like a 21st century context, connecting to what you were talking about with racial injustice and other kinds of injustice - do you think it could be possible that the balm could be interpreted as like the church is the balm who's supposed to you know work on these issues of injustice as a community?

Waters: I love that! I mean I think that definitely has some possibility and in some ways that kind of view I feel like that's actually even a little closer to what Jeremiah might have had in mind compared to just saying Jesus is the balm. If you really think of the church as the balm, the church is what can heal. And you think about the balm as what would have been a kind of medicinal substance that people used for healing - that a community would have used for healing, that a community saw as valuable. So yeah, I think that there could be some even better parallels, well not better, but there could be some thought-provoking parallels. And I think in the church, I mean if that were the attitude like if the people in in church just saw themselves as the balm - and i'm not saying they don't, that wasn't to imply that - but to think about how the actions of the church and the work of the church helps to be a healing to society, then yeah I mean I definitely think that could be useful for addressing racial issues and just anything that causes pain, health issues, any any types of issues. Thank you.

Audience: I'm a spiritual director, and I have to say that the prayerful side of Jeremiah is probably without a doubt the place that many of my directees find themselves. And I'm wondering if you could offer some books that might give some insight into that Jeremiah so that I can explore a little bit more about that side of him to be able to be a companion better. Because I know I go there but it's always nice to know and to be able to connect with that struggle. You know, because it's very real. It's Ignatius - of course that's where - I'm so rooted in that needless to say, but that desolation, consolation but when it really gets hard to hope. And that uncertainty that enters into one soul, particularly lately, you know. The directees in the last 18 months have been really full of that, and I think about Jeremiah a lot. But I don't know a whole lot, so I hesitate - hold back. So is there, could you offer like a text?

Waters: So, there were a couple of works. I don't know if this would be the best, but Bruggeemann has written a couple of commentaries on Jeremiah that especially highlight some of this prayerful - Walter Brueggemann is the scholar's name. The one I quoted was "To

Tear Down and To Plant.” But there's another one more recent commentary that he's done, that I can probably look up soon after this to tell you. But look up Bruggemann's commentary on Jeremiah. I think that would be a great place to start. Then also, this doesn't, this isn't a book just on prayer in Jeremiah, but I actually found the Africana Bible Commentary, which has sort of short treatments on each book of the Bible, the Jeremiah treatment especially focuses on HIV and AIDS and Jeremiah and issues of prayer and restoration that I find - it could be another place to look. I don't know that - it's not a book length, but I think it is also a good resource.

Staff: And Dr. Waters, if you want to provide some books for us later we can always email them to our registrants.

Waters: Absolutely. I'll be happy to share my bibliography.

Staff: Maybe one or two more here and then we're going to ask our Zoom audience if they have questions too.

Audience: Not so much a question but just to follow up on the comment the young lady made and thinking about the two versions. To hear the spiritual and to hear a contemporary gospel song based upon, you know, that same, you know, to keep things in their historical context and also in in that spiritual context, being a negro spiritual. You know the second one isn't but the first one definitely is. So you know there's always a whole lot of traveling back and forth from the Hebrew scriptures to the Christian scriptures. So in that context you know there's always that assurance that you know what God has done for the Hebrew people God will do for us - the enslaved people in this country. You know for them, you know, because churches weren't - well our church existed - but you know you're still talking about the evolution of black churches in the United States. You're talking about how they would adapt what was handed down to them, sometimes not formally. But you know, I would say in the gospel version, you know, it sounds like you know and typically the concept would be that you know in that context, yes the healing that we're looking for is very contemporary and so it is born out of the spirituality of the black church in the United States. When you're listening to the spiritual, because another you know from the conversation we were having here and just over hearing some other people, you know, the sense of you know the accompaniment or the the tempo of the song and people listening to that as a as a sound of lament is not so much a sound of lament. It's a matter - you know that that foreboding accompaniment is a reminder that we understand what we're living through but God just as God brought the people out of their exile, so God is going to free us. So the melody and the words are always those of hope and yet they're bringing the Old Testament, they're bringing Jesus into all of that. But you know, I was just thinking you know in terms of sometimes I feel like a motherless child, you know, and when you're looking at our history for the Catholic Church, you know for Blacks in that church, that's still a popular song too. Because you know, we were one of the last as Christian denominations go to you know rid ourselves of enslaved people. For some, when it came down and said we can no longer do this or you're gonna be - it's not like we set them all free; we sold them. You know so it's not a pretty history, but just keeping things in their context, I think it's it's fair to say - and you can speak to this more - but it's fair to say that, yes there's always that hopefulness and that's in the melody. You know for that particular beautiful rendition of you know “Balm in Gilead”. But you know, there's a difference you know just to keep in balance when we're looking at things historically and how you know those things are adapted for that particular use. Just looking at you know the situation of the Black church, meaning you know of various denominations and how we experience and express ourselves today, that balm is still there and they can look at - it is still Jesus, but acting in various ways. Whereas, you know, the hope of the enslaved people is always, you know, like

Babylon - like wherever they were - to be free to be restored. That hope is always, you know a descant, if you will, to that melody. Thank you.

Waters: Thank you.

James: Alright so, a couple of comments first from our Zoom audience. One person points out that there is a hymn from 1854 called "The Sinner's Cure" that identifies Jesus as the balm in Gilead. Just just for everyone's information.

Waters: I thought that the 1854 one was more of the original spirit like, the earlier spiritual without the explicit reference but I'll check. Because I have a note that 1854 is the first written version, but I'm not sure if that version said Jesus "is" the balm. Thanks for the note I'll this is worth looking at.

James: Actually I'm rereading this, and that's not exactly what the person is commenting - what I said before. But definitely that idea of drawing in the balm of Gilead there. Another participant says, "participation by the congregation in the second performance as equals in the healing process rather than the other, gives me hope for the possibility that someday we can all have power with. Thank you."

And then we have one question here. "Thank you for an excellent presentation. Do you have any thoughts on how we can extend or share the lessons from Jeremiah that could impact the discussions taking place locally, nationally on racial inclusivity, when so many are moving away from religion?"

Waters: That's a great question, and thanks for the comment and the question. I mean I think the inclusivity piece is so essential because it's one thing to recognize problems and challenges in society. But some of those solutions can only be really effective if the affected people are part of the conversation.

I think just thinking of not only observing problems but also thinking about who's impacted by those problems and what voice do they have in the solutions - this is most important. I think that and that's why just sort of this idea of the blind, and the lame, and the women - they're not healed but they're just present. I really feel like that's something to keep in mind: that real healing for whatever the challenge, a racial challenge, a health challenge, is going to require the people most affected by it to have a say in having a voice in what that vision of a restored society would look like.

I think really sort of honing in on, like, on that point is key. Beyond that I guess I'd say doing that type of work because you just realize it's important, not because historically that didn't always happen. I think that sometimes there can be a fear that it's not just important to have people present because you just want to check certain boxes and say certain people are present. But because you value their contribution to the solution. And so not just having inclusion, but having a mindset that recognizes the benefits of inclusion. I think that's key and I think that's sort of an important take away from Jeremiah.

James: Alright, thank you very much.

Waters: Thank you.

Meghan: Thank you, Dr. Waters. Thank you everyone for being here.

Waters: Thank you, thanks for your comments. Thanks very much!