

We very rarely dip into Lamentations over the course of the Sunday morning preaching schedule. Most of us preachers think that's for the best. That's what I thought upon returning to this book of lament. I mean, what do you do with 6 short verses of pure lament, followed by 8 encouraging and hopeful sounding verses?

Initially, I want to encourage us to make connections to the world in which we live with Lamentations. Surely all of us know people who have experienced a sudden downhill plunge in their physical health, most often accompanied by increasing emotional distress. Perhaps they're no longer able to drive. Many folks sit in a house or apartment far from friends, with no family, and no way to get around, utterly isolated and overwhelmed by life. People like that who I've known *cry* a lot and *pray* a lot—begging God for help, thrashing about in agony, wanting to trust God, but crushed by one problem after another.

Numerous neighbors, friends or family may reach out to help, but it's never enough. Nothing is ever enough. Friends get frustrated by the unsolvable difficulties and at times by hearing constant complaints. When people persevere over past events that may have triggered their downward spiral it usually results in even more pain. So I, a supposedly compassionate pastor and counselor, have at times suggested that what's past is past, and they really need to move on. “Please don't let one event ruin the rest of your life,” I may suggest in my best prophetic pastoral voice. And please don't bombard me with well-deserved insults just yet. Just keep listening...

When thinking about people in these kinds of predicaments, any reading from Lamentations can pierce your heart like a sword. Lamentations 1 essentially says, “It's OK to cry. Cry your heart out, for now at least. Don't stem the flow. Let your tears roll down like a river.” Unlike the *Psalms of Lament*, most of Lamentations doesn't address God, asking for relief from whatever caused all the tears. Most laments in the Bible simply weep over the mind-numbing horror that from time to time overwhelms God's people. Lamentations is pure

lament, and in fact we all need to hear it. So, I'm not going to skip to chapter 3 right away. I'm going to preach chapter 1 first!

First, let's understand the historical setting. This book is a post-apocalyptic reflection after Judah was conquered by Babylon and, more to the point, Jerusalem has been utterly destroyed. What last Sunday's reading in Jeremiah 32 predicted has now happened with incomprehensible devastation! Here the focus is on Jerusalem, the deserted city. Our passage describes the destruction by comparing how lonely the city now is compared to what it had been.

That description is very carefully crafted. In fact, this outpouring of raw grief is a meticulously constructed poem. You'll notice that each of the laments in chapters 1 and 2 have 22 verses, the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Except the lament in the middle of the book in chapter 3. It has 66 verses,  $3 \times 22$ . Not to mention, each verse begins with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Further, this alphabetic acrostic poem is filled with what one scholar calls "eerily unsettling images." In other words, someone (tradition says it was Jeremiah) has expended a great deal of creative energy to make this raw lament just right. Sorrow like this deserves the best poetry.

We could also call Lamentations "A Grief Observed," the title of a marvelous book by C.S. Lewis about his life after the death of his wife Joy. Author Madeline L'Engle says about Lewis' book, "I am grateful to Lewis for having the courage to yell, to doubt, to kick at God in angry violence. This is a part of a healthy grief which is not often encouraged." Written moment-to-moment as Lewis processes the loss of his wife to cancer, it is more than a mere book on grief, but a visceral hand outstretched in the darkness, a reluctant guide through the "mad midnight moments" of mourning and loss. Lewis' book *A Grief Observed* reminds us that, "Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape."

We should also be aware of the deep theology rumbling just below the surface of Lamentations 1. The writer assumes that the cursed Babylonians who ruined their lives are actually agents of divine retribution. Though they did the work of

destruction, it was God himself who destroyed the city and the temple. Why would God do such a thing? Well, because of Israel's God-defying sin and covenant-breaking rebellion. That was the root cause of Israel's woes.

Lamentations concludes that the only proper response is sincere repentance. Repentance does come at the end. Between lament and repentance are some of the loveliest passages in all Scripture about God's continuing love and mercy: "*Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness*" (3:22-23).

Note how chapter 1 shows us the desolation of Jerusalem by contrasting the present with the past. The once thriving city is now deserted. **Jerusalem is like a woman: once a wife, now a widow; once a queen, now a slave; once a mother, now childless as "her children have gone into exile,"** says verse 5. **But we shouldn't miss the depth of her sorrow in verse 2: "there is none to comfort her."** Does it get any sadder than that? You've lost it all and there is no one to comfort you. **At least our friends have us, poor comforters that we are.** All her "lovers" (in Israel's case these are the false gods after which she ran with idolatrous lust) and all your "friends" (in Israel's case these are the surrounding nations to whom she appealed for help against the Babylonians)—all of them gone.

From the image of Jerusalem as a forlorn widow, the Scripture moves to "*Judah has gone into exile. She dwells among the nations; she finds no resting place.*" Those last haunting words come directly from God's warning to Israel in Deuteronomy 28 as they took possession of the Promised Land, *their land of rest*. For centuries, Israel knew that if they forsook the LORD they would lose their resting place. And now they have.

Then, erupting to the surface comes a disturbing sentence in verse 5: "*The LORD, has brought her grief because of her many sins.*" By the rivers of Babylon Israel asked again and again, how did this happen? Why did this happen? The prophet speaks God's truth into Israel's grief. It's your fault. Hard as that was to hear, Israel needed to hear it, or they would not have repented.

But that prophetic explanation didn't make the pain any less. In fact, it likely increased it. **So, the ancient people of God lamented.** If God's people today don't lament, if we repress our sorrow, it can go underground and cause any number of deeper problems. **In a culture that practices denial and amnesia, Lamentations encourages truth telling!** Speak the truth about how you feel and let your tears flow. Your tears aren't isolated tears; they are part of the river of tears that flows through the story of God's people down through the ages.

I began thinking about this sermon on September 11, the 24th anniversary of the terrorist attack on America, an event that left our nation in mourning. Since then, we've had many more reasons to mourn as a people. One writer described the sad truth about such events by saying, "National tragedies threaten to render communities speechless. The collective grief can be overwhelming." Thank God we have biblical passages like Lamentations to give us voice to our sorrow. But thank God even more that we have a Savior who has come to bear our griefs and sorrows *with us and for us*. And thank God for the 100-year-old hymn by Frank Chisholm that we will sing momentarily, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." *Morning by morning new mercies I see; all I have needed thy hand has provided—great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!*

There is a place for answers, dogmas, solutions—that is—the Gospel. Which is to say that we cannot stop with lament. We should not discourage it, as we sometimes do, trying to cheer someone up. But neither should encouraging lament be our last word. The last word in Lamentations is a call to return to the God whose ways are often inscrutable. And that means we must call people to the ultimate act of our mysterious God—when the Word became flesh. At the heart of the Story is the incarnation of God, who became a Man of Sorrows.

The bottomless lament of chapter 1 leads us eventually to the bottomless care of God who not only hates our sin but also loves us so much that he sent his *One and Only Son* to make our joy complete. Lament—yes!! But then say with Jeremiah, "*The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.*" Amen.