

12 March 2017

A Season of L(am)ent: Individualism
Psalm 60; Lamentations 1:8-26; Mark 10:35-45

Psalm 60

- ¹ *God, you have rejected us, broken our defences;
you have been angry; now restore us!*
- ² *You have caused the land to quake; you have torn it open;
repair the cracks in it, for it is tottering.*
- ³ *You have made your people suffer hard things;
you have given us wine to drink that made us reel.*
- ⁴ *You have set up a banner for those who fear you,
to rally to it out of bowshot.*
- ⁵ *Give victory with your right hand, and answer us,
so that those whom you love may be rescued.*
- ⁶ *God has promised in his sanctuary:
'With exultation I will divide up Shechem,
and portion out the Vale of Succoth.*
- ⁷ *Gilead is mine, and Manasseh is mine;
Ephraim is my helmet; Judah is my sceptre.*
- ⁸ *Moab is my wash-basin;
on Edom I hurl my shoe;
over Philistia I shout in triumph.'*
- ⁹ *Who will bring me to the fortified city?
Who will lead me to Edom?*
- ¹⁰ *Have you not rejected us, O God?
You do not go out, O God, with our armies.*
- ¹¹ *O grant us help against the foe,
for human help is worthless.*
- ¹² *With God we shall do valiantly;
it is he who will tread down our foes.*

* * *

Earlier in the service we read a psalm of lament, another one of those dark poems that our upbeat hymnal doesn't include in its psalm selection. But Psalm 60 isn't just a lament; it's a particular sort of lament called the "Communal Lament." This is where the psalmist speaks not just of his own distress but on behalf of the whole nation, regarding a shared disaster. *God, you have rejected us . . . You have made your people suffer . . . You do not go out, O God, with our armies.* The singer's individual identity is lost in the group for which he sings.

In most cultures throughout history this group identity has made perfect sense, because in most societies the individual is important first of all in terms of the community. In traditional Chinese and Korean cultures, for instance, the uniqueness of the individual is almost an afterthought. This is why they say their family names first and their given names last. That's the

order of importance. In such a society, the worst sin a person can commit is to bring shame to the family, and the worst punishment is banishment from the group. Well, this is how the Hebrew culture behind our Old Testament works. Sin is punished in the books of the law by exclusion from the camp, and forgiveness involves restoration to community. So it should not surprise us to hear laments sung on behalf of the whole nation.

This is the kind of lament we find in the Book of Lamentations, the series of elegies sung over the ruins of Jerusalem in 586 BC. In the selection you're about to hear, the poet begins speaking *about* Jerusalem, in the third person, but within a few verses the poet is speaking for the city, in the city's own voice. In our passage, Jerusalem is presented as both sinner and victim. She is condemned as a faithless wife who betrayed her husband, the Lord, and then she cries out as a woman violated by strangers and left by the side of the road. The singer of Lamentations sings his own grief, but speaks for every person of the community. We read from the Book of Lamentations, chapter 1, verses 8-16:

- ⁸ *Jerusalem sinned grievously, so she has become a mockery;
all who honoured her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness;
she herself groans, and turns her face away.*
- ⁹ *Her uncleanness was in her skirts; she took no thought of her future;
her downfall was appalling, with none to comfort her.
'O Lord, look at my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed!'*
- ¹⁰ *Enemies have stretched out their hands over all her precious things;
she has even seen the nations invade her sanctuary,
those whom you forbade to enter your congregation.*
- ¹¹ *All her people groan as they search for bread;
they trade their treasures for food to revive their strength.
Look, O Lord, and see how worthless I have become.*
- ¹² *Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see
if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me,
which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger.*
- ¹³ *From on high he sent fire; it went deep into my bones;
he spread a net for my feet; he turned me back;
he has left me stunned, faint all day long.*
- ¹⁴ *My transgressions were bound into a yoke; by his hand they were fastened together;
they weigh on my neck, sapping my strength;
the Lord handed me over to those whom I cannot withstand.*
- ¹⁵ *The Lord has rejected all my warriors in the midst of me;
he proclaimed a time against me to crush my young men;
the Lord has trodden as in a wine press the virgin daughter Judah.*
- ¹⁶ *For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears;
for a comforter is far from me, one to revive my courage;
my children are desolate, for the enemy has prevailed.*

* * *

As Jesus approached Jerusalem, two of his most trusted followers came to him. We read Mark 10:35-45:

35 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' 36 And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' 37 And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' 38 But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' 39 They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; 40 but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

41 When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. 42 So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 43 But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. 45 For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

As I said, most cultures have no trouble understanding the concept of a communal lament, because the people of those cultures see themselves first of all in terms of the group. But we're different in the United States. Maybe it's because, as you know, we are a nation composed of immigrants. There were the English, Scottish, and French. Then, years later, came Germans and Poles, Italians and Irish, Chinese and Japanese. Now we see immigration from Mexico and Latin America and South Asia. And here's the thing about that: people who willingly leave their homes and families to try life in a strange place tend to be strong-minded, independent, individualists. Our first peoples, the Native Americans, had a very community-oriented culture, but nearly everyone who has come since then has been an individualist. So you could say that our national gene pool is fairly heavily slanted toward the value of the individual rather than the value of the group.

This is who we are as Americans. This is why John Wayne is our icon and why our heroes tend to be "Rugged Individualists" and entrepreneurs. It's neither always good, nor always bad. It's just who we are. I suspect that our stress on individual achievement is why we were the first to send people to the moon and why the Cold War ended with the Soviet Union in shambles and the US standing strong. I suspect it's also why we're the only developed country without a national health service of some sort – it goes against the grain to Americans to pay higher taxes so as to benefit other people. I've got mine; that's their lookout. Again, this is who we are, for better or worse, and I'm not here today to speak for our nation. Nobody asked me to.

But I do sometimes try to speak for the church, and in that role, I lament what our American individualism has done to the community of Jesus Christ. You see, Jesus warned his disciples against the competitive nature of individualism. As they approached Jerusalem, just before the final week of Jesus' life, James and John, the brothers who along with Peter made up Christ's inner circle, went to him asking for elevation to individual positions of prominence in his coming kingdom. Jesus shook his head sadly. "You don't understand what you're asking," he

replied. You see, not only is Christ's kingdom supposed to be different from earthly kingdoms, but the role of the individual is different in the church, too. In *this* community, the role of the individual is to give himself or herself for others. "Do you want to stand out? You want to walk a distinct, individual path?" Jesus asks. "Then watch me as we arrive in Jerusalem: I'm about to walk that path alone and drink that lonely cup. This time next week, see if you still want to stand out as I do." As Jesus puts it, *whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all*. In the church, the group takes precedence over the individual.

Though you couldn't tell it to look at the American church. We have defined salvation as an individual event: ask Jesus into your heart and you get to go to heaven. It's a transaction for one's own individual benefit rather than the scriptural call to work out our salvation together. We have begun designing churches for individuals, around individual preferences: this is a church for Boomers, this is one for Millennials, this is one for hipsters. But here's the problem: once we've shaped a church around one group's individual style and music choices, how do we then get them to "serve each other." When we've sent the message that your preferences are what matters, how do we then take that back?

And then there's the way we view church leadership – and forgive me now I express a more personally-felt lament. In our denominations, we idolize the bold, entrepreneurial church planters who build massive churches with thousands in attendance and command huge salaries and are granted immense prestige. We judge the value of church leaders by their individual achievement. As most of you know, I have been reappointed this year. This summer I will be moving to serve a church in Eau Claire. Well, I spent this past Monday at a district gathering at Pine Lake Camp. Over and over again, fellow pastors came up to me and said, "Congratulations on your new appointment." I don't know what that means. Why was I being congratulated? All I can guess is that it was because I've been appointed to a larger church. Evidently these colleagues considered it a good career move for me. A promotion. I'm moving up in the church. If so, that's obscene. Did you hear what Jesus told the ambitious James and John? By Jesus' own standards, the greatest pastor in America is probably someone we've never heard of, some part-time, underpaid servant who leads a storefront ethnic congregation that may never grow in numbers but that stands as a place of hope in a run-down neighborhood. That pastor will be greeted in heaven by choirs of angels, but don't hold your breath waiting for him to be a featured speaker at a pastor's conference. No, for that we want a suburban megachurch rock star in jeans and a polo shirt and a hundred-dollar haircut. What part of *whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all* are we having trouble grasping?

And so today I raise a communal lament. I lament on behalf of the United Methodist Church that has become my own tribe and community and which I have learned to love. I lament the failure of our communal life through the glorification of the individual. I lament that we have taught an individual salvation that is little more than a Get-Out-of-Hell free card. I lament that we have shaped our churches around individual preferences instead of using the church to shape individuals after the difficult model given us by our founder, Jesus Christ. I lament that we have created an individual leadership culture that defines success in ways that have nothing to do with our Lord's life or example. How threadbare lies the church that bears your name, Lord Jesus. Today I raise this lament before you.

* * *

Let me say again that I'm not doing this series on Lamentations because I'm clinically depressed or want you to be. I truly believe that we have to confront the reality of our pain – and our own responsibility for it – if we are ever to move past it. The lament psalms point us in that way. Nearly all of them conclude with an expression of trust and hope for the future. Psalm 60 concludes like this:

*¹¹ O grant us help against the foe,
for human help is worthless.
¹² With God we shall do valiantly;
it is he who will tread down our foes.*

When we lament our sin in truth, we reclaim God's promised mercy. Go forth today with that hope.