

26 March 2017

A Season of L(am)ent: Jesus Wept
Psalm 79:1-9, 13; Lamentations 3:1-18; John 11:17-35

Psalm 79:1-9, 13

- ¹ *O God, the nations have come into your inheritance;
they have defiled your holy temple;
they have laid Jerusalem in ruins.*
- ² *They have given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the air for food,
the flesh of your faithful to the wild animals of the earth.*
- ³ *They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem,
and there was no one to bury them.*
- ⁴ *We have become a taunt to our neighbours,
mocked and derided by those around us.*
- ⁵ *How long, O Lord? Will you be angry for ever?
Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?*
- ⁶ *Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you,
and on the kingdoms that do not call on your name.*
- ⁷ *For they have devoured Jacob
and laid waste his habitation.*
- ⁸ *Do not remember against us the iniquities of our ancestors;
let your compassion come speedily to meet us,
for we are brought very low.*
- ⁹ *Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name;
deliver us, and forgive our sins, for your name's sake. . . .*
- ¹³ *Then we your people, the flock of your pasture,
will give thanks to you for ever;
from generation to generation we will recount your praise.*

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We continue reading from the Book of Lamentations through this Lenten Season. Today we read chapter 3, verses 1-18:

- ³ *I am one who has seen affliction
under the rod of God's wrath;
² he has driven and brought me
into darkness without any light;
³ against me alone he turns his hand,
again and again, all day long.
⁴ He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,
and broken my bones;
⁵ he has besieged and enveloped me
with bitterness and tribulation;*

⁶ *he has made me sit in darkness
like the dead of long ago.*
⁷ *He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;
he has put heavy chains on me;*
⁸ *though I call and cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer;*
⁹ *he has blocked my ways with hewn stones,
he has made my paths crooked.*
¹⁰ *He is a bear lying in wait for me,
a lion in hiding;*
¹¹ *he led me off my way and tore me to pieces;
he has made me desolate;*
¹² *he bent his bow and set me
as a mark for his arrow.*
¹³ *He shot into my vitals
the arrows of his quiver;*
¹⁴ *I have become the laughing-stock of all my people,
the object of their taunt-songs all day long.*
¹⁵ *He has filled me with bitterness,
he has glutted me with wormwood.*
¹⁶ *He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
and made me cower in ashes;*
¹⁷ *my soul is bereft of peace;
I have forgotten what happiness is;*
¹⁸ *so I say, 'Gone is my glory,
and all that I had hoped for from the Lord.'*

Chapter 3 of Lamentations is the center of the book, both in form and content. In this chapter the cry of despair reaches its peak. The poem shifts to the first person – *I am the one who has seen affliction* – making the cry personal. It's not clear, however, whether the voice speaking is that of the poet or the voice of Jerusalem itself. Either way, chapter 3 is a wrenching cry of the heart in the aftermath of horrible tragedy.

There's one thing about the Book of Lamentations that isn't evident in our English translations. The book is made up of five separate poems, one in each chapter, and each poem is written in a rigid, highly structured form. They are alphabetic acrostics. That is, the first verse in each poem begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *alef*, and each successive verse begins with the next letter in sequence, so that the last verse begins with the last letter in the Hebrew alphabet, *tav*. There are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet, which is why chapters 1 and 2 both have twenty-two verses. It's kind of a strange, artificial, externally imposed structure, and in chapter 3 it becomes obsessive. Here, the first *three* lines begin with *alef*, followed by three lines beginning with *bet*, and so on, which is why chapter 3 has sixty-six verses.

This isn't just a fun biblical fact – it's weird. Why is this formal, rigid order used in this of all books? Some suggest that it may express the totality of the poet's despair – the A to Z of

tragedy, so to speak – but I don't think that's enough. I think this acrostic form is an external order that is desperately imposed on chaos, because any order is better than none. Everything that comprised the speaker's world has collapsed, and he's grasping at any coherence he can find. Everything he once depended on has betrayed him, and now he has to seek any available meaning, artificial or not.

Grief is like that. Grief brings with it the sense that all our old sources of comfort have been taken away. Grief is the feeling that what we once considered solid rock has turned to quicksand. And like the mourner of Lamentations, we seek any order we can find. Maybe that means going back to work or school right away, where we know the routines. A familiar schedule can be a wall against the encroaching chaos. Maybe it can involve imaginative storytelling, finding creative explanations for a tragedy that makes no sense. We need meaning. We were designed by the Source of All Meaning to look for purpose, and when the creeping darkness of meaninglessness approaches, we will fight it back with any feeble weapon we can find. This grasping for structure is normal

But it's not enough. Immersing yourself in work won't provide meaning. Inventing explanations won't hold back the chaos. Not for long. At best, it's a first step, maybe necessary, but only for a while. But in the disequilibrium of grief, we claim order and take a stand against the chaos. We resist disintegration. Our poet is taking that stand: There must be meaning behind the horror, and by God, I will stand here with my acrostic word games forcing structure onto my life until God can offer something better.

Next week. We'll look at the poet's glimmer of hope next week.

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Today's Gospel is not the reading listed in your bulletin, but a different story from Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. As he drew near, he came to the town of Bethany, where he had heard that his friend Lazarus was gravely ill. We read from the Gospel of John, chapter 11, verses 17-35.

17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

18 Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. 21 Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' 23 Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' 24 Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' 25 Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' 27 She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

28 When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' 29 And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 31 The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was

going to the tomb to weep there. ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'
³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.'
³⁵Jesus began to weep.

Those of you who have been in worship the past few weeks of Lent have probably figured out what I'm doing. I've had two short meditations instead of a sermon. In the first one, I've reflected on a passage from the Book of Lamentations, about grief and the grieving process. In the second meditation, we've read a story from Christ's final journey to Jerusalem, and I've reflected on some sin that we as a church should lament. This week we were going to read about Zaccheus and think about the problem of materialism in the church. But on Wednesday afternoon, as I drove back from the hospital, having spent the last hours with a family whose life had just changed forever, another sermon on materialism just didn't seem so important.

So today let's continue reflecting on grief, using the Lazarus story. Lamentations is a song of grief on a national scale, but Lazarus's death is grief on a personal scale. But personal grief is no less painful for being more focused. Quite the opposite. Personal grief hurts more. It's like focused sunlight under a magnifying glass: smaller in scope, but burning more fiercely, and in that pain, the first question we face is, "Why?" Why did this happen? This makes no sense. Couldn't God have done anything? It is the question behind Martha's and Mary's accusation: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." The question is: "Why *weren't* you here?"

And I don't have an answer. I didn't have an answer on Wednesday afternoon, and I still don't. I don't know why a young husband and father, son and brother, should be suddenly killed. I don't know why any of the four people who died that day should have been killed. If God sometimes intervenes in human affairs, as I believe happens, I have no idea why this time . . . *this* time God didn't. Martha and Mary don't understand, either. "Why weren't you here? You could have stopped this. Where were you?"

Can I just say this? That's a fair question. We *should* ask God that question. If we're going to teach that God *can* intervene in the world, we have every right to ask why God didn't. And notice that Jesus isn't at all offended by the sisters' accusations. He simply listens. In the same way, God is not offended by the furious tirade against God's injustice that we find in the Book of Lamentation or the anger that informs nearly half the psalms. The fact that these outbursts against God are carefully preserved for us in our scripture is a clear sign that this is completely right. All these outbursts respond to the fact that sometimes life here on earth is horrible and unjust, and they take God seriously enough to demand some accounting for it. Refusing to challenge God is, I think, a sign of a weak faith. This week I have prayed angry prayers, and I do that not because I think God is bad but rather because I truly believe that God is good, and I expect more of God than this. And if you feel that way today, too, then for God's sake, pray it! Pray it with anger. Pray it with tears. God will hear you. Just as Jesus heard the sisters' accusation and accepted it. In the end, what he said was, "Where have you laid him? Can you take me to him?" And then he joined them in their grief. Jesus wept.

That probably doesn't feel sufficient. In our times of trial, we want a God who will fix things, and a God who sits down with us and cries feels a little inadequate. I'd love to stand up here and explain why that isn't so, to justify God's inaction, but here's the thing: even if I could, it wouldn't help. Explanations don't. I've heard more explanations being given to grieving people than I can count. Some of them are truly horrible and you wonder how anyone could have possibly felt it would be helpful, but even the ones that are sensitive and thoughtful are useless. They don't diminish grief. No explanation helps. But let me at least try to show why it matters that Jesus wept.

You see, it is when we cry for someone else that we are most like God. In the beginning, God made humanity in the image of God. Now that image has been marred since then, but traces remain. Those traces are why we mourn. One of the traces of God within us is love. We mourn because we had entrusted a part of our very soul in the person who is gone. In that person's death, we die piecemeal. Another trace of God's image is justice. Distinct from all the rest of creation, we have a sense that things ought not to be this way. Young parents should remain with their children. Mothers should not have to see their children die. The only reason we have that unique knowledge is because God planted it within us. And a third trace of God's eternal image in us is the conviction that humans – and humans alone – have carried throughout history, that death itself is unnatural. Beyond this life, we know there is more. We bear eternity's ember within us. And so, when life and love and justice are broken, we weep. And because life and love and justice are gifts from above, when they are broken, so does God. This is why we grieve. This is why it is right and good and just for us to be angry. And this is why it is completely appropriate for us to take our anger and sense of injustice back to the God who gave them to us, because God agrees with us that things are not as they should be, and until they are again, God weeps beside us.

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Nothing I have said helps the person who grieves. Nothing anyone can say will help, which is why we who have the role of comforters could really work on the spiritual discipline of not saying so much. The only comfort I have ever known when I was grieving was when someone else grieved beside me. It maybe made my own weight of sorrow a little less. That's where God is. One day all will be remade as it was supposed to be. Until then, we mourn. And God weeps with us.