

2 April 2017

A Season of L(am)ent: Great Is Thy Faithfulness
Psalm 13; Lamentations 3:19-33; John 14:1-7

Psalm 13

¹ *How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever?
How long will you hide your face from me?*
² *How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?*
³ *Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
⁴ and my enemy will say, 'I have prevailed';
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.*
⁵ *But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.*
⁶ *I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.*

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In the long lament poem at the center of the Book of Lamentations – Chapter 3 – there is a shift in tone, reflecting a shift in the spirit of the poet. We continue reading where we left off last week, verses 19-33:

¹⁹ *The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall!*
²⁰ *My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.*
²¹ *But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:*
²² *The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end;*
²³ *they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*
²⁴ *'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.'*
²⁵ *The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.*
²⁶ *It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.*
²⁷ *It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth,*
²⁸ *to sit alone in silence when the Lord has imposed it,*
²⁹ *to put one's mouth to the dust (there may yet be hope),*
³⁰ *to give one's cheek to the smiter, and be filled with insults.*
³¹ *For the Lord will not reject for ever.*
³² *Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his
steadfast love;*
³³ *for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.*

Here's where we've been so far this Lenten season. We have broached what is for most Christians a new subject: the idea of lamentation. We've talked about grieving in church, being sad in worship, acknowledging that even being good Christians who attend church and pray and

all that doesn't make our lives wonderful in every way. Sometimes life is still horrible. As I said, this is new ground for today's church. We don't talk about sad things. More often we try to make church a place where the darkness of life is banished for an hour. We sing happy music and hear affirming messages and get an emotional pick-me-up. We have tried to create a world in which we could pretend that, as drab and bleak as the rest of the world might get, here everything is unicorns and rainbows and Jesus is my best friend. So, talking week after week about lamentation in church has probably felt weird. In fact, though, in the larger context of our faith, we're the ones who are weird, with all our happy talk. Our Bible doesn't avoid lamentation; it's filled with it. Laments make up nearly half the psalms, are represented in every historical book (including the gospels, where Jesus himself raises lamentations) and appear in nearly every prophetic text. There is even one book devoted *entirely* to lamentation. It's called, um, Lamentations.

So, each Sunday in March we've read a passage from that book, and not to put too fine a point on it, it's been bleak. I'd apologize for that, except that I'm not sorry. The Book of Lamentations is important. It's an honest response to horror and tragedy. In 586 BC the Jerusalem temple, which was the center of the Jewish faith and which they believed was protected eternally by God, was destroyed. After a horrible siege, involving years of starvation and degradation, the city was taken and dismantled stone by stone. Her inhabitants were killed or exiled. The nation of Judah ceased to exist. Lamentations describes that horror.

As we have examined the book, we have seen how grief can be not just an individual experience but one that includes a whole community. I won't belabor that point. After the tragedy that our own community has experienced, we've seen that that's true. Lamentations is not just one man's complaint; it is communal lament. We then talked about the validity of anger in grieving. We talked about our need for order in the midst of chaos. But mostly, and every week, we've stressed that we can't avoid grief. We can't step over it or go around it. To paraphrase Helen Keller: the only way to get past grief is *through*. And then, in the middle of our talking about grief, we have experienced it. We have mourned together the death of our own Jason Weiland and the lives of the three others killed on March 22. And we still mourn.

But today, as we approach the end of Lent, I at last get to point past the horror. There *is* hope beyond mourning. We see that even in the psalms of lament. While there are a few of those psalms that end in limbo, leaving questions unanswered and nothing resolved, most of them conclude with an expression of trust. It is as if having spoken the pain aloud enables the poet to look beyond it. In the psalm we read earlier, Psalm 13, we started with *How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me?* but we ended with *But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.* Even the Book of Lamentations gets there eventually. In that central poem of the book, chapter 3, the poet's grief reaches a breaking point and shifts toward hope.

Why does this happen? Why, at some point, does inconsolable grief finally lift its head and imagine life beyond? I think it comes from pure exhaustion. I don't mean just tiredness, although that's a factor. I think we finally re-imagine hope when we have exhausted every attempt to make the pain go away ourselves, when we've given up trying to fix the problem and

instead simply bowed our heads and acknowledged that we can't. I believe it is at that moment of hopelessness that, paradoxically, we stumble onto hope.

I wish it were easier. I wish that we could reach that point *before* we hit bottom, and maybe some do. Most of us don't though. Hitting bottom is when we abandon control, and that's the last thing most of us want to do. So we try anything else first. For instance, we try blame. Our pain must be someone else's fault. And often there *is* someone to blame. Maybe it's a terrorist, or a drunk driver, or a deranged man with a gun. And blaming other people *does* help, for maybe five minutes, but in the end, blame only leads to hatred, which never removes pain. Hatred can only deepen it. Or we blame ourselves. Did we do something to deserve this? Is it our fault? Has some malevolent force in the universe – whether we see that as karma or God – chosen to punish us? And again, if we look, we *will* find something we've done wrong. If we're inclined to blame ourselves, we can always find guilt. But this is the path of self-destruction. Like the path of hatred, it does not lead through pain but only multiplies it. We might even try to blame God. Certainly the author of Lamentations did this. But this, too, is self-defeating. When we reject God in our grief, we also cut ourselves off from our deepest sort of comfort.

Another of our futile attempts to stifle the pain is the path of theological or philosophical explanation: "God lets this sort of thing happen because . . ." Now, don't mistake me here. I'm not actually opposed to theology, most days. It has its place, and there is a long and honored branch of theology called "Theodicy," which is the effort to deal with the problem of evil and suffering. There is some brilliant work in this field. But as wonderful and thoughtful as those ideas may be, they don't help us get through grief. Their value comes years later, when we reflect back on grief after some distance and healing. While we're still going through the valley of deathshadow, helpful explanations aren't. Unless the source of our pain is a bad theory, it will not be taken away by a good theory.

I understand these fruitless attempts to stamp out pain. It would be great to find someone to blame. It would make pain reasonable. I understand the wish for explanations. If we could explain why bad things happen, then, theoretically, we could keep them from happening again. We'd still have some control. But it doesn't work. Again, paradoxically, it is only when we release our neurotic need for control, when we accept the fact that horror and death and tragedy and grief and pain are simply inevitable realities of life, which we cannot fix, that we discover the possibility of hope.

The author of Lamentations finds this hope in chapter 3. In the stillness that comes when you no longer have tears or strength left to cry, we hear God. *It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. . . to sit alone in silence* (vv. 26-28). Even if God did allow this terrible thing to happen, God's nature is not to cause pain, but to show mercy and faithful love. *For the Lord will not reject forever. Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love* (vv. 31-32). Whatever we are going through, it was never God's will for us to suffer, *for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone* (v. 33).

When we stop our striving, cease our explanations, give up our anger, then we face the darkness, and in that darkness we find God has been beside us all along, waiting for us to look up, longing for us to say the words that break down the last barrier, "I can't do it myself. Help!"

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 (vv. 21-23).

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In John 13, at the last supper, Jesus reveals to his disciples that one of them will betray him and another will deny him. They don't believe it, but it still grieves them that he would say such a thing. Jesus continues, in chapter 14, verses 1-7 with these words.

14 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.' ⁵Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' ⁶Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

We have a gift that the author of Lamentations didn't have. In 586 BC, the Jews knew that they were the chosen people, that they had entered into a unique covenant with the One God. But that special election was a double-edged sword. Yes, it granted them privileges and special attention, but there were expectations for them as well – keeping the Law of Moses – and if they didn't do that, then the special attention they got from the Lord would be punishment. They were God's children, but our own children are the ones we have the highest expectations of and the ones whom we punish. So for the authors of the lament psalms and Lamentations, it was a very real question in a time of distress whether God had finally given up on them and revoked the covenant. *How long, O Lord? Will you forget us forever?*

But we have a different perspective, because we live AD, not BC. We have the gospel of Jesus Christ, who demonstrated his commitment to his covenant not just to Israel, but to the world, to the point of I giving his life to establish it forever. He walked among us, endured all the pain that we could ever endure. He suffered and grieved, just like us. We can no longer question God's faithfulness, because we have seen how far God will go to be faithful. *Do not let your hearts be troubled*, he tells his disciples. "But, Lord!" demands Thomas, "We don't know the way!" *I'm the way*, Jesus says. If you have questions, look at me. And if you want to know what the Father is like, look at me. *If you know me, you will know my Father also.*

There is hope. It is not usually the hope that we look for first, but it is there behind the pain when we're ready to see it. We will never be forgotten. We will never be abandoned. *Great is thy faithfulness.*