

Wormwood & Gall

A sermon by Rev. Benjamin Broadbent
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The text on which I will concentrate today comes from Lamentations, chapter 3. If you came to hear something uplifting today, I won't say you won't get it, but I will say that it won't be a direct path, because, initially, I want to lift up the personal and communal value of lament.

In general, our culture is not comfortable with open expressions of suffering and grief. In the face of it, we are awkwardly sentimental: "O, that's really too bad." Or, we view grief as an aberration, something to be overcome as quickly as possible: "Isn't it time to move on?" At its most base, our response to grief is voyeuristic, as is evidenced by reality TV, which can grant us a window into someone else's suffering without having to take any responsibility for companioning that person in their suffering.

The subject of lament is a downer at parties. Precious few people have the ability to hear a full expression of lament. For most, initial interest devolves into premature consolations. Many of you, I imagine, have been on both sides of this interaction.

Those who live in the so-called last remaining superpower believe that suffering and grief keeps us from realizing our full potential. In our go-get-it society, lament is unhelpful and impractical. We respond to common tragedy with jingoistic phrases like "God Bless America," either a triumphant assurance of security, or an audacious demand that God comply. Tears are for the weak and the poor, the unfortunate. We are the blessed. We are the strong. We have scarce need for tears.

But it is, perhaps, the human inability to lament openly, to face and receive and witness shared grief that leads people and nations to acts of vengeful violence. We know from psychology that emotions not felt openly manifest themselves distortedly. We know from physiology that wounds left untended fester. We know from sociology that wrongs done require restoration. Retribution only fosters more violence.

This year, we are considering together what it might mean to claim and proclaim the biblical narrative, in all its beauty and mess, in all its truthful clarity and disorienting strangeness. What resources, we're

asking ourselves, does the Bible offer the church so that the church may offer to the world new possibilities for human relationship? For example, if a new model of lament might promote human flourishing in a way largely forgotten by the world at large, and by the church in particular, perhaps a text such as that which we find in Lamentations can provide a new, albeit odd, alternative to the short, often boring, list of alternatives currently available to us.

If you open your Bible to Lamentations, you'll find it to be a short text wedged in between two large texts: Jeremiah and Ezekiel. This is only the case in the Christian Bible. In the Tanakh, the Jewish Bible, Lamentations is included in the Khetuvim, or Writings. In the Christian canon, it follows Jeremiah because of a verse in II Chronicles 35:25 - "Jeremiah also uttered a lament for Josiah." Josiah was the king of Judah at the time of Jeremiah.

Biblical scholars tell us Jeremiah probably did not write Lamentations, but the setting of the two texts is the same - the destruction of Jerusalem in 587. It is hard to overstate the effect of this destruction upon the Israelite people. The city was laid waste and many were killed. Many others were deported, to Babylon. It was, in essence, the end of Israel. Drawing parallels to our contemporary situation, Walter Brueggemann suggests that 587 = 911. In both cases, it was the end of the world as we know it. Perhaps Brueggemann understates the exile in this comparison. 587 was, for the Jewish people, the end of the world, period. It marked the destruction of their holy city, their temple, their identity as a people, and most devastatingly of all, the end of God's covenant with them as God's beloved people.

The Book of Lamentations was written from the perspective of those pitiful few who remained in the destroyed city. The book consists of 5 poems. These are the book's 5 chapters. Notice that the first, second, fourth, and fifth chapters each contain 22 verses. These are acrostic poems with verses starting with subsequent letters of the Hebrew 22-letter alphabet. Chapter 3, upon which we focus today, is the exception. It is not an acrostic and its verses number 66, a multiple of 22.

The content of the book is relentless lament. The only exception, to which I'll return, are 20 verses in chapter 3. But let us resist the temptation to avoid lament and rush to its negation. Let us hear and heed the lament. Let us voice and breathe the lament. And let us do this not because we crave abuse, but because we crave truth, as difficult as it

may be to hear it. The fact that something is hard to hear may be the sign that it is painfully true.

Lamentations 3, verse 1 and following:

I am one who has seen affliction
under the rod of God's wrath;

²he has driven and brought me
into darkness without any light;

³against me alone he turns his hand,
again and again, all day long.

⁴He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,
and broken my bones;

⁵he has besieged and enveloped me
with bitterness and tribulation;

⁶he has made me sit in darkness
like the dead of long ago.

⁷He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;
he has put heavy chains on me;

⁸though I call and cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer;

⁹he has blocked my ways with hewn stones,
he has made my paths crooked.

¹⁰He is a bear lying in wait for me,
a lion in hiding;

¹¹he led me off my way and tore me to pieces;
he has made me desolate;

¹²he bent his bow and set me
as a mark for his arrow.

¹³He shot into my vitals
the arrows of his quiver;

¹⁴I have become the laughing-stock of all my people,
the object of their taunt-songs all day long.

¹⁵He has filled me with bitterness,
he has glutted me with wormwood.

¹⁶He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
and made me cower in ashes;

¹⁷my soul is bereft of peace;
I have forgotten what happiness is;

¹⁸so I say, 'Gone is my glory,
and all that I had hoped for from the Lord.'

¹⁹The thought of my affliction and my homelessness
is wormwood and gall!

²⁰My soul continually thinks of it
and is bowed down within me.

What redeeming value could there be in voicing this lament? Let me suggest that lament is radical truth-telling. Lament voices grief and pain and wound, without rationalizing. Lament lends poetic and honest attention to truth on the ground. This truth-telling begs questions of justice. It imagines alternative political arrangements. And it raises unutterable theological questions like, “God, where are you?”

Lament takes seriously the excruciating absence of God, which is, I venture, a near universal human experience. Consider recently published writings by Mother Theresa, in which she articulates her enduring God-doubts. Lament refuses to agree with the dominant culture that doubt is a weakness. Lament is the means by which a person of faith - even very little faith (a mustard seed?) - remains in relationship with God by calling God to account for his/her absence.

Lament confronts the God who abandons. Lament confronts the God who was once praised as faithful and who now appears to be missing in action. Lament calls upon God to witness the concrete realities of human suffering. Lament protests God’s nonchalance. Lament demands attention to injustice and wound, to suffering that endures and pain that dehumanizes. The bitterness of life, our Wormwood & Gall, is brought to light by lament.

In our individualistic culture, we are not very good at performing the lament. We are convinced that suffering is largely unnecessary when a product can be bought or a technology employed or a therapy engaged. Suffering is largely unnecessary in a world with innumerable distractions. But we know that suffering is real, and we’re beginning to learn that suffering is exacerbated by its denial.

Other cultures, often those marked by material poverty, are rich in social resources. When I was in college, I went with a group of peers to Guatemala for a month to help build houses with Habitat for Humanity. One Saturday evening, we were invited to attend a church service. While we mostly didn’t understand what was being said, we appreciated being there and felt comfortable until the time of lament. I had never experienced anything like it. The congregants were invited to come forward and share their lament with God. Folks calmly approached the front of the church and proceeded to wail in loud, high pitched tones. Lamenters came and went. We were supremely uncomfortable and looked

around to see whether others were alarmed. They weren't. After about 12 minutes, the wailing stopped and the worshippers returned to their pews for the duration of the service.

No one seemed worse for the wear. In fact, I perceived a cathartic calm. This lament was real, expressed, unashamed, and fully felt. Lament is not an overly sentimental show of emotion. It is the natural, organic, even matter-of-fact expression of suffering and grief.

We, who prefer to keep lament quick, personal, and not political, know better because our ancestors knew better, walking the debris-strewn streets of their destroyed city, witnessing the children dying in the streets. They could not and did not deny the suffering in which they were steeped. And because they allowed themselves to fully grieve, to voice poetic lament, to speak in truthful abandon, something happen. That something happens in chapter 3, between verses 20 and 21, signified by the English word "But..." It could not have happened without the truth-telling that preceded it, and, because of its placement in the center of the laments, we receive the affirmation that God's steadfast love does not negate the expression of lament.

On this World Communion Sunday, we confess that America is not the world, does not own the world, shall not dictate the way the world is to be. The world belongs to God, and God alone. We break rice cake, acknowledging that daily bread is all the world needs, and yet millions today go without their daily bread. From the cup, we taste the salt water tears of our kindred in Christ, all people, created and loved by God. We ask for God's blessing, not as a demand, but as a lamenting plea. Be absent no more, bless us. Be silent no more, bless us. Turn your head no more, bless us. God Bless America. And in the words of a gospel preacher - America yes, but God bless Iraq. America yes, but God bless Sudan. America yes, but God bless Myanmar. America yes, but God bless Venezuela. America yes, but God bless the Koreas. America yes, but God bless Iran. America yes, but God bless the world, and all of God's children. Amen.