

Order of Worship with Texts
Sunday, June 28, 2020
Lamentations Part 2

Countdown

Prelude

Psalm 44:17-26 (The Message) Kim Harris

All this came down on us,
and we've done nothing to deserve it.
We never betrayed your Covenant: our hearts
were never false, our feet never left your path.
Do we deserve torture in a den of jackals?
or lockup in a black hole?

If we had forgotten to pray to our God
or made fools of ourselves with store-bought gods,
Wouldn't God have figured this out?
We can't hide things from him.
No, you decided to make us martyrs,
lambs assigned for sacrifice each day.

Get up, God! Are you going to sleep all day?
Wake up! Don't you care what happens to us?
Why do you bury your face in the pillow?
Why pretend things are just fine with us?
And here we are—flat on our faces in the dirt,
held down with a boot on our necks.
Get up and come to our rescue.
If you love us so much, Help us!

Greeting

address the 3 week series topic of LAMENT each week

Opening Prayer (Randy)

O God, our God, look with mercy upon your people. Hear our prayers of confession, of repentance, and of grief at what we have done to one another and to your creation. Give us courage to seek you humbly and to act with justice as followers of Jesus. Receive our grief and weariness, O God, as this year has been simply too much for us to bear. Help us to stand with those whom you call blessed - the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the persecuted, and the peacemakers who see the places where your kingdom breaks

through. Call us into your presence as we worship this day. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Words of Grace (Sam)

May God, who pours out loving kindness upon our weary spirits,
and whose mercy endures forever,
free us from our sin
and inspire us to a new life together in God's kingdom
of justice, equity, and peace.

Hymn

from Songs for the Masses

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guitar, Jon Warner

Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord
O Lord hear my voice
Let your ears hear my cry for mercy
O Lord hear my voice

My soul waits for the Lord
In his word I put my hope
My soul waits for the Lord
More than the watchmen wait for the morning
More than the watchmen wait for the morning

If you Lord kept a record of sins
O Lord who could stand
But with you there is forgiveness
Therefore you are feared

Israel hope in the Lord
With the Lord there is mercy
And with him is full redemption
He himself will redeem

Offering and Prayer of Dedication (Laura - use same recording for 3 weeks)
General Fund, United for the Community, Minneapolis Relief

Special Music (Brittany Wedlund and Alyssa Larsen) (Nan W artwork)

In This Very Room

Ron and Carol Harris

Centering POC Voices in Art/Poetry: Rev. Frenchye Magee

Scripture Reading: Lamentations 3:34-57 (Laura)

When all the prisoners of the land
are crushed under foot,
when human rights are perverted
in the presence of the Most High,
when one's case is subverted
—does the Lord not see it?

Who can command and have it done,
if the Lord has not ordained it?
Is it not from the mouth of the Most High
that good and bad come?
Why should any who draw breath complain
about the punishment of their sins?

Let us test and examine our ways,
and return to the Lord.
Let us lift up our hearts as well as our hands
to God in heaven.
We have transgressed and rebelled,
and you have not forgiven.

You have wrapped yourself with anger
and pursued us,
killing without pity;
you have wrapped yourself with a cloud
so that no prayer can pass through.
You have made us filth and rubbish
among the peoples.

All our enemies
have opened their mouths against us;
panic and pitfall have come upon us,
devastation and destruction.
My eyes flow with rivers of tears
because of the destruction of my people.

My eyes will flow without ceasing,
without respite,
until the Lord from heaven

looks down and sees.
My eyes cause me grief
at the fate of all the young women in my city.

Those who were my enemies without cause
have hunted me like a bird;
they flung me alive into a pit
and hurled stones on me;
water closed over my head;
I said, "I am lost."

I called on your name, O Lord,
from the depths of the pit;
you heard my plea, "Do not close your ear
to my cry for help, but give me relief!"
You came near when I called on you;
you said, "Do not fear!"

Message: *My Eyes Flow with Rivers of Tears*

A Sermon on Lamentations in 3 Parts

Part Two: My Eyes Flow with Rivers of Tears

June 28, 2020 at United Methodist Church of Anoka

You said, "Do not fear." The poet cries out to God on behalf of a people conquered, enslaved, abused, angry, and afraid. This is the context of Lamentations.

Today I will share with you part 2 of a sermon on the book of Lamentations. Last week, in part one, we explored a bit about the poems contained in this book and the historical context in which they were written, in the time when Jerusalem had been conquered by the Babylonian empire, the Temple destroyed, and the people separated from one another and exiled, many sent to Babylon where they were enslaved.

Those were troubling times. Today, we will explore more deeply the despair reflected in the poems that make up the book of Lamentations and specifically the role of collective or shared grief. For indeed, these are troubling times.

This morning, Pastor Laura read for us from the third poem in Lamentations, which is the climactic poem in the book. As I mentioned last week, four of the five poems in Lamentations are written as acrostics, where each line of poetry begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It is as if the writer wants the reader to understand the fullness of the despair - this is complete, utter despair. Despair from A to Z. And in this third poem, in chapter 3, that despair is tripled - 100% despair times 3 - as three verses are assigned to each letter.

This is a level of expressed grief that might make us uncomfortable here in our western culture, and especially here in the upper-Midwest, where we are exceptional at pushing past emotion. We prefer not to have others see us cry. We don't want to get tears on the tablecloths. We manage our emotions, keep an even keel, don't rock the boat, don't show weakness. Sound familiar? If I had a dollar for everytime someone apologized to me for "bothering" or "burdening" me with their feelings...well, let's just say I could retire plenty early.

Do you remember a few weeks ago when we looked at Jeremiah 29? That's this same story of exile told in a different way. In that chapter, Jeremiah reveals that the Israelites who are exiled in Babylon are tempted to leave their faith in God behind and follow the false prophets of Babylon who promise them quick fixes for their suffering and expedited relief from their pain.

Jeremiah has the incredibly difficult job of inviting them not to rush through the pain and suffering, but to trust in the work of God for their good over the long haul. There is no quick fix. Lamentations exposes the raw pain of such an unfair truth.

In her commentary on Lamentations, scholar Kathleen O'Connor cites another scholar, Tod Linafelt. She writes,

Linafelt calls Lamentations a brutal book, a book that assaults us, and it surely does, even in the violence-laden climate of media, entertainment, and the streets. But the book's unmitigated violence, its expression of loneliness, abandonment, and suffering, its descriptions of death, of helplessness, of the suffering of women, children, the elderly, all have a contemporaneity to them. The poems evoke and outer world and portray an inner landscape known to many contemporary people.

The book functions as a witness to pain, a testimony to survival, and an artistic transformation of dehumanizing suffering into exquisite literature. In the process, it raises profound questions about the justice of God.

This is the power of shared grief, of communal lament. These laments are written by a specific person in a specific time and place, and yet they evoke for us something about the very nature of suffering. They draw us into our own grief, our shared anguish. They expose the ways that we, not unlike the Israelites, are tempted to look for quick fixes and to be finished talking about things we don't want to talk about anymore.

Lament links the past and the present, reveals how trauma visits generation upon generation. Lament allows us the freedom to rage, complain, cry out, demand justice.

It's interesting, I think, to note that God never speaks in the book of Lamentations. God speaks often to Jeremiah and through Jeremiah during the exile. But God does not speak in Lamentations. It is as if, in lament, God makes space - holy, sacred space - to hear and receive

and honor the feelings of those who suffer. Without retort, without defensiveness or justification. It's as if the Bible gives us this significant example of shared grief as a valid, important part of the story.

In our current reality, grief is all around us. Grief, this emotion we prefer to reserve for special occasions and only behind closed doors, has pushed its way through our barriers and boundaries and into our shared life. It's coming out sideways in how we speak to and about one another, in how we are making collective decisions about what comes next, and in how we process all that we are hearing, seeing, and learning.

Way back in March - do you remember March? It was about 8 years ago? At least it feels that way. Remember when we thought this pandemic would be a brief inconvenience? When we had the lid tightly kept on unrest and uprisings? When we thought we would soon be back to "normal"?

Well...back in March the Harvard Business Review published an interview with David Kessler, a world renowned expert on grief, called "That Discomfort You're Feeling Is Grief." It was a strong piece then, in March. I think it's even more helpful now, as we've begun to come to terms with the extended nature of our shared experiences of struggle, pain, and frustration.

Kessler noted in the interview that we are all feeling more than one kind of grief right now.

We grieve the ways the world has changed that have made us uncertain and uncomfortable. We fear what changes might come out of these troubled times that we might not like. We have grief that is anticipatory of potential losses we may experience in the future: of loved ones, of economic stability. And that grief can feel ambiguous right now because the things we are grieving: virus, racism, long-term economic hardship, irreconcilable breaches in important relationships...these things are ambiguous. We can't see them. We can't always even name them or describe them. And when we are grieving many of the same things together, but from different perspectives, we can have trouble believing one another.

According to Kessler,

The loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection. This is hitting us and we're grieving. Collectively. We are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air.

Our primitive mind knows something bad is happening, but you can't see it. This breaks our sense of safety. We're feeling that loss of safety. I don't think we've collectively lost our sense of general safety like this. Individually or as smaller groups, people have felt this. But all together, this is new. We are grieving on a micro and a macro level.

He notes the stages of grief, reminding readers that these stages are not linear and may happen in a different order, on an unexpected timeline. The stages are denial, anger, bargaining, sadness, and acceptance.

We are in different places, different stages, but so much of what we are feeling together is grief. So much of how we are responding to one another is grief. So much of how we are participating, defying, acquiescing, protesting, seeking change, seeking comfort in the known, is grief.

Lamentations invites us to stop trying to stuff this grief or shame ourselves and others for it. Grief is a natural response to suffering. Grief is an appropriate response to injustice. Grief happens for us individually and, in times like the present moment, grief can be a powerful shared experience that motivates us to work together for a common good that does not deny the pain of our neighbors in order to soothe our own discomfort.

Our shared experiences, our shared struggle, our shared desire for God's kingdom to be made real: these are places from which we can begin to name our grief. These are also, if we are willing to come without ego or agenda, are the spaces where we can begin to share the grief of others. We start by listening and believing people when they tell us their stories. By allowing the grief of another person to sit side by side with our own grief - where we don't need to eclipse it with our own stories, but instead can acknowledge it.

I also invite you this week to take time to examine your own feelings, or lack of feelings - did you know that disassociation can be a manifestation of grief? What are some griefs you might be able to name that you presently share with others?

Disruption of comfort

Shift in worldview (perhaps unexpected, perhaps unwelcome)

Anxiety over feeling unprepared for this present moment

Defensiveness at the challenging of deeply held values or beliefs

A feeling of uncertainty and fear about the future

The experience of a specific loss: of a job, of a home, of a loved one

What griefs are swirling in and around you today?

And how are you responding to that grief?

Are you catastrophizing?

Are you in denial that anything is wrong at all?

Are you feeling anger? Rage?

Are you seeking comfort? In healthy ways? In unhealthy ways?

The great opportunity in our shared experience of grief is the potential that we might also have a shared experience of grace, one that will be remembered for generations. The people in exile in Babylon had such an experience 70 years after Jerusalem was destroyed. Eventually, the time

came for them to return and rebuild, to move forward together: a changed people in a changed city. It wouldn't be their last experience of grief. It wouldn't be their last experience of grace.

Next week, in part 3, we'll see that Lamentations includes a plea for God's mercy. Until then, as you examine your own grief and the ways your grief is shared among others, I also invite you to consider what mercy we might seek together from God.

What does God's faithfulness look like for us in the future? What will our faithfulness look like in the meantime?

Amen.

Hymn

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Shepherd and sheep, my God and I:
to fresh green fields you led my steps
in days gone by.
You gave me rest by quiet springs
and filled my soul with peace
your loving presence brings.

O shelter me, O shelter me:
the way ahead is dark and difficult to see.
O shelter me, O shelter me:
all will be well if you would only shelter me.

Yet now I walk a different way;
Death dogs my path with stealthy steps from day to day.
I cannot find your peaceful place
But walk in dreary darkness, longing see your face.

I will look back in days to come
and realize your faithfulness led me back home. .
With tears of joy, I'll find my peace,
trusting that in your mercy you have sheltered me.

Pastoral Prayer (Rev. Cynthia Williams)

Lord's Prayer

Special Music: Men's Quartet (John R, Bruce F, Michael M, Dale B)

The Old Time Religion arr. Lyn Murray

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Give me that old time religion
Give me that old time religion
Give me that old time religion
And it's good enough for me

It was good for the prophet Daniel
It was good for the prophet Daniel
It was good for the prophet Daniel
And it's good enough for me

It was good for Paul and Silas
It was good for Paul and Silas
It was good for Paul and Silas
And it's good enough for me

It was good for old Abe Lincoln
It was good for old Abe Lincoln
It was good for old Abe Lincoln
And it's good enough for me

Benediction (Rachael)

Postlude