

Keeners of Qinah
2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27
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Preached June 28, 2015 at San José, Costa Rica

Maybe you remember the story of the family who in 1982 decided they'd had just about enough of the rat race, of man's inhumanity to man, of war, violence, and every other social ill and so they decided that they would just get away from it all, move away and find the most peaceful, tranquil few acres they could find, and make a go of it. So they looked and they looked, and finally found the perfect place. They made all the arrangements and they sold most of what they had and they packed up the rest. And they moved it, and themselves, to a new beginning. To the Falkland Islands, just a few weeks before the war between Argentina and Great Britain.

Have you ever been that fed up with the world, despairing over today's violence or tragedy? If it is not a natural disaster, it is a corporation closing its doors. If it is not a mother or father dying of cancer and leaving behind young children, it's the pilot of an airliner purposefully crashing it into the side of a mountain. Or maybe it's a guy who walks into a Bible Study, spends an hour at the church and then pulls out a gun and kills nine people because he doesn't like the color of their skin. There is no end to the truly disturbing news we receive on a daily basis. It really can become overwhelming, but there isn't really any place to go. There is no escape from the bombardment of what passes for news.

About three thousand years ago, the soon-to-be King David receives the very disturbing news we heard in tonight's reading. Both his best friend, Jonathan, and his emotionally unstable mentor King Saul, have been killed in battle against the Philistines. Overcome by Israel's enemies, Jonathan goes down on the battlefield, and Saul takes his own life after being wounded by the Philistine archers. It is the end of an era. And David's grief is no small thing. Jonathan was to him more than a friend: "I am distressed for you, my *brother* Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women." This was a friend who had saved his life, and offered him counsel, and even conspired against his own father on behalf of David. And if that weren't enough to bear, the King of his people is dead, and though some might think he'd have reason to rejoice since he had already been chosen as Saul's successor, David mourns the holder of the office, if not the man, mourns it because in spite of all he and Saul had been through together, this giant of a man had done a pretty good job overall as Israel's very first king. The death of a rival is no time for gloating, then or now.

And so he intones his lamentation, the Song of the Bow, it came to be called, and orders that it be taught to the people of Judah. This was not some private moment offering respect to the dead. No, this was a public proclamation that should not be forgotten. "*Your* glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places." This is a national tragedy, even though it had personal dimensions for David. In the

midst of his own heart-felt grief, he seizes the moment to lead the nation in its grief, to give shape to the voice of the people, to help them put it all in perspective. For all his faults, they've lost their leader in the worst way possible, to their sworn enemies. Saul didn't die after a long and glorious career. No, despite his valor, despite his swift sword, he was defeated, and what does that say to a fledgling nation? Now, lesser men might have seized the opportunity to glorify themselves as the Lord's newly anointed, or to try to rally the troops in vengeance against their enemies, or to try to raise the morale of the people. But David calls it correctly and lifts Judah's voice in mourning.

He does one other thing we shouldn't overlook, and that is that he calls on the women to aid in this process. "O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you with crimson in luxury, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel." There are many scholars who believe that David calls upon not just women in general to weep, but for particular women, particular professional mourners who were skilled and trained at leading public lament. These would be the same group called for in the ninth chapter of Jeremiah: "Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider, and call for the mourning-women to come; send for the skilled women to come; let them quickly raise a dirge over us, so that our eyes may run down with tears, and our eyelids flow with water." This was a group of women who prepared themselves for just such times as the death of a king, or a call to repentance, or a battlefield defeat, to lead the people in processing their grief, their guilt, or their

disgrace in a very public way. In English we call these women the keeners, and the lament they raised was called the *qinah*, a very special form of Hebrew poetry the rhythm and meter of which lent itself to calling forth the tears Jeremiah describes and God desires. They were the wailing women, loud and soulful and penetrating, able to tear your heart out with their passion, and then put it back in your chest with pathos. Whether through the tone of their wailing voices, or the words they chose, this very special group of women brought forth exactly what was needed in those critical moments of death or transition. And David is calling upon them to add their voices to his in this critical moment.

Although it seems like every day there is a reason for national lament, in the United States this past week, the focus has been on South Carolina where a young man killed nine members of a historically black church. This act of hate has energized once again debates about race relations, and mental illness, and gun control, and capital punishment, and flags, and civil wars fought over a hundred and fifty years ago. There is no shortage of pundits and politicians, partisans and patriots weighing in on the subject. But where are the keeners? The wailers? The professional mourners that make tears flow down like rivers and bring people together in consolation and self-reflection. It's true that something like a consensus is coming together around the inappropriateness of the Confederate flag, but on so many of the other issues, the nation seem more interested in arguing than coming together to discern what future God is calling it toward. If the bombardment of

violence and death is overwhelming, so too is the incessant commentary about it, when what we really need is simply to sit together and cry for awhile, and then get up, wipe away our tears, look around and see that those with whom we have just wept are those with whom we must move forward so that we may have to weep together less and less frequently. Imagine if mourning and lamenting was all we did for a while, all we were allowed to do for a while, and if that mourning and lamenting could be called forth more broadly and deeply, and if that mourning and lamenting could overcome the skepticism and opportunism that seem to carry the day.

Yes, I know that sounds simplistic. I know it sounds naïve. I know it sounds like if we could all just have a good cry about it, everything would be fine. But maybe it's also true. Maybe what mourning and lamenting are really all about is acknowledging that we really can't handle everything that comes our way, that we don't have an answer or a theory or a policy for every tragedy, that despite all of our best efforts we haven't come close to overcoming our human condition, the one that is responsible for so much of what overwhelms us. Maybe mourning and lamenting are the first step to the kind of humility that allows us to put not just more of, but all of, our faith in God to transform our tears and our hearts.

This, I think, is some of what David shows us in his lament. "O how the mighty have fallen." For all their prowess on the battlefield, these warriors too can perish. I, who am supposedly even greater than Saul, am stricken too. There is a

stark humility and humanity in David's words that points us in the direction of the divine, even if God isn't specifically mentioned in this lament. Lament is not just a human response to tragedy. It's a divine gift. It is one of those ways God gives us to be human, and to put our humanity in perspective, and from that perspective, reach out to one another, and to God, so that we're not washed away by either by a tide of bad news, or a flood of pure emotion. The gift of lament is that no matter how powerless or overmatched you may feel, no matter how distant or removed, no matter how overwhelmed, you can still find divine ground to stand on.

The church has much to offer the world. We are purveyors of hope and life and grace. We feed the hungry, and tend the sick, and visit the prisoner. We advocate for justice and welcome the weary. Maybe we need to add to that list that we are the keepers of the qinah, that ancient lament that heals and humbles. And as the keepers of the qinah, we wail when the world says stuff your tears, we mourn openly and unashamedly, we recognize that there are no limits to human tragedy or depravity, but also no limits to God's grace, and we proclaim that sometimes grace is found in unexpected places like tears shared together when there is nothing else we can do but cry. I don't know how the church would really assume such a role, but maybe it's worth thinking about and praying about, and maybe we could start by learning this Song of the Bow, as David directed us. May God help us in those moments in which we grieve to lament in the fullness of David's lament. Amen.