

Welcome to the Refugee Camp
Lamentations 5
© Stacey Steck
Preached August 4, 2013 at San José, Costa Rica

When people read Lamentations, and they don't very often read it, but when they do, they tend to read, and treasure, verses 22-24. That is because these are among the only words in Lamentations that approach hopeful. "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." And wouldn't we all rather read words of hope rather than despair?

But though those lovely words may be part of Lamentations, they are not actually the heart and soul of the book. No, Lamentations wishes to present us with the harsh reality of the times, with words like these that begin the book: "How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal. She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies." Truly, words of despair.

We moderns tend not to dwell on defeat, but on our can-do attitude. Yes, there was mourning in New York City after 9/11, but it didn't last very long. Soon the rhetoric was how we would not be defeated by terrorists, how we would rebuild the ruined city. Of course, the context was different, and neither the United States

nor New York City had fallen as Jerusalem and Judah had fallen, but in the midst of a national tragedy, the cathartic language of lament of olden days has been replaced by the can-do language of challenge, and so these ancient words may fall clanging on our ears. What is the matter with you people? Pull yourselves up by your bootstraps and get yourselves together! It's not the end of the world, for Pete's sake. But, you see, it was the end of the world. It was an utter defeat. It was the year 587 before Christ, and the nation, the city, and the temple had been destroyed, its people carted off to that strange land of Babylon, and who knew if this people really had a future? A few people had been left behind in Jerusalem to suffer through the years, and it was these people who likely wrote the five poems of the book of Lamentations. You can sort of imagine them sitting among the fallen stones of the temple trying to make sense of what had happened, but at the same time, still in shock, still in utter disbelief that their God had abandoned them to the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar.

In our lifetimes, few of us from North America or Europe know this depth of destruction. Maybe we've studied the World Wars, or heard about them from our parents or grandparents, but we haven't actually lived it, we haven't sat in the smoking ruins of the village in which countless generations of our families have lived, worked and died. Yes, we've probably all had our fair share of personal tragedy, of being betrayed, or heart-broken, or left with shattered dreams, or losing something or someone truly special in our lives. I'm not trying to belittle whatever

painful experiences we've had that might come to mind as we read these Scriptures tonight, but I do want to give the terrible, heart-wrenching words of Lamentations their due, and make sure they are allowed to continue to represent more than our individual sadness over the unpleasant events of our lives.

You see, there are still many places and peoples in this world who could claim these words and really understand the depth of the sorrow with which they were composed. The prayer we read tonight from chapter five could be the prayer of millions and millions of people, from the dislocated of the refugee camps of the Sudanese and the Somalis, to the virtual prison camps of children in the rug making factories of Pakistan, to the brothels of teenaged sex trade workers in Thailand and Costa Rica, to the communities ravaged by the civil war in the Congo, in which women are raped as a way to demoralize and terrorize the enemy, to those living behind a wall in Palestine, watching their olive groves being destroyed. These are places that are living, day-to-day, with the same kind of conditions of suffering and deprivation, the same sense of abandonment, the same questions, that Lamentations records. These are the places which cry out today, "Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us; look, and see our disgrace."

Again, I don't mean to trivialize whatever hardship you or people you know may have to endure. But if that's the depth of our reading of Lamentations, we will be missing what it wants to share with us. And just what are we meant to know? Well, first, that these are not individual laments, but that they come from a

community. They know that it has affected not just a few people, but everyone. They are well aware that in addition to the people who deserved to fall from their lofty places, the kings and the priests, and the wealthy, that the already vulnerable people are suffering too. This is a prayer from the heart of the community, not from the kings or the priests or the wealthy. This is a prayer of the rank and file. These folks have been betrayed by those charged with their care. The sins committed that lead to this situation were largely not theirs. Not that they are sinless but that they were not people who lived in a democracy and who could vote out their leaders. Indeed it was these people who were the victims of the sins of the upper class, against whom all the prophets brought God's words of judgment. "Our ancestors sinned," they cry out, "they are no more, and we bear their iniquity." And so now here they are victimized a second time, and crying out to God for help and mercy. Sometimes we read these Old Testament stories with our New Testament faith that makes each person responsible for their own actions, their own decisions. But that is not exactly how people believed back in the day. You see, it was the leaders' faith and behavior that led to the rise or the fall of the whole nation. And now the whole nation is suffering. None of us live in that proverbial vacuum, and what goes around comes around, not just to us, but to everyone.

Lamentations would also have us remember the value of public lament, of public vulnerability. I mentioned earlier how we moderns move quickly past feeling sorry for ourselves and onto fixing our situation. We don't want to dwell on

the negative, and we surely don't want others to think we can't bear up under the pressure. We use a show of strength, however artificial, to hide our weakness, no matter how real and legitimate. But there is a reason why the Bible is full of laments, both communal and individual. The book of Lamentations is certainly not the only place we find this language. The Psalms are full of it, the prophets use it regularly, even Jesus laments over this same Jerusalem, wearing his heartbreak on his sleeve – “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that has kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.” In the Hebrew, there is even a special name for the unique meter in which the poetry of lament is written. It is called Qinah, a word which even sounds as sad as the sadness it describes. And the purpose of Qinah is to express that part of ourselves that we cannot fix, that we cannot simply turn off and forget, at least not without doing great harm to ourselves and others. Qinah is part of God's remedy for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, a divine gift to keep the soul afloat in the midst of the hurricanes of life, an invitation to not suffer alone, but to share our sorrow together, in the community God has created for that purpose among others. The English word catharsis, which is the purpose of lament, has as its roots in the Greek word which means to vomit or evacuate one's bowels, expelling toxins and bitterness and cleaning out whatever eats you up inside, making pure your innards. And when you do that, when you let out all of that sadness and bitterness, there is

then space to experience God's grace and hope. We would do well, I think, to learn how to lament in this Biblical way, rather than holding it all inside.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not mention the role sin plays in the book of Lamentations, not so much in this fifth chapter as in others, but still making an appearance here. You may remember that a strong strand in the Bible is the idea that since the nations of Israel and Judah sinned, God sent invaders to conquer them, to teach them a lesson, so to speak, that their destruction was not simply a historical event, but a divinely-inspired historical event. They sinned, God warned, they refused to repent, they were overthrown. A strong strand of Lamentations is devoted to confessing that sin, owning it, and asking God to forgive it to restore them. Although we today may find it troubling to think of our God as one who would cause such great suffering simply to maintain some divine sense of honor, this is the mindset behind what we are reading tonight. But even if we choose to believe that in fact Israel and Judah were overthrown because their moral character left them vulnerable to attack, that they invested in the wrong things, so to speak, we must still take seriously the sin being confessed here. Because whether or not the suffering came directly from the hand of God, or simply the opportunistic hand of King Nebuchadnezzar, it was indeed the result of the failures of those charged with caring for God's people according to God's desires.

Why is the awful imagery of Lamentations, with descriptions of parents eating their children, and women being raped and princes being tortured, why is

this in the Bible? I think to remind us that sin has consequences, dire consequences, far beyond what we may think, unseen beyond our own lives and circles, but devastating nonetheless. We may choose to turn a blind eye to the way our lifestyles in the west impact the vulnerable in the rest of the world, but God has no such luxury now, nor ever has. You see, God is the one who hears all these lamentations. God is the one whose heart breaks right alongside every other broken heart. God is the one seeking our repentance and our lament, for our own sakes as well as for others. God is the one who still calls us to care for God people according to God's desires.

As you prepare your heart and mind for the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, I would invite you to examine your life and conscience, and see if there isn't some aspect of them that might not benefit from some lament, from some confession, from some changing of behavior. And if you find something, and you probably will without too much trouble, don't let that stop you from coming to the table. Your unworthiness is never greater than the grace of Jesus Christ. You see, the table is where we meet the one who gives us the strength to lament and confess and change. May the grace we experience anew at Christ's table give us the courage to face our own sin, and the world's suffering. Amen.