

Lamenting Communion

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Lamentations 3:19-26 — The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in God." The Lord is good to those who wait for God, to the soul that seeks the Lord. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

On most Sundays, our two scripture readings come from two different books of the Bible, but today, as you can see, both readings are from the book of Lamentations. Both of them are in the lectionary for today, and it seemed fitting to me to engage them together. Fair warning: I'll do the same thing next week, where both of our readings will be from the same book, but then I promise not to do it again for a while.

To get a sense of what's going on in Lamentations, I'll ask you to imagine something with me: imagine, if you can, the hardest and saddest time in your life, or one of them; a time when you felt overwhelmed by pain — be it physical, emotional, or spiritual pain, be it your own pain or the pain of a loved one; imagine a time when despair left you feeling crippled, and hope felt far beyond your reach. Now imagine that, in this time of your life, you wrote a handful of poems, trying to express the depth of your pain and despair. You address these poems to God, but not because you're feeling close to God in this time; on the contrary, God feels distant, like a parent who has abandoned their child. But you address your poems to God anyways, simply because there is no one else to hear them.

This is the book of Lamentations: a collection of five poems that address God with ambivalence and that express immense pain and despair — not that of a single individual, but that of an entire city, an entire people. Earlier this summer, I preached on the book of Jeremiah's first chapter, and I mentioned that Jeremiah was writing at the time of the Babylonian empire's attack on Jerusalem, in 587 BCE. Lamentations was written about this same time and about this same crisis. When King Nebuchadnezzar's mighty army invaded Jerusalem, they tore down the city's walls, leaving the people utterly defenseless; the Babylonian army ransacked the Israelite king's palace and many other homes; they set fire to the holy temple, in the center of the city; the soldiers plundered everything of value, including the temple's holy treasures; and they took many of Jerusalem's residents — the wealthier, more powerful ones — back to Babylon, into exile, while the poor were left in the wreckage.

In the face of such tragedy, what kinds of poems did these people compose? What could they say to each other in the wake of their trauma? If you read these five poems for yourself, you'll find mournful remembrances of the great city lost; exclamations of the community's deep emotional

distress; descriptions of horrific physical suffering; attempts to explain that suffering as divine punishment for sin; indignant accusations directed at God; and, at the same time, desperate pleas for God to rescue God's people. I'm going to read some more passages from Lamentations now, just to give you taste of what we're talking about here:

- *"Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of the divine's fierce anger." (1:12)*
- *"See, O LORD, how distressed I am; my stomach churns, my heart is wrung within me." (1:20)*
- *"The Lord has become like an enemy; the Lord has destroyed Israel. The Lord has destroyed all its palaces, laid in ruins its strongholds, multiplied mourning and lamentation." (2:5)*
- *"Infants faint in the streets of the city. They cry to their mothers, 'Where is food and drink?' as they faint like the wounded, as their life is poured out on their mother's bosom." (2:11-12)*
- *"Look, O LORD, and consider! To whom have you done this? Should women eat their offspring, the children they have borne?" (2:20)*
- *"I am one who has seen affliction under the rod of God's wrath; God has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; against me alone the Lord turns the divine hand, again and again, all day long. The Lord has made my flesh and my skin waste away, and broken my bones; the Lord has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation; the Lord has made me sit in darkness like the dead of long ago." (3:1-6)*
- *"Why have you forgotten us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days? Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old—unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure." (5:20-22)*

That last passage is actually the very end of the book. Lamentations doesn't end with that famous passage of "great is thy faithfulness," which — as beautiful and meaningful as it is — is only a brief break in the book's pain and despair. Rather, Lamentations ends with a lingering fear that God has left and isn't coming back.

Based on all this, what we've heard in Lamentations today, I want to offer you three short claims about grief and God.

First: God gives us permission to feel angry and despairing in our grief. We don't have to stuff down our anger. We don't have to pretend that we don't feel hopeless. We are permitted to be angry even at God, and we are permitted to doubt that God is going to make it all okay. In fact, I'd say that we are not only permitted; we are invited. And the invitation is this book's existence in our bible. Friends, all of those passages we just read, as raw and jarring as they are, and as unfaithful as they may seem, we call them "the word of the Lord." These angry and despairing words, aimed at God: they are holy words! They are holy because they express our *reality* in suffering, and our God is a God not of fantasy, but of reality, even when reality is raw and jarring. While conventional piety may want us to put a fake smile on our face, God does not ask

us to gloss over our anguish. If it's there, God says, don't suppress it; express it — if not to others, at least to yourself and to God. Because God is big enough to handle our anger, friends.

Second: God shares in our grief. When we suffer, God is not distant or dispassionate; God's divine self suffers with us. We are reminded of this truth hundreds of times throughout scripture, but the most powerful reminders come from the person of Jesus, who is the incarnation of the God of love. Through Jesus, God wept, got angry, felt lonely — just as we do. Because of Jesus's crucifixion, God is personally acquainted with physical suffering of the worst kind. And even more incredibly, because of the crucifixion, God knows what it's like to feel abandoned by God. On the cross, Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When we remember this, we are reminded that God has drawn near to and embraced every form of suffering — physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and otherwise. And so, when we ourselves suffer, the Spirit of God draws near to us and embraces us.

Third, and lastly: in the wake of our grief, God invites us to look for and to strive for new forms of life. It takes time, to be sure; we cannot rush into this. But in due time, as we recover from pain, we *can* seek and create beauty out of our pain. As we sit in darkness, we *can* seek and create new manifestations of light. Hardship need not paralyze God's spirit of creation and creativity; on the contrary, hardship can catalyze it. And Lamentations is an example of this. Although we don't see it in our English translations, these poems utilize the Hebrew alphabet in a creative and brilliant way. If you were to write a poem in English that had 26 lines, and the first line began with a word that started with the letter "A," and the second line began with a word that started with the letter "B," and so on, all the way to the 26th line starting with "Z," then you'd have the same structure that four of the five poems in Lamentations have, where the verses follow the order of the Hebrew alphabet. It's a beautiful, carefully-constructed work of art, and it comes out of a community's suffering. Similarly, in my own life, I think that some of the best things I've written emerged out of my experiences of suffering. Any of us, I believe, can use art as a way to make some order out of our chaos. And beyond art, God invites us to look for ways in which the chaos and ugliness of our past can give birth to order and beauty in our future — or perhaps in someone else's future, through passing on lessons learned or practicing empathy for another. As we grieve, then, let us look for opportunities to usher in new life around us. As we lament, let us be open to the spirit of resurrection in our midst.

With that, friends, we turn to this table, where we both remember the grievous death of Jesus Christ and at the same time celebrate the new life in God that Jesus embodies and offers. Here we learn that our God suffers, because our God loves, and it is from this love that new life springs. Let us be nourished today in the knowledge of our suffering God, our loving God, our living God. And today, on World Communion Sunday, let us be especially mindful of our kindred in Christ around the globe, with whom we are joined at God's table. Amen.