

5 March 2017

A Season of L(am)ent: Why Lament?
Psalm 44:8-26; Lamentations 1:1-5; Luke 19:41-44

Psalm 44:8-26

- ⁸ In God we have boasted continually,
and we will give thanks to your name for ever.
- ⁹ **Yet you have rejected us and abased us,
and have not gone out with our armies.**
- ¹⁰ You made us turn back from the foe,
and our enemies have taken spoil for themselves.
- ¹¹ **You have made us like sheep for slaughter,
and have scattered us among the nations.**
- ¹² You have sold your people for a trifle,
demanding no high price for them.
- ¹³ **You have made us the taunt of our neighbours,
the derision and scorn of those around us.**
- ¹⁴ You have made us a byword among the nations,
a laughing-stock among the peoples.
- ¹⁵ **All day long my disgrace is before me,
and shame has covered my face**
- ¹⁶ at the words of the taunters and revilers,
at the sight of the enemy and the avenger.
- ¹⁷ **All this has come upon us,
yet we have not forgotten you,
or been false to your covenant.**
- ¹⁸ Our heart has not turned back,
nor have our steps departed from your way,
- ¹⁹ **yet you have broken us in the haunt of jackals,
and covered us with deep darkness.**
- ²⁰ If we had forgotten the name of our God,
or spread out our hands to a strange god,
- ²¹ **would not God discover this?
For he knows the secrets of the heart.**
- ²² Because of you we are being killed all day long,
and accounted as sheep for the slaughter.
- ²³ **Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord?
Awake, do not cast us off for ever!**
- ²⁴ Why do you hide your face?
Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?
- ²⁵ **For we sink down to the dust;
our bodies cling to the ground.**
- ²⁶ **Rise up, come to our help.
Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.**

No one here can understand what it was like. Few alive today can imagine it. Maybe Bosnians who witnessed the genocide in Srebrenica or Syrians who escaped Aleppo, but none of us. The destruction of Jerusalem was not just a tragedy. It was unthinkable. It felt like the end of a world.

Jerusalem, the City of David, where Solomon's magnificent temple sat on the pinnacle of Mount Zion, was not just the capital of Judah. To the Judean mind it was the center of God's universe. Psalm 87 says that the Lord loves Mount Zion more than anywhere else and declares that anyone born on Zion is privileged over anyone else. To this mountain David had brought the Ark of the Covenant, and here God's covenant with David and his line had been confirmed. God had promised that there would always be a king from the line of David, and Jerusalem itself could never be destroyed. "God is in the midst of the city," says Psalm 46. "It shall not be moved." This eternal city was the proof that Israel was God's chosen people forever.

It had even been proven. In the 8th century before Christ, the Neo-Assyrian Empire swept through Palestine and utterly destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel. But when these invaders came to the Southern Kingdom, Judah, and camped around Jerusalem, the king of David's line, King Hezekiah prayed for God's deliverance, and a plague swept through the Assyrian siege camp and wiped out the army. Assyria had come to plunder Jerusalem, but instead the people of Jerusalem went out and plundered the deserted Assyrian camp. "God is in the midst of the city. It shall not be moved."

So when the next empire rose in the north, Babylon, and began moving toward Palestine, the people of Judah knew that God would protect them again. People from outlying towns moved into Jerusalem, where they would be safe. Jerusalem was God's footstool and Mount Zion God's throne. Who could stand against God? When a young priest from Anathoth, Jeremiah, began to preach in Jerusalem that God could destroy the city, as a punishment for Judah's faithlessness to God's covenant, it almost got him stoned to death. To even suggest that Jerusalem might fall was treason against the city and apostasy against God.

And then, in 588 BC the Babylonian army came and laid siege to Jerusalem. For two years, the people in Jerusalem starved and died of disease, and in 586 the Babylonians got into the city. They executed the Davidic king and either killed or enslaved the rest of the population. They burned everything flammable, tore down the city walls, and demolished Solomon's temple. They took everyone except a few of the poorest people to exile and slavery in Babylon. One who was left behind was the now middle-aged prophet Jeremiah.

That's when the Book of Lamentations was written, a book you may have never heard a sermon from. It was written by one an eyewitness to the city's fall. It is a funeral dirge for all that had once seemed eternal and a cry of despair over the end of hope itself. The book doesn't name an author, but tradition says that it was written by Jeremiah himself, the prophet who had foretold the catastrophe and then had to watch it all come true. We read from the Book of Lamentations, chapter 1, verses 1-5:

*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.*
² *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.*
³ *Judah has gone into exile with suffering
and hard servitude;
she lives now among the nations,
and finds no resting-place;
her pursuers have all overtaken her
in the midst of her distress.*
⁴ *The roads to Zion mourn,
for no one comes to the festivals;
all her gates are desolate,
her priests groan;
her young girls grieve,
and her lot is bitter.*
⁵ *Her foes have become the masters,
her enemies prosper,
because the Lord has made her suffer
for the multitude of her transgressions;
her children have gone away,
captives before the foe.*

For our Gospel today we read Luke 19:41-44:

41 As [Jesus] came near and saw the city, he wept over it, ⁴²saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. ⁴³Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.'

Luke tells us that as Jesus arrived in Jerusalem after his ministry in Galilee, he pauses on a hill, beholding the great city, and weeps. This is a rebuilt city, of course. After the Babylonian Empire fell, exiled Jews had returned and rebuilt a shabby, makeshift temple and put up some token walls, but over the centuries since then, the city had recovered much of its former glory. King Herod had built a temple even more magnificent than Solomon's, and the city Jesus beheld that day was dotted with marble Roman palaces. But Jesus looked on it and wept. "Oh, Jerusalem, if only you had remembered the covenant with your God. If only you had sought the things that lead to *shalom*. But it's too late for you now. Soon, once again, you will be destroyed. Not one stone will be left in place." It was another forty years before this happened, but when the Roman

legions destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD, it was just as complete as the destruction in Jeremiah's time. The temple has never been rebuilt. Jesus saw this coming, inexorably, and, like Jeremiah before him raised his voice in lament.

Why do they lament? Why does Jesus, the Son of God, pause to weep over a city? Or, more to the point, why does the Bible dwell on their lamentation so much? Why is the Book of Lamentations preserved in our Bible – five chapters of the grimmest, gloomiest poetry ever composed? Why does Luke feel the need to pause and record Jesus' tears? What good does crying do? For that matter, why are there so many psalms of lament, like Psalm 44 that we read earlier in the service? In fact, about 40% of the psalms in our Bible are laments. Why all this wallowing in grief?

The theologian Soong-Chan Rah, in his book *Prophetic Lament*, started his study with an experiment. The book of Psalms was the hymnal of the Jewish faith, so Dr. Rah compared it the hymnals of American Christianity. As I said, 40% of the psalms are laments, but even by stretching the definition, only about 10% of the songs in our hymnals can be classified that way. Methodists do a little better, at 12%. I have no doubt at all that that's because we have Charles Wesley, who tended to write about real life and real faith, but even with Charles' work, Martie and I had a terrible time finding laments for us to sing this Lenten season. Then Dr. Rah looked at the music licensing corporation that keeps track of the choruses that are sung in contemporary worship services. There, laments make up about 3%. We sing happy songs. And we read happy scriptures. You noticed, of course, that we read our psalm today from a bulletin insert. That's because Psalm 44 begins with praise before it moves into lament. Our hymnal only includes the happy first eight verses. The long Psalm 89 is another one. It was written about the same time as Lamentations, also responding to the destruction of the temple. The first half of the psalm is all about God's eternal covenant with David, his promise to preserve David's line and Jerusalem forever, and the second half of the psalm is a furious tirade against God, demanding to know what went wrong with his precious promises now that the king from David's line had been executed and Jerusalem demolished. Our hymnal leaves that part out. We'll be reading psalms of lament all month, and we're going to have to print you an insert every week, because none of the others are in our hymnal.

So lament is constant and deep in holy scripture, and is basically missing in our churches. Doesn't that begin to feel as if we might be just a little neurotic? Like the person who avoids grieving the death of a loved one by trying to stay too busy to think about it? Hear this now. Honestly mourning a death, whether of a person or a city or an idea or a marriage or a dream, is not "wallowing in grief." It is confronting the existence of pain and admitting the reality of disappointment, and until we acknowledge pain, we are doomed to bear it. Oh, we can suppress it for a while. We can frantically distract ourselves from it. We can surround ourselves with noise and busy-ness so we don't have to think about it, but we have to sleep sometime. And there will be moments of silence. And then the pain will make its presence known. There is no way to go around grief, or to jump over it. The only way to the other side is *through*. Unacknowledged grief is like a deep wound that has healed on the surface but is infected inside. Eventually, we have to open it up and clean out the infection. If we don't, it will break out by itself. Or it will kill us.

One of the last vestiges of a time when lamentation had a recognized place in the Church is the season of Lent. And so this Lent we are going to be exploring lamentation, both the biblical book and the neglected spiritual practice. I don't know if it will be especially easy for any of us. We're not used to this, after all. But if we do it honestly before God, then I believe it can be health-giving, and perhaps on the other side we will find a hope worth keeping. Let's see.