

19 March 2017

**A Season of L(am)ent: Triumphalism**  
Psalm 74; Lamentations 2:1-7; Luke 9:51-62

**Psalm 74:1-11, 20-23**

- <sup>1</sup> *O God, why do you cast us off for ever?  
Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?*
- <sup>2</sup> *Remember your congregation, which you acquired long ago,  
which you redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage.  
Remember Mount Zion, where you came to dwell.*
- <sup>3</sup> *Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins;  
the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary.*
- <sup>4</sup> *Your foes have roared within your holy place;  
they set up their emblems there.*
- <sup>5</sup> *At the upper entrance they hacked  
the wooden trellis with axes.*
- <sup>6</sup> *And then, with hatchets and hammers,  
they smashed all its carved work.*
- <sup>7</sup> *They set your sanctuary on fire;  
they desecrated the dwelling-place of your name,  
bringing it to the ground.*
- <sup>8</sup> *They said to themselves, 'We will utterly subdue them';  
they burned all the meeting-places of God in the land.*
- <sup>9</sup> *We do not see our emblems;  
there is no longer any prophet,  
and there is no one among us who knows how long.*
- <sup>10</sup> *How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?  
Is the enemy to revile your name for ever?*
- <sup>11</sup> *Why do you hold back your hand;  
why do you keep your hand in your bosom? . . . .*
- <sup>20</sup> *Have regard for your covenant,  
for the dark places of the land are full of the haunts of violence.*
- <sup>21</sup> *Do not let the downtrodden be put to shame;  
let the poor and needy praise your name.*
- <sup>22</sup> *Rise up, O God, plead your cause;  
remember how the impious scoff at you all day long.*
- <sup>23</sup> *Do not forget the clamour of your foes,  
the uproar of your adversaries that goes up continually.*

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We continue, through this season of Lent, examining one of the less familiar and most daunting books in the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Lamentations. This bleak book is a series of funeral songs for the city of Jerusalem and the temple, written by an eyewitness of their destruction by

the armies of Babylon in 586 BC. These elegies are grim and graphic and harsh, which is probably why some of you have never read (or, perhaps, heard of) this book. We don't usually talk about it; we'd rather be upbeat. But that's exactly why we're dwelling here this month: because in our culture we try too hard, and too artificially, to be positive. We optimistically seek quick fixes for our problems, but there are no quick fixes for tragedy. I believe that grief is not only inevitable in life, but that facing it honestly and openly is necessary if we are ever to be healthy and whole.

One part of a healthy grieving is acknowledging anger. Many of you have been taught the so-called "Stages of Grief," first described by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. If so, you know that anger is one of those normal stages. No, we cannot get stuck in anger and internalize it indefinitely. That's not healthy. But neither is it healthy to gloss over it or suppress it or pretend it isn't there. Our anger may be expressed at another person, or at ourselves, or at God. In the Book of Lamentations we find all three. Here is anger at Babylon, but here also is anger at God. You see, there is no doubt in the writer's mind that all that has come on Jerusalem is a punishment from God, and frankly, God's punishment feels excessive. Did God really need to destroy *everything*?

But most of all, the poet is angry at Jerusalem, at himself and his people, for their arrogant assumption that because they were special to God they were somehow immune from disaster. Judah had treated their covenant with God not as a living relationship but rather as a privilege that they'd been granted that could never be retracted no matter what you did – a lot like some people treat marriage. Or salvation. But God's plan had always been for mutual commitment and faithfulness. God had granted love, not an honorary degree, but Judah had forgotten that. She had been so proud of her temple, her sanctuary, her palaces, her festivals, when she should have been focusing on her faithfulness to God's covenant. In chapter 2 of Lamentations, verses 1-7, hear the poet's anger in his grief:

- How the Lord in his anger has humiliated daughter Zion!*  
*He has thrown down from heaven to earth the splendour of Israel;*  
*he has not remembered his footstool on the day of his anger.*
- <sup>2</sup> *The Lord has destroyed without mercy all the dwellings of Jacob;*  
*in his wrath he has broken down the strongholds of daughter Judah;*  
*he has brought down to the ground in dishonour the kingdom and its rulers.*
- <sup>3</sup> *He has cut down in fierce anger all the might of Israel;*  
*he has withdrawn his right hand from them in the face of the enemy;*  
*he has burned like a flaming fire in Jacob, consuming all around.*
- <sup>4</sup> *He has bent his bow like an enemy, with his right hand set like a foe;*  
*he has killed all in whom we took pride in the tent of daughter Zion;*  
*he has poured out his fury like fire.*
- <sup>5</sup> *The Lord has become like an enemy; he has destroyed Israel.*  
*He has destroyed all its palaces, laid in ruins its strongholds,*  
*and multiplied in daughter Judah mourning and lamentation.*
- <sup>6</sup> *He has broken down his booth like a garden, he has destroyed his tabernacle;*  
*the Lord has abolished in Zion festival and sabbath,*  
*and in his fierce indignation has spurned king and priest.*
- <sup>7</sup> *The Lord has scorned his altar, disowned his sanctuary;*

*he has delivered into the hand of the enemy the walls of her palaces;  
a clamour was raised in the house of the Lord as on a day of festival.*

\* \* \*

Today we read another incident that took place during Jesus' final journey toward Jerusalem, where he would meet his death. This story is found in Luke 9, verses 51-62.

*51 When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. <sup>52</sup>And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; <sup>53</sup>but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. <sup>54</sup>When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' <sup>55</sup>But he turned and rebuked them. <sup>56</sup>Then they went on to another village.*

*57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' <sup>58</sup>And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' <sup>59</sup>To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' <sup>60</sup>But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' <sup>61</sup>Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' <sup>62</sup>Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'*

Last week we examined a different story about these two disciples, James and John. There we saw them taking Jesus aside and trying to finagle a promise that when he became the new king of Israel they would be his right and left hand men. Jesus declined to grant them individual honor, but said that they could follow his example, if they liked.

Today we see another revealing incident. Passing through a Samaritan village on their way to Jerusalem, they were . . . not so much mistreated as just ignored. No one there welcomed them. No one, apparently, offered to feed them. No one listened to Jesus' preaching. And that burned James and John. The fact that Jews had treated Samaritans like dogs for centuries didn't matter: this was *Jesus* they were snubbing! James and John begged Jesus to call down fire from heaven and burn those suckers to the ground. Please, Jesus? Can we wipe them out? Please?

Now I don't want to read too much into one incident, but it does feel as if this is a pattern for these two disciples. Mark 3 says that their nickname among the twelve was "Sons of Thunder," which sort of fits their response to these Samaritans. You can't treat *us* this way! There are people like that, people who demand to be treated with the respect they think they deserve, who are hypersensitive to every slight. These are the ones who stand up for their rights, who don't let *anyone* mess with them, who keep score, who respond immediately to any perceived insult. To these people, forbearance, patience, empathy, and forgiveness all feel like weakness. They can be loyal friends, but they can also turn on you at the first hint of disrespect. Such people are either loved or loathed; there is no in-between. And it feels as if James and John were like that. "Let's burn this town! We'll make it an example for every other town we come to! Let's see if anyone else dares to ignore us!"

Maybe you can think of someone like that. In fact, you may even be able to think of a nation with that personality. I love our country, which was founded on incredibly noble principles and has become a true land of opportunity and, for many people at least, freedom. But we do have our . . . quirks. We are so sure of our superiority, with or without evidence, and always have been. When John Winthrop led a ragged bunch of religious refugees to Massachusetts in the 1640s, he declared that their tiny band would be a “city set on a hill” – a beacon of light to the world. When you picture the scruffy little band of Puritans he was speaking for, that’s ridiculous, but somehow it happened. Almost as soon as we won our independence from Great Britain, we began declaring our “Manifest Destiny” to conquer and occupy all the land between the oceans. “Manifest” means “obvious,” which again is ridiculous. It was obvious to no one, least of all to the Native Americans who already lived there, but it happened. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century we expanded the American empire to cover the globe. It wasn’t an empire like the British Empire of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, established by means of naval power. No, we didn’t *conquer* other nations. The American empire used different weapons. We conquered the world by means of Coca-Cola, Ford Motors, McDonalds, Apple Computers, and Hollywood. By such means we became the most influential nation on earth. Sure, we may be known in the rest of the world primarily for mediocre fast food and heavy-handed foreign policy, but *everyone* takes us seriously. James and John would be proud of us.

I say all this with affection. Even as I sometimes wish we would outgrow our national adolescence, I love this country with all its rugged beauty and its self-inflicted wounds. But when this triumphalist side of the American psyche bleeds over into the American church, it is not all right. What is occasionally exasperating in a nation is simply unacceptable in the Church of Jesus Christ. I get it that every church takes on some of the personality of the culture around it, but that’s only fine so long as the culture doesn’t conflict with the teaching and example of Christ. There’s nothing wrong with the American church being unique, but we still must be the church first and American second. We forget that too often.

When I was in high school in the late 1970s, my church at the time, the Southern Baptist Convention, declared its own “Manifest Destiny.” We were going to “reach the world for Christ by the year 2000.” The whole world. Every person on earth was going to hear the gospel by the turn of the millennium, and we were going to do it *ourselves*. No mention was made of working with, say, Methodists. This challenge was called: “Bold Mission Thrust.” That’s right: they went with military imagery. At least I hope it was military. That’s the *least* offensive way to understand that. Now there were good people behind this goal, but all the same it was incredibly arrogant, and I will add incredibly wrong: we were sent to proclaim the good news to the hopeless, not conquer and assimilate them. This was American triumphalism thinly disguised as mission.

That triumphalism comes out in the church every time a successful megachurch franchises itself, putting all the Mom and Pop churches downtown out of business. It rears its head when a hundred books are written about how to start rich churches in growing affluent suburbs and none on how to start churches for migrant workers or in depressed former steel towns. We fall into the trap of triumphalism when we measure our success by our political influence instead of by transformed lives, when we get our feelings hurt by the Starbucks coffee cup but are not bothered by the problems of poverty and homelessness at our doorsteps. We are

triumphalist when we are more concerned about the percentage of Americans who will check the box marked “Christian” on national surveys than we are about how many of those “Christians” are actually growing into the image of Christ. This is when we are more American than Christian. This is when we are triumphalist. And wrong.

Look back at the story of James and John. How did Jesus respond to their desire to make an example of that rude Samaritan city? He rebuked them and *went on to another village*. And then he followed that up with a remarkable set of sayings. When one of the crowd said, “I’ll follow you anywhere,” Jesus replied, “Will you? Into poverty? Homelessness? Ridicule? Alienation from family? Ostracism? Because those are all places my path may lead.” You could not ask for a more striking contrast to the attitude of James and John. Jesus didn’t say much about the church that would follow him, but from what he did say, we can safely assume he envisioned a church that was meek, poor, compassionate, quietly making a difference in the lives of those whom it touches.

Influence in society? That’s for superficial amateurs. Jesus, and his church, are about influencing lives. When a hopeless soul rediscovers hope in the church, when one who had never known love encounters there love without conditions, when the lonely find community, when the empty find meaning, that’s not triumphalism. That’s real triumph.

I have to finish the story of James and John. It turns out that they were teachable. When Jesus rose from the grave and *still* made no effort to establish an earthly kingdom, they figured out that he didn’t want to, and they decided that they’d rather be rejected by society with Jesus than be influential without him. James was executed by King Herod. As for John, well, tradition tells us that this particular “Son of Thunder” went on to write the following words from 1 John: *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who doesn’t love doesn’t know God, for God is love. Amen.*