

“Lamentation: The Dark Night of the Soul”

Lamentations 3:19-24

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer

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“Lamentation”—what a peculiar word! Although it may sound antiquated—even obsolete—to our modern ears, I suggest that it is a word highly appropriate to the Season of Lent, a word we would do well to consider as we journey toward Holy Week.

The word lamentation literally means “the passionate expression of grief or sorrow or regret.” In the Bible, the word “lament” is the name given to a particular form of passionate prayer, a cry for help in the midst of pain and suffering. Would it surprise you to learn that almost half of the 150 Psalms are laments, prayers expressing deep sorrow and pain, often accompanied by heartfelt regret? “How long, O Lord? Will you utterly forget me?” (Ps. 13:2). Or, “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice!” (Ps. 130:1). As I grow older and notice my strength decreasing and my aches and pains increasing, the following lament catches my eye: “Do not cast me off in my old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent.” (Ps. 71:9). And who can forget that, on the cross, Jesus quoted the most famous lament from the Psalms: “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?” (22:1).

I must admit that when I learned in seminary that the Psalter contains no less than 67 psalms of lament, I was stunned. “Why so many?” I wondered. I much preferred reading the joyous, uplifting psalms of praise or thanksgiving. But I was young and hadn’t experienced enough of life to understand why laments play such a large role in the Psalter, the ancient the hymn book of Israel and the Church.

Our scripture lesson for today is not taken from the Psalms, but rather from an Old Testament book I have never before used as a text for a sermon. The book isn’t very well known, tucked away, as it is, among the great Hebrew Prophets which overshadow it. Shockingly, this small book contains *nothing but laments*; therefore, it bears the fitting title, Lamentations. Why, you might ask, is an entire book of the Bible given over to nothing but laments? That is a question that calls for a story.

Jeremiah was the son of Hilkiah, a Jewish priest from the Benjamite village of Anathoth. In the year 626 BCE, God called Jeremiah to serve as prophet to the Kingdom of Judah. This was a particularly difficult time to be called into the service of God, for under the influence of a secession of evil kings—most notably Ahaz and Manasseh—Judah had turned away from the God of Abraham and the requirements of the Mosaic Covenant. They began to worship Baal and other gods of the surrounding nations, even to the point of building altars upon which they sacrificed their children!

Jeremiah resisted his call from God, saying he was but a youth and not a trained speaker. His reluctance is understandable. Who in their right mind would relish the call to be

God's spokesperson at such an evil time? But Jeremiah soon discovered that there was a "fire in his bones" compelling him to preach, even though his message was completely rejected. He became a laughingstock. He was mocked. He was beaten. He was put in stocks. He was imprisoned. He was thrown into a muddy cistern and left to starve; fortunately, someone rescued him. He escaped more than one assassination attempt. And to top it off, while Jeremiah was preaching a message of impending doom unless the people repented of their sins and idolatry, other prophets—false prophets—were proclaiming peace and prosperity!

In the year 587, however, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians as Jeremiah had predicted, initiating a 70-year period in Jewish history known as the Babylonian Exile. Tradition states that Jeremiah, with the aid of his scribe Baruck, wrote the Book of Lamentations in response to the destruction of the city of Jerusalem, the devastation of the land, and the carrying away of Judah's best and brightest to far off Babylon. Listen to excerpts from the book's opening stanzas:

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.
 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.
 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.
 Her foes have become the masters, her enemies prosper,
 because the Lord has made her suffer for the multitude of her
 transgressions; . . .
 Jerusalem remembers, in the days of her affliction and wandering,
 all the precious things that were hers in days of old.
 When her people fell into the hand of the foe, and there was no
 one to help her,
 the foe looked on mocking over her downfall.
 Jerusalem sinned grievously, so she has become a mockery;
 All who honored her despise her, for they have seen her
 nakedness;
 She herself groans, and turns her face away.

What heart rending words! Is it any wonder that Jeremiah is known as “the weeping prophet”? Many see in Jeremiah’s life a foreshadowing of the life of Jesus, who also uttered a lament over the city of Jerusalem when it rejected his message.

Times of lamentation are inescapable dimensions of life; they are part of the universal human experience. We may not wish to experience them, but experience them we will—both individually and corporately. And when the tragedy is of our own making, the lament takes on an even more poignant tone, like Jeremiah’s on behalf of the people of Judah.

Whether a lament is national, as in our scripture lesson for today, or it comes from deep within a single wounded soul, a lament is a cry for justice and mercy and relief from suffering. But it is also more than merely a cry. Uttering a lament is also the necessary first step in the journey to healing. You see, the biblical practice of lamentation counters a false, naïve, and overly romantic view of what it means to be a spiritual person. Being spiritual does not mean that everything is always lovely; that we never get upset; that we just sit around holding hands, singing Kumbaya, and saying how wonderful everything is. No! This is a false—I’d go so far as to say a pernicious—understanding of spirituality. Tragedy, injustice, brokenness, and evil are part of our lives, part of living in the real world.

I firmly believe that the biblical practice of lament teaches us two profound spiritual truths, truths we do well to consider on our Lenten Journey. In order to experience these truths in the most powerful way, let us look again at today’s scripture lesson.

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, his 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
him.”

The first spiritual truth is the wonderful, freeing awareness that it is okay—no, it’s more than okay, it’s a good thing—to express our uncensored feelings to God. “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end.” Jeremiah’s words proclaim that God loves us unconditionally and eternally. God’s shoulders are broad enough to bear our complaints and sorrows, and God’s arms are always open to embrace our suffering souls. Mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead captured this truth most beautifully when he wrote, “God is the great companion—the fellow-sufferer who understands.”¹ And this is why Jeremiah could boldly proclaim even in the midst of the chaos around him, “therefore I have hope.”

And the second spiritual truth found in this passage is equally wonderful. “[God’s mercies] are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” God not only experiences our pain; God also offers us fresh “resurrection possibilities” for living, day-by-day. God is not only our great companion in suffering, but also the source of novel and transformative possibilities for overcoming the sufferings and tragedies and injustices of life. And this is why Jeremiah could boldly proclaim even in the midst of the chaos around him, “therefore I have hope.”

Lamentation. I hope that word does not sound peculiar and old-fashioned now. Lamentation is a profound word—a Lenten word with a message—for our laments touch the heart of our God who understands, and who offers us fresh possibilities for the next unfolding moment.

And that’s today’s good news.

¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected ed., ed. by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Macmillan, 1929; New York: The Free Press, 1978), 351.