

## “Hope for the Hopeless”

Ridgley Joyner

Lamentations 1:1-6; 3:19-26

She sleeps slumped in a maroon wingback chair, a large-print magazine folded into her lap. The table beside her is piled with third-class mail and a small glass. Beside the chair is a stack of cards and notes, some many years old. Read and reread, they provide a link to her past. They are her memory. A portrait of her husband smiles at her from its place beside the closet door. The television blares, her nap anesthetizing the loneliness.

Now she sits motionless, finding joy in once-upon-a-time memories prompted by photographs on beige walls. On the retina of her mind she again sees those scenes of the family together at the Jersey Shore. Those where the wonderful days with cherry snow cones, Coppertone bronzing, and new sandals. She was entertained by the remembrance of caramel-corn evenings on the boardwalk, a respite from the heat of southern Ohio summers.

Eventually the children left home and started their own families. A complete reversal from what was her once booming household. But, she and her husband still returned to the beach and held hands as they walked on the sand. It was still good. Then came that distressing morning when the medical staff offered them a choice: “Artificial Valve or Pig Valve?” Her world was turned upside down His heart grew weaker. Time edged shorter. The cardiologist said the operation was a success, but soon the resulting infection halted his life.

Her daughters helped her choose the black dress she wore to the funeral. The service filled with friends affirming his significance in their lives and offering her their condolences with hugs and tears. Notes and flowers

arrived, but they soon tapered to silence. This was all a complete reversal from what she thought she knew. Or where she thought she'd be. Her whole world was turned upside down.

When I read this account this week, I couldn't help but think of our scripture reading.

These first six verses are considered the "prelude" attributing the poetry to the prophet Jeremiah overlooking the city of Jerusalem after the Babylonians came in and burned down their synangogue. Much like the angel left overlooking Dresden on the front of your bulletin. And here Jeremiah finds his words...

How lonely sits the city!...How like a widow she has become! This is believed to be the howl of Jeremiah as he personifies the national tragedy of the babylonians engulfing the kingdom of Judah in 587 BCE. This is our context.

Today We are invited into the reflections of these exiles, one among the people of God in Judah, Daughter Zion, Jerusalem. Scripture reveals this to us an all too familiar feeling in the very first six verses of Lamentations.

What once was a city full of people is now characterized as a deserted, lonely, widow. A princess that has become a servant. Whose friends are now enemies, with no one to comfort her. What once was a city where God dwelled is now, a city that roams among the nations with no resting place. Foes have become masters, enemies prosper.

From overseeing the nations to being overseen. Jerusalem is Overtaken, without strength distressed, even the roads are mourning—all are in bitter anguish, princes are like stags with no pasture. This suffering has encompassed all of God's people in exile. Such devastation is disorienting-- their lives forever changed, and they are greeted with this deafening silence.

This year we have heard of plenty of people that dwell among many nations with no resting place, most without a name, just a label.

We too know what this disorientation can feel like. We pick up the newspaper, we sit at the doctors office and glance at the TV, we pump our gas and the speakers shout at us disorienting news.

We are surrounded by incoherency. Things that do not compute.

Parents having to bury their children.

Schools being targets instead of reaching targets.

Young moms losing their husbands

Holy Lands with Religious violence.

A land of freedom full of disempowerment

Company Mergers, budget cuts, life transitions, health hurdles

Scriptures depicting a punishing God, an abandoning God, when we thought our God was always there

Scriptures like Lamentations staring us in the face on what is supposed to be a joyful Summer day.

When bad things happen in our lives, our relationships, our world—sometimes they smack us in the face with complete reversals. Our worlds are turned upside down and we find ourselves in a state of confusion and disorientation like Daughter Zion, Jerusalem.

We ask questions like How did I go from a promotion one year to laid off the next? Why do we seem to never have enough? Didn't she think that would hurt me?

How can so much evil exist in a world created by such a good God? When bad things happen—when we find ourselves in exile we ask questions of our God.

Perhaps we are uncomfortable or with little answers, our solution is to explain it away rather than sit with it. We can't figure it out so we find platitudes to make sense of it, we put God in a box and tell others what we would want to hear—it was God's will, I'll get over it. This is teaching me something.

When life as we know turns on its head, we ask why and so do our ancestors this morning. Why? Why would our God, who loves us unconditionally who delivered us from the hand of pharaoh, out of slavery, our God who fed us in the wilderness allow our great nation to fall into ruin, to fall into the hands of the enemy?

Why is this even in the bible? This is when we are challenged to truly wrestle with who God is, and whose we are as God's broken people.

The Israelites, we read in all the prophetic literature they were warned—it was coming, and they didn't listen. They didn't depart from their blatant neglect of the poor and the needy, putting their hope and trust in a nation, a king. For the exiles, the answer was that their many sins tainted God's people, God's city. This exile, this deportation was what they thought was God's way of punishing them: complete and total abandonment. Even though attack from the Babylonians was imminent. Even though the northern kingdom and their neighboring countries fell to the enemies first. Nevertheless, They believed God was punishing them. These are the repercussions of God's covenant love, they tell themselves. It only makes sense, right?

We encounter God in our suffering with our questions, but we also bring our culture our background to the equation. In an honor and shame culture of this text in the ancient near east, of course the poet could have assumed that this suffering was punishment. The exiles dishonored God and God will now shame them. But today, digging into the text from the context of 2018, and wrestling with who God is in exile, I don't buy this type of punishing God. A vengeful and abusive God is NOT the God we know. This interpretation can be very problematic if this is what we take from the cries of people that are in distress in Lamentations.

If God is a deity that causes things like deportation for punishment of sin or violence for the sake of unfaithfulness, then victims of abuse are without refuge, tyrants and bullies cannot be trumped and love can never be trusted. This undermines the God we know of in scripture and makes God's covenant love unreliable.

We are not in a world void of the pain expressed in these verses. And if this sacred text lies next to so many other texts that we turn to day in and day out, We can't ignore "hard" or "depressing" passages and only look to a God who is loving and merciful and fits in our box. If we do, we only hear part of the story—we miss a large portion of scripture including Lamentations that invite us into tragic experiences of believers. If we ignore it, It shrinks God to our own understanding. To neglect these texts erase the ability for us to see ourselves in the text. To sit beside the grieving children of Jerusalem who mourn. To embody this expressive poetry for ourselves.

This sacred poetry is a testament to us, God's children, that sometimes a relationship with God is a relationship of lament and only lament. Perhaps then we might find hope knowing that God is weeping with us in our pain. In that reversal of an image, there is no abandonment by God.

Lamentations invites us to engage God in the text. To engage a disorienting God in a disorienting world. To admit that our preconceived ideas and expectations and our boxes that we put God in..they might come crumbling down like the temple in Jerusalem. And it is then that God gives us the words of Lament in scripture---to reorient ourselves in our relationship with God and others—a relationship that is constantly open to the revelation of God in our encounters with scripture, but also in our life, in our suffering.

This is my favorite book in the Bible. Call me depressing, but these words. Kathleen O'Connor says that the book of Lamentations is "God's tears for the world". They aren't just complaints from unfaithful people. They are real, vulnerable, honest poetry. The narrator is making art with this

language. This Hebrew poetry is called “acrostic”. Each line starts with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet and each chapter completes the alphabet. This isn’t just writing complaints, this sufferer put their experience into poetry with words that pull us in. The words are tragic—they invite us in body mind and soul to sit with the suffering. They give us permission and a vocabulary to be honest with God in our pain.

These sacred words from our ancestors are necessary for survival in a disorienting world--they are our path to healing. Because the sheer fact that these people are crying out to God is because they believe that their God is more than what they see.

Wiesel in his book “night” tells the story of his fellow prisoner Pinhas who lost his faith while at Auschwitz. when he was selected to go to the gas chamber, pinhas asked wiesel to say the Kaddish for him—the liturgical prayer used to mourn the death of a loved one. When Wiesel inquired why, since pinhas was no longer a believer, he responded: “you do not see the heart of the matter. Here and now, the only way to accuse God is by praising him”

Even a hymn of praise can be used in profound times of disorientation. Reminding God of God’s past compassion and imploring God to be that diety here and now when it is needed most.

Each of us in these pews are grieving some sort of loss. Whether it is a relationship, a loved one, a loss of control of our lives, a job, or even our expectations of one another. Each of us in these pews know those are in the midst of scary life transitions and adjustments, people who are left with no words after a friend’s fight with cancer nears the end, or no

words when they are feeling utterly empty, just going through the motions wondering when passion and joy for life will fill their heart.

In the midst of what leaves you asking why and how know this:

God even hears our most damning and hateful prayers. There is hope in a God who weeps with us and lets us lament.

There is hope in knowing that Our God did not completely abandon God's people then, and take heart in knowing our God will never abandoned us.

God brought to us the Holy words of Lamentations today. On this day challenging us in the midst of all of this disorientation in our lives, God gave us these words, so that we can reorient ourselves with God, reorient ourselves with world, with one another. Challenging us to take heart, 'fear not' because on a cold dark night our world turned upside down:

A baby was born not in a cradle, but in a manger. And that carpenter became a king.

This table shows us the blessed reversal of Christian faith. That there is room at this table for the once full now empty, for the desolate, for the busy, for the widowed, for the princesses, and the servants, for the orphaned, for the barren, for the grieving. And we can go from this place rejoicing in the midst of our laments that...

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end...they are new every morning ...Thanks be to God.