

“Pain and Protest”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 21, 2020

3rd Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 137

Rev. John Wahl

Lamentations 2:10-19

This morning, we turn to the second of five Old Testament books referred to collectively as *The Forgotten Books of the Bible*, each one read at an annual Jewish holiday festival. To lament is to call out to God in pain and protest through poem and prayer – to claim and proclaim our wounds and the woundedness of the world.

Today’s first reading, Psalm 137, concludes with one of the most jarring and horrible verses in all of scripture, with the image of children being thrown against rocks. How could anyone wish that upon someone else, we wonder? What grief and anger would it take for such a desire to enter into someone’s mind?

This Psalm is dated to the 6th century BC, when Jerusalem was overrun by the Babylonians who murdered, looted and destroyed the city, taking many of its residents into exile; to a time when this pain was fresh in the hearts and minds of the people. So, the vindictive anger of the final verse mirrors what many people profess: that punishment should fit the crime; that those who have deprived others of a future deserve no future themselves.¹

In situations of trauma, grief and anger are inevitable, and often inseparable. Maybe the worst possible response to monstrous evil is to feel nothing. What must be felt – by victims and on behalf of victims – is outrage.

The book of Lamentations comes from this same moment in Jewish history, it’s a reflection on the humiliation and anger of the people of Jerusalem following the destruction of the city by the Babylonians. It stands within the Bible for its unique form and function. It is comprised of five chapters; and includes the voices of five different members of the community. Today, we will hear from two of them: the Funeral Director, whose role is something like the master of ceremonies, narrating what can be heard and observed; and Daughter Zion – the personification of the city of Jerusalem: a devastated woman who bears the marks of trauma in her body, having been stripped and exposed before those who once admired her.

Each of the five chapters of Lamentations – in the original Hebrew – is written in a variation of an alphabetic acrostic, proceeding letter by letter through the alphabet: *alef*,

¹ J. Clinton McCann, Jr. *New Interpreters’ Bible Commentary*, vol. 4

beth, gimel... In English, this would be like writing a poem where the first line begins with A, and the last line with Z. Chapters one, two, four and five have 22 verses – the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet – and chapter 3 has 66, 22 times 3.

The significance of this acrostic poetry form is open to interpretation. Perhaps the pattern may be a way of expressing the totality of the trauma that has occurred: everything has been destroyed, from A to Z. Or, maybe, the alphabet gives some sense of structure to what would otherwise be an overwhelming sense of unbound grief.² The form ties together these various voices from all across a devastated community. They belong to each other, even if they do not always agree with each other about what has been experienced or why. Without any one of these voices, the whole would be incomplete.

What happened historically is that the Babylonians – long-time rivals of Israel – had laid siege against Jerusalem for 18 months before finally breaching its walls. The siege deprived the people of food and, by the end, there was widespread starvation. The Babylonians had broken down the walls, burned the city, and destroyed the temple before carrying many of the city's most prominent citizens into captivity. Lamentations is written from the perspective of those left in the wake of Jerusalem's destruction.

And yet, Robert Williamson says,

*For all the physical suffering, the community's theological trauma may have been just as significant. When the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem – the supposedly indestructible city – and destroyed its Temple, it called into question everything the people had believed. Either God was not as powerful as they had imagined, or God had abandoned them in their time of need. Their lives devastated, the people's theology could not address the trauma they had experienced.*³

How do we make space in our communities for those that are angry, whether that anger is pointed at God, or at humanity? How do we respect the value of pain and protest for those who have experienced trauma; whether individually or as a community?

In response to the destruction of Jerusalem, some turned to a theology – a worldview – found in the book of Deuteronomy, which claimed that God rewards those who are obedient and punishes those who are not. On the positive side, this thinking of reward/punishment allows people to feel they are in control of what happens to them; if you want a positive outcome, all you need to do is follow Gods' commands. On the other hand, a theology of reward and punishment insists those who are suffering must admit

² Robert Williamson, Jr. *The Forgotten Books of the Bible*.

³ *Ibid.*

their wrongdoing and repent, even if they have not done anything wrong. This belief that people get what they deserve means that victims are sometimes blamed and shamed.

Lamentations presents multiple – and sometimes changing, sometimes competing – perspectives in the voices of these five different characters. Each voice has its own perspective on the community’s devastation; some trying to impose order to a chaotic situation. In the first chapter, the Funeral Singer – the poem’s narrator – offers an initial account of the city’s fall and aftermath, reporting it in a way that you might hear on the evening news: from a safe distance but with explicit images of destruction and shame.⁴

His voice is followed by that of Daughter Zion, who offers an angry and raw lament for the destruction that has happened to her people. She calls for vindication against her enemies. As she remembers those who celebrated her destruction, she wishes for their destruction – she wants them to suffer just like she suffers.

But, despite her intense suffering, Daughter Zion isn’t crying out for help or healing. Rather, she is seeking someone to take notice of her – just to look at her; to find someone that will acknowledge her pain.

When, in today’s passage, the Funeral Singer speaks again, he now refers to Daughter Zion as “the daughter of my people.” Having listened to her words, he can no longer maintain a dispassionate distance, untouched by suffering. Turning to speak directly to her, he asks:

How can I comfort you, young woman Daughter Zion? Your hurt is as vast as the sea. Who can heal you? (2:13)

This is the moment that the Funeral Singer becomes Daughter Zion’s witness. He comforts her – not by healing her or pacifying her or telling her to forgive her attackers – but by acknowledging that she has experienced unfathomable hurt, as vast as the sea.

In this way, the Funeral Singer may serve as something of a model for those of us who wish to be present for people who have experienced devastation: whether personal trauma or some shared destruction. We can let their suffering affect us – because we belong to each other – and we can weep on their behalf. We can believe them. We, too, can be a witness.

The Funeral Singer encourages daughter Zion to continue in her angry protest against God; not trying to silence her or call on her to submit quietly. He doesn’t push her toward easy forgiveness. Rather, he yields the floor, encouraging her to protest all the more:

⁴ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, Jr. *Bibleworm Podcast*

Pour out your heart before my Lord like water. Lift your hands up to him for the life of your children – the ones who are fainting from hunger on every street corner.
(2:19)

Far from quieting her angry protest, the Funeral Singer joins his voice with hers. She has been the victim of unimaginable and insufferable pain. Her desire, therefore, is to be noticed: to be seen and heard. Her pain has fueled her desire to protest; to lament. And so, like so many other people who have experienced personal or community trauma in all ages – and so visibly in our own time – she has taken to the streets with her protestations. For her, it was the destruction of her city and her people being ravaged by hunger and bondage. Today, it is people of color being brutally killed by police with knees on necks and shots in the back. It is systems and symbols of racial injustice with statues and monuments standing as reminders of trauma and pain.

Pain and protest inevitably belong together. Feeling nothing is worse than outrage; and so, for those who have not experienced trauma directly, the transformation of the Funeral Singer serves as a reminder that we, too, can be witnesses to the suffering of others by listening to their lament and allowing ourselves to be moved and changed by their experience. By taking notice of the pain of Daughter Zion, he marches with her in the streets, empathizing with her trauma, encouraging her to speak out even more loudly. This is the power of witness: seeing the suffering of others, even if there is nothing we can do fix it.

In this way, Lamentations reminds us that we all belong together; that we all belong to each other – that one person’s suffering is all of our suffering. “It reminds us,” again quoting Robert Williamson, “that our stories are knit together in a great, acrostic tapestry of faith that hold our pain and sorrow, that gives us words to name it, and will not allow us to forget.”⁵

For contemporary readers, Lamentations insists that we, too, all belong together: black, white and brown, urban and rural, young and old, rich and poor, just and unjust. Those who have experienced trauma and those who stand alongside them are united in community and by our common humanity – even if not by our theological conformity. We will not always agree; but we can always take notice, to share the pain of others, and give witness.

We live in a world that is polarized in many ways; in an age when tensions are high and pain is raw. In the presence of so much trauma – personally and communally – the protests are bound to continue. Next week, we will be looking at different voices in the book of Lamentations, but the ones presented today – Daughter Zion in her pain, and

⁵ *Forgotten Books of the Bible*

the Funeral Singer with his empathic witness – can give us a roadmap for how to hear – and respond – to the pain and protest of lament. Amen.