

# “The Voices of the Community”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – June 28, 2020*

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Lamentations 3:19-26

Rev. John Wahl

Lamentations 5:1-3, 15-22

As we continue our journey through these five lesser-known scriptures of the Old Testament – *The Forgotten Books of the Bible* – today, we spend a second week with the book of Lamentations. A lament is a cry or prayer of pain; of the kind of suffering that comes from trauma which is real. It asks those listening to take notice. Its images can be vivid and raw; painful to read or listen to.

Lamentations is a collection of five different voices lamenting the pain and suffering surrounding the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. The holy city and its Temple were utterly destroyed, some of its residents left wailing and starving in the streets while others were carried off as prisoners to a different land.

In the first two chapters, we heard from two distinct voices: first, the Funeral Director; a narrator who reports what he sees colorfully but dispassionately and, second, Daughter Zion: a woman who personifies the horrific suffering of the widows and orphans left behind after war’s destruction; traumatized and angry at God for allowing or even causing such devastation.

Daughter Zion cries out in protest, asking for her pain to be noticed. After hearing her cries of lament, the Funeral Singer undergoes an amazing transformation: he notices her and though he did not experience her trauma, he becomes her witness, encouraging her to cry out even more loudly. He does not try to fix or wash away Daughter Zion’s pain – that is not what she was asking to happen – but can now empathize with her suffering.

In chapter three, the Funeral Singer and Daughter Zion are missing and are replaced by an un-named male – a soldier or protector of some sort – called the Strong Man. He presents the testimony of another individual survivor of the catastrophe and offers a different viewpoint from that of both previous voices. Like daughter Zion, the Strong Man has suffered trauma. Initially, he seems close to giving up and losing hope. Even the memory of his suffering he describes as bitterness and poison; his

words remind us of the need for all trauma victims to psychologically process their pain.

But despite all that he has experienced, the Strong Man has not lost hope; he is willing to wait for God. His arrival at this place of hope is through a convoluted journey, a tortured struggle. And yet, because he does have hope, he believes that his suffering will one day come to an end; that he can look forward to a new day.<sup>1</sup>

We skip over chapter four, where we hear the voice of another narrator, sometimes called The Scoffer, because he fails to take seriously these voices of trauma, staying above the fray. His voice does not offer real witness to their pain, wanting instead to explain it away.

In chapter five, yet another voice arrives, but this is not an individual, but the communal “we.” Maybe this voice represents the book’s imagined audience, the community of survivors who have stood by while the individual speakers among them testify to the pain of it all. This final petition is a request for restoration; a summation of the pain of the people and the city; a final demand that God take notice of them.

Having already heard the voices of Daughter Zion and the Strong Man, we might expect the Voice of the Community to decide between them: to choose between hope and angry protest; to decide singularly how the community will handle the devastation they have experienced.<sup>2</sup>

It is natural that – in times of personal or communal trauma – we like to have a singular narrative; a coherent understanding. It is more complicated to hold onto multiple perspectives; to allow for different descriptions and resolutions to the same experiences.

Last week, we talked a little about theologies – the way we believe that God interacts with the world; specifically, we looked at the reward/punishment theology that is prevalent in much of the Old Testament. This is the belief that God’s response is based on our actions; that when we do good, we get rewarded; but when we do wrong, punishment follows. This theology can be a powerful motivator; but in the face of trauma – which is sometimes indiscriminate or undeserved – it is difficult to reckon suffering as God’s punishment. If God is faithful and just, why would such trauma exist?

The Voice of the Community deftly allows both Daughter Zion and the Strong Man to have their experiences of suffering fully expressed, without forcing a choice

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen O’Conner, *New Interpreters’ Bible Commentary*, vol. 6

<sup>2</sup> Robert Williamson, Jr., *The Forgotten Books of the Bible*

between differing perspectives. It chooses to preserve the community rather than force theological conformity.

In verse 19, they address the Lord directly, describing God as enthroned forever, from one generation to the next. To the Strong Man, this thought would be assuring; an admission that God is present in control; that it is good to wait in hope for God to act. But to Daughter Zion, God might be enthroned but if the city of Jerusalem and its Temple have been destroyed, God is not present but absent; the people are hurting and alone. Sitting on the throne might be seen as an abdication of responsibility to get up and do something.

For someone who is in the midst of – or suffering in the aftermath of – trauma, there is no right or wrong perspective; a lament of pain can authentically express either hope or despair. An individual or a community that has been through traumatic suffering might react either way, or – as is the case with the Strong Man – might toggle back and forth between a desired to be noticed and a determination to wait for God to intervene.<sup>3</sup>

I would think that most of us have been swinging back and forth between these polarities of hope and despair as we have experienced and witnessed the far-ranging events of the past few months. Now, as 2020 comes to its mid-point, we can't be sure whether things are getting better or worse; if we are heading in the right direction or on the cusp of even more trauma and unrest. It is important for us to process these experiences; to allow the space and time necessary to gain perspective on what we have been going through. But it is important as well to understand that different people are in different places along this spectrum of lament. Differing perspectives do not make the trauma any less real; we can and must hold on to multiple theologies in order to be a community that both suffers and tries to make sense of that pain together.

The Voice of the Community, in this final chapter of Lamentations, affirms and includes both Daughter Zion and the Strong Man without deciding between them. It embraces theological ambiguity in order to hold the community – which has endured so much – together.

In order to do this, the chapter and the book end not with a final answer but a question to continue pondering. For while God might choose to come down from the throne and restore the city and people of Jerusalem, the Voice of the Community

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<sup>3</sup> Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, Jr., *Bibleworm Podcast*

acknowledges that things might not go back to normal. It allows space for not knowing:

*In the face of dehumanizing and radical suffering, there are no ready answers, no facile theological solutions – only partially adequate ones. In the midst of pain, anger and weeping, Lamentations forms a shelter; a sacred space where suffering is seen and acknowledged.*<sup>4</sup>

This may be the true measure of a community's diversity – not only embracing people who look different, or come from different places, but truly listening to and honoring diverse individual stories. The Voice of the Community in Lamentations allows multiple narratives of suffering to coexist: both trauma that results in anger and trauma that leads to hope.

Scott Williamson puts it this way:

*In all our diversity – of experience, of theology – Lamentations reminds us that we can give each other the space to speak, the space to protest; without losing our common voice and without forgetting our common humanity.*<sup>5</sup>

Friends, in a world that seeks to polarize us; asking us to choose and to exclude some of our neighbors, this largely forgotten book of the bible, Lamentations, takes a painful path to try to teach us that we need one another in order to be the people God intends us to be; that we need to notice and listen to each other in order to maintain our humanity. As the first half of this year reminds us, we are only as healthy and strong as the bonds that link us together; trauma and suffering do not happen in isolation. There must be space in each person and every community for lament and hope to coexist. In these days, we must be creators and residents of that sacred space. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Kathleen O'Conner, *New Interpreters' Bible Commentary*, vol. 6

<sup>5</sup> Robert Williamson, Jr., *The Forgotten Books of the Bible*