

Before I read our text from Lamentations this morning, I want to begin by saying that this sermon is about 6 months in the making. When I was prepping for the sermon back in early October, one of the lectionary text options was verses out of Lamentations Ch.1 and Ch. 3. At that point I didn't know much about Lamentations, other than knowing it was a book full of its namesake: lament, mourning, and pain expressed by the Israelites after the fall of Jerusalem. I searched my memory bank for times I had heard sermons or reflections or devotions built around Lamentations, and really couldn't find any. I mean, raise your hand if you can remember a sermon built around Lamentations? Despite that, I was intrigued by the verses and the difficult nature of them, and I felt a strong pull to do a sermon around them....but I kind of chickened out and went with a text far more in the comfort of my wheelhouse.

But if you've ever tried to play "hide and seek" with God, or tried to dodge something God was laying on your heart no matter how difficult, you know that you're not going to win that game. So inevitably, what started happening? Lamentations started popping up everywhere for me: a devotion I heard in late Oct., the conference that I went to in early November, the preparation for the Experience Sunday in December, and then as I began to read a book I picked up at the conference that was recommended by a friend. All of them were built around or explored the book of Lamentations or the concept of what it means to lament as a community of faith.

It was no surprise then when Peter asked about my availability to preach on Sunday, March 5th that I turned in my calendar book to find that I had already signed up to teaching the Bible 101 class today, a class where we've been working our way through the Old Testament. And what two books are we scheduled to talk about in that class today? Jeremiah and, you guessed it, Lamentations.

Alright, cool God. Memo received.

As it became clear that Lamentations was to be my text, it was no longer a "well...I don't know" type hemming and hawing over if I felt like it was the right topic, but instead a willingness to dive in. See, over the past 6 months Lamentations has grown on me mightily, and might be challenging for a spot in my top 3 favorite books of the Bible. Some of the surprised looks I just received from you all in hearing that have mirrored the responses I've received from friends and colleagues that are Pastors: everything from "wait, really?" to "you're nuts" have been said in response to me saying I'm enthralled by Lamentations.

Part of the connection is undoubtedly thinking about the youth of Seattle and what I've mentioned previously about them really desiring to read and discuss the portions of the Bible that deal with real life emotions including pain and loss, and part of it is certainly that I don't mind entering into the "theologically uncomfortable" and having my boat rocked. Lamentations does both: it challenges; it pours out everything from the messy to the downright brutal; and it puts our comfort levels to the test. Lamentations has made me squirm over the last 6 months, and that's something I believe the Western Church can use more of – not a rocking the boat just for the sake of rocking the boat, but a getting us out of our comfort zones in order to bring about growth. We need to explore those spaces more often.

So if the reading of Lamentations Ch. 2 makes us squirm a little bit today, I'd say that's ok. Lean into that. I'm going to read the whole chapter because it contains examples of multiple ideas that I want to highlight, and hopefully through our time together God will speak in and through my words and our thoughts to bring about a deeper understanding of and connection to the concept of lament and the role it plays in faith.

Listen to and for the pronouns, the voices, and the people, titles, and places that are named.

-----Lamentations 2:1-22-----

Nobody got up and left—that’s a good sign. That’s a hard text, and I intentionally wanted us to not skip over some of the harsher language or images, but to hear the entirety of what the writer is portraying.

Hearing a text like that, the natural inclination might be to say, “I understand why his pastor friends think he’s nuts.” The second inclination would be to ask the question, “Why? Why choose that for a sermon?” or even more broadly “If this is what Lamentations is, why choose Lamentations at all?” There’s a 3 part answer to that question:

1) As a part of Scripture, there’s something for us here—some Good News contained within Lamentations and the practice of lament—that God calls us to explore despite the uncomfortable nature.

2) I would offer that we cannot experience the fullness of the season of Lent without understanding the practice of lament. We cannot understand the call to remember our humanity on Ash Wednesday, the suffering of Good Friday, or the promise of deliverance on Easter without being connected to Lamentations and the emotion expressed there. Skipping ahead to the joy of Sunday means bypassing all of the lament that takes place on the road to Easter. We are undoubtedly called to be a people of resurrection, but we pursue an incomplete picture of resurrection if we don’t process and understand the lament that leads us there.

3) The third answer to the question of “Why?” comes back to the book that I picked up at the conference in November. It is entitled “Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice In Troubled Times” by Dr. Soong-Chan Rah, and in it Dr. Rah argues that one of the major issues facing the Western Church is that we have lost our ability to lament together as a community. Throughout Scripture we see people wailing, crying out to God, putting on sackcloth, and covering their heads with ashes or dust all as signs of deep anguish and turmoil (perhaps you heard those actions in v. 10 this morning?). These moments of lament take place in response to the passing down of God’s judgment, at the sight of injustice, or in moments of mourning or grief. The origins of these actions weren’t to bring attention to the individual, but to show a deep connection to their individual and communal faith, to their community, and to their pursuit of right relationship with God. Whenever something caused pain or distress to these areas of connection, the natural inclination was to respond with lament—with the anguish that comes from a loss of connection.

Dr. Rah goes on to express that the Western Church has left behind lament in part because of the obvious - it makes us uncomfortable. More importantly though, lament makes us uncomfortable because it stands in opposition to one of the major values of Western culture: the desire to show strength, to be victorious, to pull ourselves up by the bootstraps when things aren’t going well and to change our fortunes through hard work and ingenuity. Dr. Rah suggests that our ability to lament has too often been replaced by the pursuit of triumphalism—the pursuit of being, or at least presenting as successful and victorious. These two ideas usually stand at odds—being victorious AND willing to mourn often don’t go hand in hand, and

we see the results play out even in the example I just named of fast forwarding through Lent. To skip straight to the joy of Easter is a pursuit of victory—triumph—and a looking past lament.

For Dr. Rah however, being a people that understands the role of lament in our faith isn't a sign of weakness *or* a relinquishing the victory that we have in Christ. Instead, pursuing lament gives us a clearer vision of how that victory is achieved, it strengthens our connection and bond as a community, and it reinforces in us a deeper sense of our dependency on God. In short, lament isn't a source of weakness, but instead serves as a visible sign of the strength of the faith held by a community of believers. It reveals the deeply held connections that exist between us. Lament isn't a season we should occasionally go through only when things are at rock bottom, but should be a foundational component of our faith experience as individuals and a community because of how deeply we feel for each other, for our community, and for the world. We're human—we feel deeply if we allow ourselves to. And Lord knows there's a lot to feel out there.

There's a lot to unpack there, and it requires a recalibration of our thinking about what success and a vibrant faith community looks like. The central question that I want us to launch from this morning though, especially as it pertains to the front of our bulletin and our pursuit of a Sacred Lent, an anointed time leading up to Easter, is this: do we believe that times of lament are sacred? Do we hold that times of grief, mourning, or crying out to God on behalf of ourselves or others are worthy of the title of "anointed"? Our view of "anointed" in Scripture is usually connected to the most sacred rituals or events—those times where God was borderline touching and setting aside an individual or a group for a consecrated purpose. Can we hold that the words being poured out in Lamentations, the sweating of blood in the Garden in Luke 22, the anguish and despair felt by those closest to Jesus, and our own times of mourning over injustice or pain or loss between each other or out in the world can carry the same prestige?

Not to put too fine a point on it, but the answer to that question I would like to suggest this morning is: "absolutely yes." As uncomfortable as it might make us, and as disorienting as it might be to think of lament as a core component of our faith, lament is an anointed time not just because it places us in close proximity to the presence of God, but also because it teaches us crucial lessons about how we are to connect as a community of faith both inside these walls and out in the world.

There are 3 such lessons I'd like to explore this morning:

1. Lament reveals equality.
2. Lament requires humility.
3. Lament helps us pursue the connection to our Covenant relationship with God.

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To begin unpacking those lessons, let's first spend a moment with the context of Lamentations. Lamentations was written during one of the lowest points in the history of Israel. The Promised Land given to Israel by God had been overrun by neighboring Babylon, and the mighty city of Jerusalem had been toppled and laid in ruin.

This wasn't just a military defeat however, this was an attempt to tear Israel and Jerusalem and all of the cultural, political and social structures down so thoroughly that there was nothing left. In addition to the destruction, a large swath of the leadership of Jewish society was also taken into exile so that there would be nobody left with the knowledge of how to rebuild anything structurally, socially, politically, or religiously. Because Israel had become so wicked and so separated from the Covenant relationship with God established through their ancestors, God's judgment had been poured out through the instrument of the Babylonians, and Jerusalem and everything it represented was reduced to rubble.

Now this wasn't a sudden and quick judgment by God – Israel was given plenty of chances to repent and to turn back to the Covenant relationship. In this particular era God had sent the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, whose task was to pass on to the people God's direct and unmistakable decree: it's now or never; turn back or here's exactly what's going to happen. For years the people, the leadership, and the false prophets didn't listen, and so in 586BCE Jerusalem fell...the prophecy of Isaiah and Jeremiah was fulfilled...God's judgment came to pass.

Perhaps the words from our text today and the harshness with which they hit our ears make a little more sense now. Verses like verse 2 "Without pity the Lord has swallowed up all the dwellings of Jacob", v5 "The Lord is like an enemy", and v7 "The Lord has rejected his altar and abandoned his sanctuary" are concepts that we don't sit with or hear very often. In this moment in time however, they rang true for both the people left in Jerusalem and the author of Lamentations (most likely the prophet Jeremiah) who watched the destruction and its aftermath first-hand, and who recorded in real time the weeping and lament of a broken people around him. God had pulled no punches and had fulfilled everything spoken through Isaiah and Jeremiah when Israel failed to turn back to right relationship. The Covenant was so broken that God was left with no choice but to hold the people accountable—to show them the completeness of God's power, to reveal the dependency of the people on God's provision, and to show forth the righteous nature of God's Covenant relationship.

Still nobody has gotten up and left—still doing alright then.

So let's turn back to Lamentations 2, using the words and descriptions of the author to highlight the three lessons of Lamentations revealed to Israel in this circumstance, and that echoes out to us today.

The first lesson is that lament fosters equality. Within Chapter 2 we see an identification of just about every level of Jewish society and class named: "princes" v2; "king and priest" v6; "prophets" v9; "elders" "young women" v10; "children and infants" v11; "mothers" v12; "young and old, young men and maidens" v21. If we expand out into the rest of Lamentations, the author also does an interesting thing when naming the lament of the people by varying the voices used. In Chapter 1 the lament is coming from a personified Jerusalem, portrayed as a "widow" and a "former queen" who now weeps bitterly for what she once was and has now become. In Chapter 3 the author switches almost entirely to a 1<sup>st</sup> person voice and the use of the "I/me/my" pronouns to express his personal connection to and affliction over what's happened. In Chapter 2 we see 3<sup>rd</sup> person "he/she/they/them" and 1<sup>st</sup> person voices intermixed.

This naming of groups and use of different voices is important because it shows that the destruction of Jerusalem touched every level, every corner, every class, and every age of resident equally. Every voice from a personified voice of the once majestic city, to the person on the street, to the voice of the author himself all call out the same experience. All were reduced to rubble, all were reduced to wandering the

streets searching for food, all were experiencing the same feeling of loss all around them. All were wailing and lamenting.

Having a unified voice and experience is crucial in the formation of a faith community. As soon as there's room for "us" and "them" the very foundation on which the rest of the community is to be built will be laden with cracks. For God's judgment and call to Israel to return to Covenant relationship to succeed, every person would need to feel that judgment equally: young and old, rich and poor, ruler and servant. Finding themselves laying "together in the dust of the streets" (v21) is an immensely powerful...even if uncomfortable...experience from which to start. There's a very real power in shared experience.

For us today, the call to unity within lament thankfully doesn't need to begin in the devastation of God's judgment, but as people of faith we do need to wrestle with our call to bear witness to the equality of our humanity and to the call to bear the burdens of others in an on-going and consistent fashion. In "Prophetic Lament" Dr. Rah says that to pursue true justice, "justice must shift from the 3<sup>rd</sup> person to the 1<sup>st</sup> person, from the abstract to the personal." Our faith, just like the pursuit of justice, requires us to see beyond ourselves and to break down the "us" and "them"; to be willing to meet and sit with our neighbors in the dust and the ash of the street if that's where they are; to be willing to enter into the experience of our neighbors in such a way that we are willing to feel what they feel—whether happy or sad, heavy burdened or joyful. Lament—the practice of taking up each others burdens and pouring out our own—is built around the concept of equality & the realization that we are in desperate need of each other because of the trials of our shared humanity.

The second lesson is that lament requires humility. I would guess that at this point we can start to see this lesson playing out in Lamentations. Everything had been torn down and undone, and everything that the people of Israel thought they knew was turned on its head. It's fascinating that the author uses so many specific references to what had been destroyed in Chapter 2: "all the dwellings of Jacob" v2; "every horn of Israel" v3; "the tent of Daughter Zion" v4; "palaces" v5; "the place of meeting" and "feasts and festivals" v6; God "rejected his altar and abandoned his sanctuary" v7; "the wall around Zion" v8; and "the gates and bars" v9. All of this was intentional on the author's part because it shows that every aspect of Jerusalem in which the people had found their identity, their security, and their value was laid to waste. Every social, government, and religious symbol and physical structure in which they found their meaning and purpose as a Holy City and place of honor had been rejected by God. In this moment they were faced with a humbling existence and an identity crisis of the highest order: if their identity was no longer as God's Holy City, and the undisputed people of God that was surrounded by God's protection...who were they? If they couldn't figure out a path forward, how would they survive?

If we're honest, the Western Church is dealing with a question of identity right now that shares some similarities. Numbers have largely been declining across the board for decades, churches are closing, and we find ourselves caught in the tension of what we used to be, what we are, and what we want to be. Finding solutions to what has ailed us for decades will be difficult, especially if what Dr. Rah suggests about the Western Church being driven by a triumphalistic mentality rings true. If the health assessments of our faith communities are connected only to the Western ideals of success and worth, then finding a solution to our declining memberships will be difficult... because the solution won't be found in simply getting more

people in the doors—if we're not careful, that's just more triumphalism. What ails us is deeper: its origins are in the places where we mistakenly pursue identities based on structures, numbers, or programs instead of right and deep relationship with God and each other. To break free from that will require lament on our part – lament over what was for sure, but also a lament that leads to the recognition that what we have built ourselves up as may not be what God wants us to be. That our self-perceived value may not be the most valuable thing to God—can we dare to dream that God has something better in mind?

This is what the Israelites were faced with in Lamentations—and if you're still with me this is where the turn starts. The Israelites for so long had been God's people, they had been delivered and successful and victorious for so long, and now that was gone. Deeper still, not only were the people dealing with a loss of identity and value, because of how the exile into Babylon of certain groups happened, there also was a loss of leadership on how to fix any of it—how to begin to move forward—what to do next? We see the people lamenting what was, spending time naming the pain of loss of what they knew and had been. But then we also begin to see the all-important transition as they realized that there was nothing they could physically or strategically do to change their circumstances. Instead of just “doing anything” for the sake of trying to move forward, the people of Israel had to be real enough to admit that *THEY* weren't going to be able to fix the situation on their own. And when they hit the point of realizing that it was beyond their power and abilities, their lament begins to change from solely mourning over what was to calling out to God for what would be. We see the author begin to make that turn in Lamentations 3:19-26:

- <sup>19</sup> I remember my affliction and my wandering,  
the bitterness and the gall.
- <sup>20</sup> I well remember them,  
and my soul is downcast within me.
- <sup>21</sup> Yet this I call to mind  
and therefore I have hope:
- <sup>22</sup> Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,  
for his compassions never fail.
- <sup>23</sup> They are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.
- <sup>24</sup> I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion;  
therefore I will wait for him."
- <sup>25</sup> The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him,  
to the one who seeks him;
- <sup>26</sup> it is good to wait quietly  
for the salvation of the LORD.

What the people were left with was the realization of their need for God to drive the change of their circumstance. They were left with lament, but lament doesn't have to begin and end with what was lost. Within lament, there's a connection to and a crying out for God's righteousness and faithfulness. Lament isn't reducing ourselves to doing nothing. Instead it's a call to active intercession and dynamic waiting & searching for how God is going to lead into what's next; it's a call to reengage in relationship that were broken.

Our third lesson this morning is just that: that lament helps us pursue our connection to the Covenant relationship with God. For the Israelites, this judgment came because they had fallen away from Covenant relationship and no amount of calling them back had produced results. The words of Isaiah and Jeremiah detailed out to Israel exactly what would happen if they didn't repent, but it didn't end there. Isaiah and Jeremiah are also full of prophecies of what would happen next, and how God alone would redeem on the other side. So much of the prophetic words used in the Gospels to explain and identify Jesus—the source of Israel's redemption -- come from Isaiah and Jeremiah and are intermixed with the naming of the destruction about to happen. In the inner-most moments of their grief and lament, this is what Israel clung to: if God had been faithful and just to uphold the part of the Covenant where they were held accountable, God would also be faithful and just to uphold the promised redemption on the other side. That requires a humility and a waiting, though, and we hear it in the words I just read from 3:26 – “it is good to wait quietly on the salvation of the Lord.” The book of Lamentations doesn't end with rebuilding—it ends still in lament, & waiting. But it's a waiting in hope for salvation from the one named as the source of Israel's redemption in Isaiah & Jeremiah.

There is probably no more famous passage from Isaiah and Jeremiah than the description of the “Suffering Servant” in Isaiah 52 and elsewhere. This figure stood as the great hope for Israel in the midst of their grief, and becomes the description of Christ's purpose that we hold in Lent and Easter: Isaiah 52:5 says “for he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” Because their world had been turned upside down, because of the equality with which they felt God's judgment and the humility it brought about, Israel's sole choice was to place their hope in God's righteous Covenant that had taken them through judgment and would one day lead them into new and redeemed relationship through the actions of the Suffering Servant.

That journey was heavy for them, and the call to journey through Lent and to take up lament is no small task for us because it will certainly carry difficulties and weight. Our world is full of brokenness, and while I am not comparing Israel's situation in Lamentations to be the same as the brokenness in our world – I do not believe that war, natural disaster, or sickness and disease is in any way a handing down of God's judgment in our current day (let me make that clear) -- I do believe that Israel's situation, the brokenness of our world, and the need for something new to happen in the Western Church all have origins in the weakening of relationship between each other and with God.

The season of Lent calls us back to the recognition of our need for that relationship; Christ's example of equality, humility, and leaning on God's will in all things even unto death reminds us of that; lament reminds us of that. Pursuing lament as an integral part of our faith community isn't a call to despair – it's a call to feel the strains on the Covenant connections we all are called to hold, and then to call out to God in hope of them being fixed for the betterment of ourselves, our communities, and the world. Lament, and the season of Lent isn't a sad or depressing season of weakness, but a necessary sign of the strength of the bond that exists between ourselves, our God, and our Savior who is willing to travel even the hardest of roads in order to make even the most broken of things new.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

