

Lamentations 3:13-26
October 3, 2010

South Plains

A Place For Sorrow

Some years ago I received a strange request from an elder in the church. A member of the church had died and this elder was asking me to officiate at a memorial service. It was a strange request because the member had died after living for many years in Europe. Her family was gone from our community. Few current church members would remember her. It became stranger yet when I learned that the elder making these arrangements would be out of town and not attending the memorial. But, this was one of my favorite elders, so I agreed to hold the memorial service in the church for a handful of people. We needed to remember the deceased before God, not only because she had once been an important part of our church family, but also because we needed some public expression of grief. The book of Lamentations is the public expression of grief for the destruction of Jerusalem.

The Babylonian victory had been cruel and complete and totally lacking in compassion. [King Zedekiah had been made to witness the execution of his sons. With that bloody scene in front of him, his eyes were gouged out. The last thing he remembered seeing for the rest of his life was the death of his sons.] One commentator has called Lamentations a funeral service for the city. The value of a public lament or funeral,

especially a poetic lament, is that it can give the rest of us words and images appropriate for our sorrow. So, I'd like to look at the third chapter of Lamentations as a resource for funerals and grieving.

I have been honored to officiate at funerals for faithful Christians, and at funerals for persons without any noticeable faith at all, and at funerals for all sorts of people in between. My problem with a funeral for a non believer is the lack of any adequate resolution for the real grief and mourning of those who loved the deceased. Whether we gather at the graveside or in the funeral home or in the church to say our goodbyes, we want to acknowledge the loss. But we want more than just sadness. We want and need hope. Lamentations can point us to hope. But, first we need to grieve. The book of Lamentations and other biblical passages help us to grieve. That's why psalms that face the cold, hard fact of the shadow of the valley of death are helpful. They give us permission to cry.

Our days **are** like grass,
they flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more. (Ps 103:15-16)
There's no use pretending otherwise.

The poet in Lamentations 3 knows the taste of defeat too well. And, he is not afraid to say that it the Lord God himself who failed to save Jerusalem.

I have become the laughingstock....
He (that is the Lord) has made my teeth grind on

gravel...

I have forgotten what happiness is....

That's a pretty good description of real grief.

A young man who had been very helpful to me personally was killed in a freak automobile accident on Afton Mountain. At the funeral, the church was decorated with balloons and ribbons. But, there was no attempt to conceal the tragedy of his death, a good life cut short, a family bereft. We needed both the bitter and the sweet because the sweet hope of resurrection would have been meaningless without the reality of his dying. That's the first lesson Lamentations can teach us about grief: it's OK to cry. It's good to grieve.

Notice, secondly, that the poet blames God. Some of us have the misconception that God cannot stand criticism. We have a second grade Sunday School idea of our heavenly Father that says we always must speak respectfully in the presence of God and that under no circumstances may we be angry with God. Worst of all, some of us believe it's dangerous to complain to God about the unfairness of our life, the pain we feel, the doubts of our faith, and the losses we endure. But, if God did not want to hear negative prayers, much of the Bible would be lost. Moses and Abraham argued with God. Laments or complaints to the Lord, make up the largest group of the psalms. God can take our whining and even accept our putting the blame on God. We don't have to stay in that whining mode, but the testimony of

the Bible is that God will hear our laments and answer them.

Chapter three of Lamentations is 66 verses long. It's written in Hebrew as an acrostic poem with each stanza highlighting a single letter of the Hebrew alphabet. What this means is that the expression of grief is controlled. We would say it covers the subject from A to Z. Not until verse 21 does the poet mention hope. And, hope, of course is the final lesson Lamentations would impress on us.

"This I call to mind," says the poet, "and therefore I have hope (3:21)." The rest of our reading spells out the meaning of "this:"

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." (3:22-24)

Last week we sang the old hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," a robust affirmation of the dependability of God's care and love. It had never occurred to me that those words come from the book of Lamentations, a response to national tragedy and incalculable personal losses in every Hebrew family. In a time of stress, the muscle of faith grows to meet the challenge. There are two ways we typically deal with loss: with denial or with faith. Denial may take the form of depression or telling

funny stories to cover our grief. Faith can acknowledge pain and believe the future holds more than hurt, more than disappointment and bitterness.

That hope looks backward at God's faithfulness in the past, and looks forward with confidence in blessing to come. Hopeful faith sees the big picture. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper we are looking back, remembering the Lord's death 'til he comes again. We are also looking forward to the day when people will come from east and west and north and south to sit at table in the kingdom of God. There's no point denying the tragedy of the crucifixion or the tragedy of our sinfulness. But, that's not the whole picture. Christ conquered death. We anticipate our resurrection. The solemnity of this sacrament is under girded by the celebration of God's faithfulness, past, present and future.

There's a place for sorrow, even bitter sorrow. And, there's a place for hope. There's no better place than right here at the Lord's Table.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Surely it is right and good to thank you, merciful God, Ruler of the nations, Redeemer of the world. You made each tribe, race and people in your image, creating us with distinct gifts and a common humanity. In Jesus Christ, you gather us around one table in one baptism. Because we belong to Christ, we are freed from sin and guilt and able to live with love in the power of your Holy Spirit.

Today we remember Christians around the world breaking the bread of life and sharing the cup of salvation. Fill with grace the churches in Grenada: St. Andrews, Samaritan and Belair. Strengthen your people in Europe, Asia, South America, and Africa. Make your face to shine upon Christians in North America so that we might make a clear witness to peoples who have never heard the gospel. We remember this day all those living far from your love and righteousness and working against the church. Be gracious to them for Jesus' sake.

Hear the cries of the sick, the grief-stricken and the confused. Bring healing to Bettie, Stan, and all in need.

Come Holy Spirit to this table and make the sharing of this bread and cup a way to confirm our faith, to guide our steps toward you, & to re-ignite love and hope. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we make our prayers as we have been taught to pray, Our Father....