

## Love of the Lord

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

Theologies of hope, psalms of praise, shouts of joy, and the cheery songs of "contemporary" worship are silenced or, at best, reduced to faint whispers in the face of the abject devastation and unthinkable suffering of sixth-century Judah. The nation was in trauma, stripped of all that gave them meaning—their holy city, the promised land, the temple, and the Davidic monarchy. Many of them had been killed; others were exiled. Lamentations was penned in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. Many people were killed in the eighteen-month siege of the city, and the lives of survivors were broken and shattered. The old men sit in dust and ashes, the young women walk around as though lost. Babies are crying and children are starving. What could be said in the wake of such destruction? How could it be said? Words seemed frail, gratuitous, or utterly useless. A brooding silence hovered over the poet. Lamentations gives voice to those who survived this devastating experience; it is survivors' literature. In more modern terms, post-traumatic stress syndrome is a common reality for those who lived through such horrendous time. The book is authored by a survivor remaining in the land, seeking to address such issues.

Our radical suffering resonates hauntingly with the Babylonian captivity of Judah. Our Southeastern Michigan cities have become rust belts; the global genocides in Europe and Cambodia; the destructive bombings in Oklahoma City and New York City, the massacres at Columbine High School, Virginia Tech, Fort Hood, Sandy Hook, and the mall in Kenya; the young mother killed for her erratic behavior in Washington on Thursday; local governments and schools going into bankruptcy; and our federal government shut-down without regard for those who need government services the most, beg for theological explanations and moral responses. In addition many of us suffer with our own personal tragedies of death, sickness, and disappointments. The captivity of a silent grief initially shackles us. **Donald W. Musser**

In chapter 1, the city of Jerusalem is personified as a woman, a mother, who is mourning the loss of her children, her honor, her citizens and her stature. She is referred to as daughter Zion, virgin daughter Judah, my (God's) people. Such a personalizing of the city draws us closely into the pain and suffering involved. A city may have fallen, but it is the people who have suffered so deeply. Remember each mother, each father, each son, each daughter, and what they went through! She is imaged as a lonely widow who has lost her husband and as a princess from the royal palace who has become a subordinate, subjected to others' whims and wishes; she weeps bitterly, with tears flowing down her cheeks, and she has no lovers left to comfort her, as all her friends and allies have become her enemies; she has been exiled, without a home of her own, enslaved to others, and has become a victim of every pursuer, unable to offer any resistance; she is deserted by former visitors and supporters, groaning, alone, and bitter; her children have been taken captive by enemies, who now prosper; her honor and strength have vanished, and her leaders have fled without resources. She remembers how good and precious things used to be!

According to our text Israel has suffered the consequences of its own sins, because God has created the moral order and sees to its workings. Jerusalem's call goes out to God to see how bad things have become and to wonder about the tragedy of it all. How much worse can it get? It got much worst! Enough, O Lord, enough! **Terence E. Fretheim**

C. S. Lewis wrote, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Many people understand pain to lead to anger. In our text there is honest anger that confronts the subjective sense that "the LORD has made [us] suffer for the multitude of [our] transgressions."

In truth, much of our pain is self-inflicted, either directly or indirectly. How often is that honest word spoken? Jeremiah spoke that truth to free God's people. Like diseases are caused by bacteria, viruses, and who-knows-what, but behaviors that increase those risks are often our fault. In the same way the Babylonians were aggressors, but Jerusalem and its leaders had not followed God. We know some of the ills that befall us are truly justified. Everyone laments in this text because everyone has a reason to. We all suffer. **H. Gray Southern**

One important way of coming to terms with such suffering is to recall as vividly as possible what the community has been through and to honor that memory. Images from Israel's slavery in Egypt pervade the book and help give depth to the depiction of distress. Lamentations enables us to relive those moments in all of their horrific detail. We will not forget! Together we will remember! So where do we go from here? We remember "Great is your faithfulness," sings this passage, affirming God's abiding goodness throughout all seasons of life. "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies ... are new every morning." Alone, these verses portray quiet, persistent confidence in God's mercy; how can the speaker proclaim hope and trust? **Martha L. Moore-Keish**

The story is told of Old Joe who had ruined his family, raped his daughters, and threatened to kill them. Now he was dying of cancer and scared. He deserved hell, and he knew it. He had lied to his new wife about everything. She could not understand why his daughters hated him so much and refused to comfort him in his last days, until the truth came out. Now she hated him too. She called the pastor to come and visit. Old Joe hinted at his wasted life, and wondered if it were at all possible that he might sneak into heaven with just a little cabin to live in—he did not need much, and he knew he did not deserve even that. (The pastor knew it too. "You s.o.b., I hope you rot in hell.")

Every Sunday morning the Joys and Concerns were lists are lopsided, concerns being the heavier half. My best friend just had a stroke. My sister-in-law has breast cancer. I lost my job. Soon I will lose my house. My nephew was killed in Iraq. My parents were both moved to hospice. In private conversation we hear of the divorce, the drug abuse, the crushing depression. I tell you, pastor, sometimes life is so hard. "The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me" (vv. 19-20).

But ... the joys on the list are followed by exclamation points—the great fall weather! The prayers of my friends in this church! The deer I saw on the way to church this morning! His cancer is in remission! My grandson is coming for a visit! I am thankful for all God's many blessings! "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD

never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (vv. 21-23).

Old Joe was still waiting for an answer, his eyes half closed, his breathing sporadic, his bones and veins prominent. "I'm sorry for the wrong in my life. I'll probably go to hell. Pastor, is there any way God will forgive me?" The pastor had to tell him something. He probably should say something about Jesus Christ, and repentance and forgiveness, and should he throw the cross in there, too?

"Well, Joe, life can be pretty mean, but ... 'But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope ...'" **Steve D. Miller**

World Communion Sunday reminds us that life is not always wonderful. Jesus suffered and died the day after he instituted the Lord's Supper. But we come to the table we also remember that the "love of the Lord is always available to us! We must "get real" and to examine our own lives to discover the ways we contribute to our own problems. It is God's love that changes us from victims to victors. Even in the midst of violence and introspection, we can discover the same truth as this poem: even when we are partially responsible for our brokenness, God is still faithful and merciful. **Beth Laneel Tanner**

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