

The Power of Being There
Lamentations
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This is lent season. For thousands of years in church history there has been this understanding of rhythm, of groove. The church calendar is used during seasons of the year where you go through different things so that everything is not a flat, monotonous line. Periods of celebration, periods of reflection, anticipation, coming together, going away in silence. One of the things we like to do in our church is move with those kinds of rhythms. Lent is basically the anticipation of resurrection. We are walking through these poems in preparation for the resurrection.

Before we get to celebration, we want to explore the other emotions and realities. This morning we are going to explore the ambiguity of these poems, these Lamentations. They have more to say to us than ever. Sermon one, we talked about things that need to be processed in a culture of denial. We explored the lost art of the lament. Today we are going to start in chapter one and make our way up to chapter three. Lamentations are five poems that probably come out of mid-500's B.C. when the city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. Most of the leadership, the core of the city were either killed, taken into slavery, or hauled away into exile. These poems come out of carnage, mass destruction. There are various characters in the poems that come and go.

First there is a narrator. Chapter one, verse one. The poet personifies the city as a she and he keeps stacking metaphor upon metaphor. He calls her a widow. When we suffer, we often resort to metaphor because literal language fails us. We don't say "they gossiped about this and they said this and this." Instead, we say, "I got kicked in the stomach." We don't say, he cheated on me when he did this or that." We might instead say, "he stabbed me in the back."

When you really hurt, you move from literal descriptions to metaphors. How many of you know what I'm talking about?

Lam 1:1

How deserted lies the city,
once so full of people!
How like a widow is she,
who once was great among the nations!
NIV

Verse two, he starts stacking metaphors.

Lam 1:2

Bitterly she weeps at night,
tears are upon her cheeks.
Among all her lovers
there is none to comfort her.

All her friends have betrayed her;
they have become her enemies.
NIV

In verse two, like a lover who can't find and embrace, gone looking and she's lonely.

Lam 1:5

5 Her foes have become her masters;
her enemies are at ease.
The LORD has brought her grief
because of her many sins.
Her children have gone into exile,
captive before the foe.

Like a mother whose children have been torn from her and hauled away in exile in a foreign land. For the next nine verses, he stacks the metaphors, it's this bad, it's this bad, it's this bad.

Then halfway through verse nine, the woman, the personification of the city, she speaks. Notice what she says:

Lam 1:9

"Look, O LORD, on my affliction,
for the enemy has triumphed."
NIV

That's all she says, "Look Lord!" Could somebody see what I'm going through here?

Then the narrator says,

Lam 1:11

11 All her people groan
as they search for bread;
they barter their treasures for food
to keep themselves alive.
"Look, O LORD, and consider,
for I am despised."
NIV

The narrator says, this is how bad it is. People can't get food. It's so bad that people are selling anything to get a meal.

Each time she speaks, she gets more open. It's like she's so wounded at the beginning, she can only get out a few lines. As she finds herself, almost in dialogue with the narrator, she opens up.

Lam 1:12

2 "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?

Look around and see.

Is any suffering like my suffering

that was inflicted on me,

that the LORD brought on me

in the day of his fierce anger?

NIV

How many of you have had this happen when you've gone through something difficult? You keep telling people about it. And you find somebody, finally, who will say to you, "Ah, that must be so hard!" Something within you is affirmed when someone really understands how awful it must be. How many have experienced this before?

We don't want someone to fix it. We just want someone to witness what we're going through and say, "I can't imagine how you do it!" So then the narrator and the woman go back and forth.

The narrator speaks in chapter two, "she had it coming. She shouldn't have done this, and this." And then, something terribly significant happens in verse 11. Up until now, the narrator is distant and detached.

Lam 2:11

11 My eyes fail from weeping,

I am in torment within,

my heart is poured out on the ground

because my people are destroyed,

because children and infants faint

in the streets of the city.

NIV

What happens to the narrator? How many of you have, on the news, seen the on the street reporter? He is wearing a windbreaker and it has the logo of the newscast. They, in their super speedy van have heard about some crisis, They rush to the scene, standing in front of the burning house, "The children are being led out of the house...the child is holding the arm of her favorite teddy bear.." Can you get a word with the mother, Yes." "I have the first interview with the mother." "Every possession that you own has been torched and destroyed. How do you feel right now?" There going to show this at 5 p.m. because at 6 it's history. "I'd like to interview the father right now." "We are carelessly exploiting the pain of your family for higher ratings. But how does it feel to have your wedding album up in smoke." How many of you have watched the reporter and are asking

yourself, “How is that reporter staying objective and calm about this?” And then they’ll have a conversation with the guy on the street and the person in the studio who’s air-brushed and perfect. They are saying “what is the nature of the burn victim’s injuries?” How many of you have thought, “This is absolutely insane.” I want all of your hands up right now or I am going to be very worried about the future of our country.

Here’s what’s happening in chapter 2. The narrator, up to this point, is simply reporting. She, the city, has fallen. They are selling whatever they have just to feed their kids. In verse eleven of chapter two, the narrator can no longer stand at a distance. We are thirty verses into the poem and the narrator melts. He gets caught up in her pain. The narrator is finally saying, “I can’t watch this and stand idly by.” He drops the microphone and goes over and stands by the family. Here’s what happens in chapter two. The narrator, he joins her grief.

So far we’ve only had two characters. Chapter three is the third poem. I want to show you how this is arranged in the Hebrew with the letters with the alphabet, the complexity of what’s going on here underneath the surface is absolutely staggering. In chapter three, we have a new character.

Lam 3:1

I am the man who has seen affliction
NIV

Now the word “one” or “man”. The word in the Hebrew language is the word gebber. It’s a strong, masculine word, and it is someone who is a defender of the weak-women and children. The word has military connotations. It actually occurs again in verse 27, 35 and 39.

The gebber shows up and he’s fresh from the scene of destruction. You almost picture a soldier who has escaped with the clothes on his back, and rushes in to say, “I’ve been right there at the center of the storm. I have seen the affliction. (that is used several times throughout his section) In the Hebrew language the verb to “see” is synonymous with experience. He just launches into a rant.

Lam 3:2-8

2 He has driven me away and made me walk
in darkness rather than light;
3 indeed, he has turned his hand against me
again and again, all day long.
4 He has made my skin and my flesh grow old
and has broken my bones.
5 He has besieged me and surrounded me
with bitterness and hardship.
6 He has made me dwell in darkness
like those long dead.

7 He has walled me in so I cannot escape;
he has weighed me down with chains.

8 Even when I call out or cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer.

NIV

How many of you are like, “Who invited this guy to the party? I have enough nine-inch-nails albums.” God doesn’t hear me. God shuts me out.” It’s called the language of encirclement. It’s “trapped in” language.

Lam 3:15-17

He has filled me with bitter herbs
and sated me with gall.

16 He has broken my teeth with gravel;
he has trampled me in the dust.

17 I have been deprived of peace;
I have forgotten what prosperity is.

NIV

He goes on and on. “God has broken my teeth with gravel?” Those of you who have eaten gravel, you know this.” He almost begins to blame God for all of the pain. And then in verse 21, he suddenly changes gears.

Lam 3:15-17

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I have forgotten what prosperity is.

NIV

Lam 3:21-27

et this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:

22 Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.

23 They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

24 I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him."

25 The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him,

to the one who seeks him;
26 it is good to wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.
27 It is good for a man to bear the yoke
while he is young.

NIV

He expresses faith! God's mercies are still true. God can still be trusted. There may yet be hope. Well, which is it? Are you against God or for Him? Do you have hope or doubt, weak faith or strong. Is God good or is He a tyrant that goes around making people's lives miserable. Which is it/

Kathleen O'Conner says, "When you meet the gebber, you meet someone with tangled theology. Hope and horror stand side by side. Hope and honesty stand side by side. Hope and contradiction stand side by side.

If you were to mix his rant up, this is how it would read..."

"God has pierced my heart...God is good. God has driven me away...God's love is great...God has broken my teeth with gravel...God is compassionate...God has trampled me in the dust...God is good..."

How many of you can relate? How many of you know exactly where gebber is coming from?

I would argue that many people in the modern area in the Western tradition of Christianity have been sold a bill of goods that hope is the absence of all these other emotions. You either have hope, or you have all these other things. You see in the gebber someone who has hope, but sits side by side with humiliation, ("I've become a laughing stock") with deprivation (I don't even have peace anymore) with bitterness, brutal honesty, the horrors of what he's witnessed, it all sits side-by-side with his hope.

I would argue there is something there, because many people would identify with him. They would say that their hope is laced with all of these other things. This is the only place in the poem where someone says "I think there is a God and that this God might be good." It's intermingled with all of this other stuff.

If you want to be in the hope room, there's contradiction smoking over in the other corner. Doubt is like playing cards with humiliation. There's all sorts of seedy characters in the hope room. Apparently in Lamentations, that's just how it is.

A couple of years ago, a pastor was visiting here, and he said, "Let me tell you why I'm here. I am an expert in methodology of how to grow churches. I meet with church leaders and I tell them, "If you do a, b and c, then your church will grow really big." I smell something. Here's what happened. He said this, and if you do these things, then God is obliged to grow a church." A couple of years ago, my daughter died of a kind of freak disease. My whole view of everything was totally blown to shreds. Now, I have all sorts of hope, but I have all sorts of questions and doubts. I have so much to do to reconfigure

who God is.” Some people in the tradition they were raised in, made a God out of
CERTAINTY.

Then all of that certainty gets crushed with real life and I have to ask myself, “What am I supposed to do?”

First line of verse 9-Notice how the narrator talks about the woman: Lam 1:9

9 Her filthiness clung to her skirts ;
NIV

Filthiness clung to her skirts. She is the personification of Israel. God’s people had gone had experimented with other gods. Unfaithful to their God. You are being unfaithful so it will have consequences-serious national consequences. Her promiscuity is clinging to her clothing. He says she cheated and she had it coming.

But when the narrator switches over and moves from a place and judgment to “I’m in torment within when I see her suffering.” When he’s standing at a distance, he judges. When he sees her up close he calls her, “Virgin Daughter.”

All subjects of movie sub-categories. One genre is chick-flick. Chick is not to be used apart from flick. What is the greatest chick flick ever? “Notebook” Anything with Meg Ryan. “Pretty Woman.” This movie made \$463 million dollars. How does the movie end? Richard Gere drives by with a bouquet and he rescues her. She is a prostitute. She and the Richard Gere enter into a business relationship. But then as the movie progresses, she becomes something else. As it heads toward the finale, he treats her less like the prostitute and more like a woman. She’s moving from being a product to becoming a person. From bought and sold to love and cherished. He uses “Princess.”

This movie taps in to a human lesson: can a new word be spoken about me, or am I defined by what I’ve done, by my failures. Do my sins determine who I am?” Can a new word, from “filthiness” to “virgin daughter.” Perhaps you were abused at an early age, can a fresh word-beautiful, innocent child. Divorce, addiction, etc.

Matthew 9. Jesus enters into situations of profound pain and he speaks new fresh words about people. Matthew tells the story about a woman who had been subject for twelve years. Bleeding made her unclean. She represents Israel. Twelve tribes. She was unable to go into the temple. She has been living out of the city. She touches the edge of Jesus’ cloak. He calls her “Daughter.” Jews had a tribal consciousness. You are unclean, you are out of the tribe. He’s re-drawing the tribe. You’ve been pushed out. I’m pulling you in.

The narrator speaks to this woman about her worth in Lamentations.

I think you’re failure. You are not a failure. You are pure and innocent.

The first thing that the woman says, chapter one verse nine. "Look, Lord." Drives her voice in the poem. She's looks for someone who will say, I see what you are going through. Healing begins when someone says, "I see it. I acknowledge your pain."

Chapter three verse one. Gebber says, "I am one who has seen affliction." This entangled fellow. He says "I have seen." He moves from a place of distance and isolation together with her."

If we were to summarize the three voices.

The narrator speaks.

The woman speaks, Who has God ever treated like this.

The gebber says They have buried their faces...

(Simultaneously speaking)

It's messy and chaotic. Like how things really work. The narrator has moved closer to her. The gebber has moved closer. Are they listening more and more to each other? Yes.

There is something terribly divine here.

God never speaks in this book. Don't have a happy ending. The most "God moment.

In Eastern Europe, during Communism, underground artists spoke out for freedom, you run the risk of prison, exile, censorship. Had to show their work in private. "So and so will be showing this painting." Performance artist spreads the word, he will be showing his work in the woods at night. Under cloak and dagger they went to see his latest work. They get there and there's this giant pile of dirt. They are afraid. "Has he been incarcerated? Killed?" He was buried in the pile and was breathing through a straw. He was illustrating their plight. Buried by pain and oppression, but still breathing.

People moving towards each other, lamenting together, this is where God is.

Andrew Sullivan, the point of this incarnation is not to have a new list of ways of litany of offenses, not so we have a new list to feel bad about ourselves. The point is for God to be with us and by being with us to show us better how to be human, how better to embrace our lives by accepting the Divine around us and inside of us."

Wife is 32 wks pregnant, but she said, "I'm having trouble breathing." We rushed her to the hospital. Four a.m. a nurse comes in and tattoos all over. She says how she's afraid of needles. Is there anything else I can do for you? Viral induced asthma, panic dimension. Put her in a glass chamber. Lost her pulse for a minute. Breathing machine, on oxygen. Large baby, nine or ten pounds. Very had. Now confined to couch rest. Going ten feet will get her out of breath. We've been inundated with love. But it's been traumatic. Our routines down. Close the blind, tea, got a meal. Got your breathing thing, got the inhaler. And when it's all done. She'll say, "Stay with me." Just sit with her is all that I can do.

Never underestimate the power of your presence. Not just for other person, but what it will do for you.

Christians try to have answers. Confronted with, “Sometimes God doesn’t show up and all you’re left with your presence with another person. And that’s all the Divine you get. Is God there? Not on the surface. He’s buried in the pile with the rest of us.”

When someone is suffering, join them by being there. Never underestimate the power of presence.

The point of the incarnation, God being with us and being with us to show us how to be human.