

## Lamentations

At Wednesday services during Lent this year we are looking at five books of the Old Testament called “The Megilloth”. The books are read at annual acts of worship on holy days in the Jewish calendar. You’ll notice that I said “holy days” – they are not all festivals and certainly not celebrations. Today we come to a book of the Megilloth that is read on a solemn fast. One of the months in the Jewish calendar is the month of Ab. On the Ninth of Ab, a fast is observed to commemorate a time of national mourning in the history of the Jewish people. Part of the fast is the reading of the book of Lamentations. Like the other four books that make up The Megilloth, Lamentations is not always well known and it might come as a surprise to some people that there is an entire book of the Bible that is dedicated to expressing sorrow and grief.

In 587 B.C., a terrible event befell God’s people. It shouldn’t have come as a surprise; prophets had been warning of disaster for generations. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonian army. The King of Judah was King Zedekiah. His family was killed and the king was maimed. He and the leaders of the city were marched off to Babylon, six hundred miles away. There was starvation, suffering, and ruin on an unimaginable scale. There are many references to the event in the Bible. Many of the Psalms were written about this time: “By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’” (Psalm 137:1-3) Some of the Prophets, notably Jeremiah, spoke to God’s people while they were in Babylon. The first half of Isaiah is calling God’s people to repent so this judgment won’t take place. The second half is Isaiah comforting God’s people because it has taken place. The account of the story is in the last chapter of the last book that records the history of the monarchy – which is not surprising since this event effectively ended it. You can read what happened in 2 Kings 25.

“Nebuzaradan, the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. He burned the house of the Lord, the king’s house, and all the houses of Jerusalem, every great house he burned down. All the army of the Chaldeans who were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem. Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried into exile the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had defected to the king of Babylon – all the rest of the population. But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest people of the land to be vinedressers and tillers of the soil. (2 Kings 25:8-12) It goes on to describe the looting, starvation, destruction, and inhumanity that followed.

Rather than encouraging each other to get over their loss and pick up their lives and go forward – the people of God have enshrined this event as a memorial of a very important aspect of our lives with God. Laments were written during the time of captivity. They were collected into the book of the Bible we call Lamentations. When God’s people were allowed to return home after two generations, they consecrated a fast on the Ninth day of Ab and they reminded themselves to take human suffering seriously. A part of this holy day is the reading of the Book of Lamentations.

This may sound like an odd thing to do in our society. We’re not used to coming together as a community to grieve. Any grief that is shared is shared among family and friends who are close. In this culture, when we suffer a disaster – such as a terrorist attack or a hurricane or an unjust death in the community – we do not gather as a community to express grief. People gather, of course, but they don’t express grief.

They gather to express anger. They express defiance. They say, “This has made us stronger.” As if they are better off because of whatever happened and maybe it was a good thing.

This does not mean that our society cannot respond to disaster. Far from it. Give us a problem and we will set about fixing it. I’ve seen it and it’s breathtaking. People in this culture are capable of generosity and perseverance and courage that probably even surprises the people who are doing it. We meet disasters by giving money. We encourage people to help them out of an emotional depression. I honestly believe that the majority of people surrounding you in this room tonight would willingly lay down his or her life to save major casualties in a terrorist attack.

This culture is made up of people who will respond to disaster.

But we are *not* good at sharing grief and lamenting a disaster. Present people with a problem they can’t fix, and often their bravery will disappear.

I have a friend, an outgoing man. He was plant manager of a successful company and participated in a lot of community events. About twenty years ago one of his sons committed suicide. If that man’s house had burned, or his business had gone bankrupt, or he had needed a kidney transplant – I have no doubt that his many friends would have lined up to help. But how do you fix this? He told me he had never felt such isolation. When people cannot fix a loss, they often see no reason for any contact at all.

The people of God would have none of that kind of thinking. They decided that they would take the greatest communal loss in history and memorialize it every year on the Ninth of Ab. This was a real event that caused real grief and God’s people would address it.

There are five chapters in the Book of Lamentations. They are written in a very exacting style that you miss if you don’t read Hebrew. They are acrostics; that means the first letter in each line begins with a letter of the alphabet – in order. The first line starts with the first letter, the second line begins with the second letter and so on so that the entire lament contains exactly as many lines as there are letters in the alphabet. That is significant. It says something about the nature of grief.

Grief cannot be hurried through. It must be acknowledged and paid attention to. There are many parts of grief and a wise person will not miss any of them. You would not let a five year old leave out letters from the alphabet; it wouldn’t be complete. How much more important is the expression of a community in grief?

On the other hand, just as grief must not be hurried through, it does come to an end. As with the alphabet, when the last letter is reached the completion of the work of grief can be repeated but not as an ever-present condition of creation. The work of grief has an ending.

The terrible events referred to in the Book of Lamentations really happened. They are described in 2 Kings 25 and there are independent records in Babylon and Persia as well as archeological discoveries. This annual acknowledgement of the disasters that can occur in this world is tied to a real event. Sometimes people develop a life-style of disaster. Lamentation is their default mode. The reasons for this are many. Some people equate sadness with depth. Some people would rather be pitied than respected. Whatever the reason, the people of God will have none of it. The event that is remembered with the reading of the Book of Lamentations occurred. The Book of Lamentations has given voice to the sorrows of people for thousands of years, not *in spite* of the fact that it describes a different situation than whatever grieves us today but *because* of the fact that it describes a situation that really happened. Without a historical tragedy to lament, these verses would just be a free-floating expression of

general grief and would encourage God's people to express grief for grief's sake. That is not lamentation. That is just a general anxiety and pessimism about life.

Lamentation is the work of the community, coming together in the face of loss. People come together without having an achievable goal that can be accomplished and done with. We won't try to build something we can take a picture of to show everybody we've gotten this grief thing taken care of. In times of loss we do try to achieve the goal of supporting one another, yes, but it is more than that. We come together to share grief. To acknowledge that things are wrong beyond our own individual sadness and frustration.

An individual can be in anguish, but an individual does not lament. That is the work of the community. The more fervent the sadness the more inadequate is a solitary effort to express it. There is a need for others to help bear the burdens and confirm that life has meaning. The hurts of daily life become profound when they are expressed by the people of God. When sorrow is given the voice of all the generations that have read the words of the Book of Lamentations in all the hundreds of languages over the centuries, that distress is grieved beyond the powers of an individual disappointment.

Sorrow cannot be expressed by people who make their own experience the boundaries of a relationship with God. We are invited to join our experiences to the boundless mystery of God's love. The assembly of God's people requires mutual respect, and the ability to recognize holiness when we see it. It can articulate sorrow and give it depth and direction. It can change daily routine into eternal life.

Like the gospel itself, lamentation has no power outside the community. We live in the community of the church. We are at our best in a congregation used to sharing the life of weekly prayer and sacraments, joined in a common ministry, and dedicated to the exploration of a relationship with God. We have a community and that gives us more stability than we may know. It is a community that stretches back for as long as God's people have felt sorrow. We can feel grief and still not panic. The church is an assembly sufficient for the depth of sorrow that recognizes the soul as the image of God.