

“Before We Return”
Ezra 3:10-13/Luke 23:26-31

All signs point to a return. In recent weeks, we have begun to see indications that the hold of COVID-19 on life is easing. Vaccination numbers are increasing and positive tests for the disease are falling. Restrictions on travel are relaxing and statewide limits on gatherings will drop again in two weeks. The local school district has 2/3 of its middle and high school students back in the classroom, March Madness has returned, and later this week, the DPC Re-opening Task Force meets to discuss when we can resume weekly in-person worship. We are not fully back, of course, and indications are that even when we are there will still be the need for masks and social distancing, but signs of hope abound. It cannot come soon enough!

Such an outcome is one for which we have waited and prayed, yet before we rush ahead with resuming activities we once took for granted, I’d like for us to stop and look back. The past year changed us in ways none of us could have imagined and before we emerge fully from its grip, I believe we need to reflect on what we have lost. In other words, we need to lament.

Our reading from Luke gospel offers a glimpse of that kind of response. During Lent, we have been focusing on the blessing offered by women during Jesus’ ministry and today’s account tells of their presence on a Friday of long ago as his life nears its end. Prior to that moment, Jesus had been betrayed and arrested. He had been taken to the Jewish council, the governor, and the king. After those sham trials, he was returned to Pontius Pilate who knew Jesus was innocent, declared it to be so, and tried to release him. The crowds demanded an insurrectionist be freed instead so Pilate relented and handed Jesus over to the soldiers. Our reading begins at that point.

As the procession heads toward Golgotha, a passerby named Simon is forced to carry the cross beam for Jesus and walk behind the condemned one. A crowd follows along and Luke tells us “among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him.” Jesus turns to them and says, “do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children” and then makes comments that seem to allude to greater hardship ahead for the city and its people.

None of the women in that procession is identified by name, but their actions reflect the horror of what is unfolding. One scholar notes that in Scripture “women’s mourning functioned to protest injustice...express communal lament, and to serve as testimony to trauma.” (Clark-Soles, Jaime. *Interpretation: Women in the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020, p. 218). All of those meanings are present in their cries on the way to the cross.

That is the kind of moment when lament happens naturally and certainly there were times like that for us during the past year; moments when we grieved the loss of freedom and the cumulative impact of that disease. It didn’t help that we were mostly confined to our homes and then endured one of the snowiest winters in recent memory. We all felt and articulated those losses in a variety of ways—some of them healthier than others. The women walking with Jesus clearly demonstrated such loss. Yet as our Old Testament reading remind us lament is also appropriate on days like this one when we begin to move forward with hope.

That passage comes from the book of Ezra and tells of a day centuries before the death of Jesus when another momentous occasion is occurring in Jerusalem. After years in exile, the Jewish people have returned home and one of the first things they do is begin to rebuild the temple that had been constructed during Solomon’s reign, but destroyed as the people were taken away to Babylon. Our reading tells of the day the foundation for that new structure is complete

and how a great celebration erupts. The priests are adorned in their vestments as the sounds of trumpets and cymbals fill the air. The people begin to sing and voice a Psalm in their praise of God: “For he is good,” they shout, “for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.” It is a wonderful moment; a day some feared would never come.

Yet while that celebration is underway, there are others in the crowd whose minds recall the horror from 70 years earlier when the first temple was destroyed. Those memories re-surface in the old-timers for as the foundation for the new temple is dedicated, they begin to cry. Theirs are not quiet tears either, but such wrenching sobs that the shouts of praise are drowned out. “The people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping,” is how Ezra puts it. That scribe is naming lament amidst a time of celebration.

What that experience reveals is something we know to be true; that to ignore loss does not make it go away, but instead only pushes it beneath the surface. To rush ahead without stopping to grieve, to skip times of lament can also keep us from acting upon what we learned about God and ourselves during a painful season and thus miss its unique opportunity for growth. Thus, I invite you to stop on this day and ponder with me what you lost over the past year.

For some, it was the loved one who died from COVID or who passed from a different cause, but how in both cases indoor restrictions kept you from gathering freely to celebrate their life and witness. Some of you missed walking at graduation or could not travel for a wedding. Some lost a job or a business you had created and grown. Some fathers were unable to visit their newborn in the hospital and some isolated older adults experienced a decline in mental acuity. Some of you have not been the same room with classmates or co-workers or clients in twelve months. As a church family, we missed sharing in the joys and struggles of life with one another and an entire year of in-person learning and service. The current class of youth elders and deacons have not met with their fellow officers once in person, and our worship, including Easter and Christmas Eve, mostly originated from an empty sanctuary. Some of our losses are irretrievable. Some will fade as life resumes, but all of those realities are cause for lament.

Thus, I would like to share a litany written by a woman named Molly Hicks of Austin, Texas. I’m not sure when she developed the resource as some of it sounds as if it was first used before any COVID-related restrictions eased. I believe it was composed for use in several hospice organizations. Yet even with that initial use and purpose, it still speaks to this moment.

“We light this first candle,” she writes, “to represent our past. We could not have conceived of how profoundly our lives would be affected by this virus. Our grief is complex, and we mourn for the ways in which life has changed.

“We light this second candle in honor and memory of the millions of people worldwide who have died from COVID-19. It feels impossible to comprehend such a number. There may be people whom we have known and loved deeply. We may have provided care for them as they took their final breaths. Or we may have only heard about them on the news, their names and images leaving lasting impression. Each of these human beings were and are important.

“We light this third candles to honor every person who has cared for members of the human family during this crisis. We hold close the healthcare workers on the front lines of hospitals, nursing home, and home care who are diligent and compassionate in the midst of suffering and have been changed by what they have witnessed. We hold close all those caring for emotional needs who provide space for people to express themselves. We hold close all those people whose work ensures that we are fed and clothed. We hold close those who address the

needs of our facilities, infrastructure, and transportation. We hold close teachers, parents, and other educators who share knowledge and model humility. We hold close our children who are bravely navigating this new world. We hold close spiritual leaders who offer solace as we explore questions that seem to have no answers.

“We light this fourth candle in support of all those who are grieving, including ourselves. We may be grieving for loved ones who died from COVID or from other causes during the pandemic. We may feel the pain of not being by their sides as they died, and having to miss or postpone important rituals like memorial services. We may know or be one of those who have recovered from the virus but are struggling with its lingering effects. We may feel a sense of collective loss that is difficult to describe, one that intersects with other losses. These four candles also represent the four seasons of the year. The days, weeks, and months that we have endured may have passed by in a blur as we faced the crises around us and felt the ache of isolation. Even so, we may be able to remember moments when we connected with the natural world in new ways and observed our surroundings with fresh eyes.

We light a fifth candle to represent our future. We join together in hope for the health and wellbeing of the world, for new life, for equity and justice, and for clarity. We long for strengthened relationships with the people around us, and we will help each other maintain connections with those who have died. We will make space for ourselves to remember, to breathe and to rest, during this year and in the years to come.” (received via e-mail)

Lament does not leave us in the past, but equips us to live differently as we move forward. It does not make the hardship of the past twelve months disappear either, but instead allows us to grow from that challenging year and place our hope anew in God’s faithful care. Thus, on this day, before we return to some semblance of normalcy, we stop to lament and offer our profound thanks to God, the One whose “steadfast love endures forever.”