

“Calling to Mind”
Lamentations 3:19-24/Romans 5:1-5

Last Sunday, I began an intentional effort to close a gap in my preaching history. After 36 years as a pastor, delivering over 1400 sermons, one would think I had offered a homily at least once on each of the 66 books of the Bible. Yet a few months ago, I learned that 13 of them—one-fifth of Scripture if measured only by titles--had never served as the basis for a sermon. With that embarrassing discovery, I committed myself over these final months as pastor of DPC to giving each of those missing books their due and started that effort seven days ago with Hosea. Today, we turn to another Old Testament book on the list, the work known as Lamentations.

The name is fitting, as its pages offer an honest and mournful response to the destruction of Solomon’s Temple and Jerusalem in the 7th century B.C. Its opening verse sets the tone, too, as the unknown author writes, “How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!” The chapter headings in our Pew Bible give a sense of how the book unfolds as they are entitled “The Deserted City,” God’s Warnings Fulfilled,” The Punishment of Zion,” and “A Plea for Mercy.” The writer knows that the people have brought this hardship on themselves because of their unfaithfulness, but pulls no punches in describing God’s reaction. “The LORD in his anger has humiliated daughter Zion...[he] has become like an enemy...my young women and my young men have fallen by the sword; in the day of your anger you have killed them, slaughtering without mercy.” You may begin to understand why I had not preached on this book previously!

On the Jewish liturgical calendar, though, there is an annual event called Tish B’Av that recalls all the hardship of Jews over the years including the destruction of that temple and the one of Jesus’ day. One website refers to it as “the saddest day on the Jewish calendar” and as part of a 25 hour-fast, the Book of Lamentations is read aloud in its entirety. Perhaps the closest comparison in feel at DPC is our Longest Night Service each year marking ones losses.

The Common Lectionary, a three-year resource with suggested readings for each Sunday and other special dates includes just one text from Lamentations, and it is on the Saturday that falls between Good Friday and Easter. Certainly, the first disciples were lamenting all that had happened in those hours between Jesus’ death and resurrection, making it a fitting time to focus on that book and its mournful tone. Still, the fact that a committee of scholars chose to include it only once and on the day when Christians are least likely to gather for worship made me feel a bit better about my own omission of the book.

Yet the more I pondered that work, the more I understood its important place in the Biblical canon for it names the response of people of faith throughout time. Few of us have witnessed the destruction of a house of worship or a city we loved, but we all have known of moments of lament, when we can wonder about God’s presence in our suffering. Scholar Kathleen O’Connor contends the recovery of this book “in our communal lives could lead to a greater flourishing of life amid our own wounds and the woundedness of the world.” (O’Connor, Kathleen, “The Book of Lamentations,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume VI*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001, p. 1013. I think she’s right and thus turn now to take a delayed look together at that book.

Along with its tone, Lamentations has a unique format, too, as it consists of five poems, four of them with exactly twenty-two verses. That number is no coincidence as there are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet. We can’t tell it by reading the book in English, but in its original text, the first verse begins with the first Hebrew letter of Alef, the second with the second letter of Bet and so forth. The literary term for that kind of pattern is acrostic. Only the

third chapter deviates as it is a triple acrostic with verse 1 starting with the first Hebrew letter, verse 4 with the second letter, verse 7 with the third letter and so on. Thus, our passage opens with the seventh Hebrew letter and it continues the lament.

“The thought of my affliction and my homelessness,” he says “is wormwood and gall!” That expression means a spirit of bitterness and resentment; a look at the preceding verses explains why he feels that way. Earlier in this third chapter, the author says that God has turned against him repeatedly and all day long, even shutting out the man’s prayers. He says God is like a bear lying in wait and has set him up as a mark for his enemies. The man laments that his teeth grind as if on gravel, his soul is bereft of peace, and that he has forgotten what happiness is like. It is then that our passage begins as he speaks of “wormwood and gall” before concluding “My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.” What a sad state. Yet it is the very next verse that things change as he says “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.”

Years ago, the author Kathleen Norris was a member of the Hope Presbyterian Church in Keldron, South Dakota. As part of a memoir recalling that chapter of life, she tells of a pastor who discovered in an everyday event something that embodied that congregation’s name.

“One former minister...told me that she couldn’t imagine what was happening at the first funeral service she conducted for a member of Hope Church when, as people gathered for the graveside service, the men, some kneeling, began studying the open grave. It was early November, and someone explained they were checking the frost and moisture levels in the ground. They were farmers and ranchers worried about a drought. They were mourners giving a good friend back to the earth. They were people of earth; looking for a sign of hope.” (Norris, Kathleen. *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1993, pp. 175-6)

The author of Lamentations sought a sign of hope and found it. “This I call to mind and have hope,” he said. “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.’” Thus, despite his hardship and grief, his suffering and lamentations, that believer of the past made the intentional choice for hope when he remembered God’s faithfulness. One scholar explained that emotional pivot in this way: “hope is a decision of the speaker based on remembrance of divine mercy.”(Ibid, p. 1051)

The Apostle Paul spoke of that same connection. Our New Testament reading comes early in the book of Romans where he recalls faithfulness. Just prior to our passage, he recounts the story of Abraham, a great ancestor in the faith and connects his narrative to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Our text begins. “Therefore,” Paul continues, “since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing in the glory of God.”

The Apostle then articulates his reason for hope. “We also boast in our sufferings,” he continues, “knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

Paul’s words give concurrence to the author who wrote “this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.” Neither voice suggested that we humans forget our hardships or minimize the hurt in them. There is no encouragement to convince ourselves that things could be worse and that we should simply put on our big girl or big boy pants and move on either. There can be times when any of those approaches can keep us moving forward, yet that isn’t what Lamentations or Paul recommends. Rather in the midst of those times when we honestly mourn the hard moments of life, we, too, can focus on what we know to be true about God and have hope.

A Third and Fourth grade Church School class was once asked to complete the following sentence: "By faith, I know that God is..." Here are some of the responses. A girl named Amanda wrote, "By faith, I know that God is forgiving, because he forgave in the Bible, and he forgave me when I went in the road on my bike without one of my parents." Brandon said, "By faith, I know that God is providingful, because he dropped manna for Moses and the people, and he gave my dad a job." A boy named Paul responded, "By faith, I know that God is caring, because he made the blind man see, and he made me catch a very fast line drive that could have hurt me. He probably sent an angel down." One child who did not include her or his name wrote, "By faith, I know that God is faithful, because the school bill came, and my mom didn't know how we were going to pay it. Two minutes later, my dad called. He had just gotten a bonus check. My mom was in tears." (*Leadership*, Summer 1997)

A mournful believer of the past declared "this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope." That decision turned the corner for him and can do the same for us as all these centuries later he invites us to recall the very faithfulness of God, too, trusting that when we do we will find new divine mercies as well, morning by morning.