

“Rivers of tears...”

Selected readings from Lamentations

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It seems to me that most of us are pretty good at complaining. We complain about the weather, the traffic, the price of milk, an annoying neighbor, robo calls, poor service at a restaurant, bureaucratic red tape, technology that doesn't work right. Or maybe those are just the things / complain about! ☺ You probably have your own list! What we're not so good at is *lamenting*.

When it comes to the big stuff - the things that hurt our hearts and make us question everything we thought we could count on – it's a different story. Unending grief. The ways life – and people – have disappointed us. Trauma. And things beyond just us: hate rearing its ugly head everywhere; the world on fire. These kinds of things are often hard to talk about. And when we try to talk about them, we often find that other people don't want to hear, or they don't want to hear much.

There's a certain pressure for positivity in our society. Just think how often we're urged to look on the bright side, let it go, don't dwell on it, get over it, move on, turn the page, find closure, have more faith. We're assured that everything happens for a reason, that God has a plan (and doesn't give us more than we can handle), that it will all work out for the best. We have SO many ways to say this stuff! It's particularly prevalent, I think, within certain parts of the church, where folks seem to correlate it with faith. But it also kind of goes along with a general cultural tendency to deny, downplay, distract from, or cover up pain, rather than acknowledge it, feel it, and express it.

But imagine if you were to reflect on a heartbreak or injustice or traumatic event you've experienced... a disappointment or pain you struggle with... or some situation in the world that fills you with despair ... important things that seem irretrievably lost.... Imagine if you were to write about it in a poem of 26 stanzas, each beginning with a different letter of the alphabet, from A to Z, describing what happened, who was affected, and how, and the different dimensions of the pain and suffering. And then, do that exact same thing again, A to Z, trying to convey what it feels like, asking why. And then, do it AGAIN, only the third time through make the first stanza three lines the *all* begin with A, and the second stanza three lines beginning with B, and so on. When you're done with that, start again a fourth time, 26 more stanzas, A through Z. And then one last time – maybe you're tired of the alphabetical thing by now, so just 26 stanzas beginning with *any* letters, reiterating how devastating it is and wondering if there can be any hope.

That would be intense, right? Well, that's Lamentations. (Ok, not quite; the Hebrew alphabet only has 22 letters, not 26, but still.... It's a lot. No wonder people don't read this book much!)

Writing a lament like this would be emotional and hard. But at the same time, it might provide an outlet for pain, an honoring of it. It might be a way to resist denial, to claim your own story, maybe to gain some clarity. It might bring some healing. It might be empowering – truth-telling often is – and help to find the energy for justice. The acrostic (alphabetic) form suggests an attempt to paint a full picture of a complicated reality; repeating that exercise seems to say that it's hard to fully express it.

That's exactly what's going on in Lamentations. It's exhaustive, and exhausting, ... but so is suffering, which is why this structure expresses it so effectively. Their particular suffering referenced in the five lament poems of this book is the destruction of the city of Jerusalem by the armies of the Babylonian empire. This most likely means they were written sometime around or after the 6th century BCE. We can't say much more precisely than that because the Babylonians actually attacked and invaded Jerusalem three separate times and at one time the city was under siege for two years. Over a period of years the inhabitants of the city repeatedly experienced extreme violence and destruction, death, and scarcity. All the structures that supported their communal life fell apart – government, economy, family, religion. The poems talk about starving children, dead fathers, violence against women, forced labor, destroyed buildings, cruel enemies. They describe the people's despair in vivid images: it's like being in a pit, living in darkness, crying rivers of tears.

These laments are about the collapse of the whole world of an entire people. In that sense, they differ from a lament about personal, individual sorrow or suffering, which is an important thing to keep in mind as we reflect on this book. I was really struck as I read through it by just how resonant it is with places in our world today where whole groups of people are besieged with war and violence and deprivation – I thought of Ukraine and Haiti and Yemen but there are a lot more. And closer to home, communities experiencing epidemics of homelessness, opioid addictions, gun violence, poverty; lengthy laments could be written about the many faces and facets and ripple effects of such crises. But the anguish of Lamentations also resonates with more personal experiences of pain, whether it's grief, trauma, physical or mental illness, betrayal, injustice.

It's a difficult book, though; it challenges the expectations we sometimes bring to the Bible. We expect the Bible, or at least any book within it, to have a unity of perspective. We expect to hear God responding to the pain of people who've gone to the trouble to express it. We know that the Bible includes lot of stories of suffering and injustice and lostness... but we expect them to move to a note of hope, maybe even praise, by the end. Lamentations is not what we expect on any of these points.

The multiple voices we hear in Lamentations have perspectives on suffering that aren't just different, but sometimes contradictory. There is the idea (almost universally accepted in the ancient world) that suffering is punishment from God for our sins; we bring it on ourselves when we are unfaithful to God's commandments. There's a conviction that God is good, but also the suggestion that God can be a cruel enemy. There's anger at God for what seems like extreme punishment and a sense that *God* is the one who's betrayed the covenant with God's

people. Then there's the more despairing idea that God is simply absent. There is a suggestion that maybe, eventually, God will intervene if we are patient and have trust. There is blame on leaders and false prophets who led folks astray with a wrongheaded vision for their community. There's blame and anger directed at outside enemies. There's a little bit of hope and a lot of hopelessness. This is all familiar to us. We've heard, and probably experienced within ourselves, many of these contradictory thoughts. Sometimes one speaker addresses another; sometimes they speak as if to others witnessing this suffering; sometimes they address God. Repeatedly we hear this desire for God to *look* at them and *see* what's happening, see their suffering. All the different voices lift up the pain and losses, though it's clear that, as one speaker says, "rivers of tears" wouldn't be adequate to express it.

The voice we don't hear in Lamentations is the voice of God - almost seems to confirm the suggestion that God has withdrawn. We might not agree with that assessment, or with some of the other views of God that these laments offer. We might feel that something is lacking because there isn't any "thus says the Lord" here. But we shouldn't conclude that therefore Lamentations doesn't have anything to offer our understanding of God: in fact, there's important theology here. Biblical scholar Kathleen O'Connor says that this book challenges any ideas we might have of a God who "dotes on our personal and national wishes." (p. xv) Lamentations simply doesn't lend itself to any sort of feel-good or triumphalist religion.

That's probably why the only bit of this book that's commonly read in church is a section from the third chapter that talks about God's love and faithfulness and justice, claims that God doesn't really want to afflict anyone, and insists there may still be hope for anybody repentant and patient enough to wait for God to forgive and put things back together. That is a beautiful part of Lamentations for sure, but reading only that bit gives a false impression of the book. Because those words of hope aren't the conclusion, they come in the *middle* of the five laments, and they give way quickly, with a return to lament. The closest the rest of the book comes to hope is a few wonderings in chapter 5 about whether there might still be any. The final lament kind of peters out with a rather ambivalent prayer that asks God "Why do you always forget us?" and goes on to say, more or less, "restore us... unless you're so angry with us that you've completely rejected us." (5:22) That's it, the end. Not the happy ending we'd be inclined to write. Not much of an ending at all really.

What are we to make of this? Why is this here in our Bible, and how might it be "scripture" for us?

I'm grateful for insights from Kathleen O'Connor, who sees in Lamentations what she calls a "theology of witness." It says there is value and power in bearing witness to suffering, enabling it to be seen in all its permutations and effects, refusing to minimize or deny or distract from it, not rushing to hope but giving space to the pain and brokenness. These laments acknowledge that the reality of being human is complicated and messy and often horrible, some hurts never entirely go away, healing is an up-and-down process which can take a long time, and hope comes and goes. They let us know that we aren't alone in getting angry with God or feeling like

God is absent. They let us know we can speak the truth about it all – to God and in the community of God’s people. And they show us how powerful that can be.

O’Connor says that even for people who aren’t living with war and oppression and deprivation and the like, this message from Lamentations is important. When we have trouble recognizing and feeling and acknowledging our own pain, it can’t heal. At the same time, denying our own pain makes it harder for us to really see and honor the pain of others. But learning to give space for lament makes way for greater and more genuine compassion. It helps us to learn to really see the struggles that another person or community is going through, to make space for *their* truth, their pain, their lament.

It’s brilliant and inspired, O’Connor says, that Lamentations doesn’t include the voice of God anywhere in the book. (p. 85) The voices of the suffering are at the center here, in a way that will not allow for any down-playing or explaining it away. These laments insist that we face up to the pain in our lives, and even more, to the suffering of the vulnerable and oppressed in our world. They help to give voice to pain and questions and doubt and fear. They insist that we hear, and see. They invite us in to a sacred space.

O’Connor describes Lamentations as “a house for sorrow, and a school for compassion.” I think that’s beautiful. It’s also very much what the church, at its best, is, or can be. A place for lamenting is also a place for honesty, a place that makes room for pain as well as joy, a place where hearts can open up more and more to compassion, a place of dignity, a place where, together, God’s people find energy for the work of justice. There are hundreds of books in the world about how to be a “successful” and flourishing church. Some of them have good ideas; but we would probably do better – be more truly church – if we attend to the deeper and more difficult wisdom of Lamentations.

Resources:

Kathleen M. O’Connor *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*