

Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost: Lamentations

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The Summer before I entered seminary, a strange thing happened. I was sitting around with some folks I knew and loved, and one of them asked a question. You know what, that doesn't really set the scene quite right. I was sitting around with some folks I knew and loved, and one of them produced a newspaper clipping he'd been holding onto for six months. He handed me the paper — six columns wide and a third of a newsprint page high — and he asked me to read it. When I was done, he looked at me knowingly? Accusingly? He looked at me and said, "what do you think about *that*?" The article in question was a write up on faith leaders that experience doubt. I have no idea why the author went that route or what it had to do with this guy's local paper. For whatever reason, the article started off with the premise that doubt is a thing that happens, and sometimes *gasp* sometimes doubt is a thing that happens to the folks in the pulpit.

They interviewed a bunch of different Christian leaders and included quotes. The Baptist said she had her periods of doubt but she never told anyone for fear that it would send the wrong message. The Non-denominational preacher said he stopped believing altogether years ago, but he kept going because he worried if he told his congregation the truth, it would wreck them and cause a spiral of contagious doubt and disaffection. One preacher didn't include their name and wouldn't say what denomination they came from but did admit that the only reason they kept at it was health insurance. And finally, they got to the Episcopal priest. She shocked the interviewer and my friend, apparently, by saying that doubt was a normal part of the cycle of being a person of faith. "Of course I doubt," she said, "I wouldn't be taking all this on faith if I was certain." I loved that take. And I was kinda proud that it was the Episcopalian that owned up to the depth of one of our real challenges in church life. My friend, though, the one that handed me the newspaper clipping and said, "what do you think about *that*?" he was appalled. The entire article rubbed him the wrong way. How could a faith leader ever doubt? He just couldn't get there.

You may have noticed something a little unusual when we were doing our readings. Typically, we read something from the Hebrew Scriptures, then we read a psalm, then some New Testament stuff and a Gospel passage. But this morning we did a reading from Lamentations and then another reading from Lamentations. Now before anyone reports me to the liturgical authorities, the Lectionary does make room for this, I just jumped on the chance. Lamentations only shows up in our readings on three days in our three year cycle, and I really wanted to get some Lamentationing in while the getting was good. See, Lamentations is one of my favorite books of the Bible. It's tragic and beautiful and heartbreaking and, above all else, faithful.

A little backstory: Lamentations was written after the Babylonians conquered Israel. They'd come in and leveled everything. The Temple in Jerusalem — *the* place you'd go to connect with God — the Temple was stripped bare and then burned to nothing. The invaders executed top tier politicians, academics, and artists. Then they stole away the vast majority of people, especially anyone that had even a shade of influence. And what was left behind was a broken land populated by a tiny remnant of broken people. Lamentations is the words of a handful of those broken people. A strongman who was bested in battle and sees the destruction as his fault for not being strong enough. A mother who saw her child killed and weeps over the sweet memories buried in ash and cruelty. A man who wanders the city with a thousand-yard stare and a single, impossible question: "why?" All this sounds like perfectly understandable human responses to unthinkable tragedy. So what does this have to do with faith? Scholars believe that Lamentations is more than just a collection of heartbreaking stories from the aftermath. Instead, Lamentations is a sort of liturgy making space for intense grief.

Imagine: half a dozen despairing people, the din of destruction echoing in the distance, smoke still twisting from dying coals where your landmarks used to be, the conquering army gone and with them all your treasure, and you find yourself walking aimlessly through the charred remains of your beloved hometown only to look up and realize your mind may have been wandering but your feet stumbled their way to the one place you know you will be held safe, the Temple. Only the Temple is gone and now you and that half a dozen haggard souls stand where the Holiest of Holies once stood. You are dumbstruck by loss and can't believe what you see and can't believe what you can't see any longer. And then one of you speaks up, the first words a squeak, a clearing of the throat to get the ash of beloved places out to make space for words you all feel but need to be said. "I couldn't do it." "I wasn't strong enough." "I should've been there." "Who would do something like this?" "What just happened to us?" You each speak in turn, no set prayer book guiding your impromptu service but a clear liturgy emerging. We each speak the grief we feel, deep and real and consuming. It's awful but it's the reality of who and where we are right now. And then one of you says the thing everyone feels and no one wants to say. "How could God let this happen?" The last verse of Lamentations prays that impossible question. "Restore us, O Lord, unless you have utterly rejected us." What a desolate thought to be rejected by God, and also, what an understandable thought. But this translation isn't quite right. Most English translations use a version of what I just said, something along the lines of "God has rejected us," presumably because we did something not all that great. But the original Hebrew is very different, and honestly, I don't understand why we didn't keep it. Instead of suggesting that the people did something wrong and God has rejected them, the original Hebrew says something more like, "Restore us, O Lord, if you even exist."

Y'all. From the remnant of the people standing in incomprehensible desolation, how much more human and how much more real can it get? Lamentations is a whole book of people saying, "What just happened?" and then it ends with a plea to a god they aren't even sure is there anymore, if that God was ever there in the first place. And, many years later, when it came time to decide which books would make the cut to be included in the collection of Hebrew scriptures, someone in their wisdom decided to include this. And many more years later, when it came time to decide which books would be included in Christian scripture, we kept it. There's hope in Lamentations, that second passage we just saw is full of hope, but the book ends abruptly in the depth of real pain. And you know what? That's faithful and appropriate and real. How bizarre would it be to slap on a smile and yell "Thanks be to God" from the ashes of that sacred remnant. To gather as the people of God and say what is true, that is faith. "If you're even out there, God, how dare you?"

When my friend handed me that newspaper clipping, I loved it. I mean, the whole situation was weird, but I loved the response from the Episcopal priest. Doubt is a real and normal thing, and we keep on trying to be faithful as the cycle cycles on. Cussing at the heavens is as faithful as any other thing we do when we engage with God because we're still engaging with God. But my friend didn't understand that. He couldn't get there. He'd been raised in a way that made no space for doubt. Doubt was a thing to be avoided, evidence that your faith wasn't strong enough or deep enough or sincere enough. And what a shame. I can't imagine how lonely he must feel when he finds himself in a place of desolation, abandoned by the people he loves, doubting that God loves him or exists at all, and then, on top of all that, feeling like a bad Christian because an inkling of doubt crept in. I think he needed more Lamentations in his life. Actually, I think we all do. I think we all need more Lamentations in our lives. That's why I jumped at the chance to read it twice in the same morning. I know it's a short book, and I know it's not terribly fun as far as Biblical readings go, but I also know that Lamentations packs one of the single most important lessons in all of scripture in its short lines. That, no matter how we feel or what we've been through, we can and probably should live into it honestly and name it to God. And your tone with God doesn't matter. God can handle it. No matter what it is, even our doubt. God is out there, and God can handle it.

