



# “Remembering The Bad Ol’ Days”



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Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

## **Lamentations 3: 1-9, 12-23**

- 3** I am one who has seen affliction  
under the rod of God’s wrath;  
<sup>2</sup> he has driven and brought me  
into darkness without any light;  
<sup>3</sup> against me alone he turns his hand,  
again and again, all day long.  
<sup>4</sup> He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,  
and broken my bones;  
<sup>5</sup> he has besieged and enveloped me  
with bitterness and tribulation;  
<sup>6</sup> he has made me sit in darkness  
like the dead of long ago.  
<sup>7</sup> He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;  
he has put heavy chains on me;  
<sup>8</sup> though I call and cry for help,  
he shuts out my prayer;  
<sup>9</sup> he has blocked my ways with hewn stones,  
he has made my paths crooked.
- <sup>19</sup> The thought of my affliction and my homelessness  
is wormwood and gall!  
<sup>20</sup> My soul continually thinks of it  
and is bowed down within me.  
<sup>21</sup> But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:

<sup>22</sup> The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,  
his mercies never come to an end;  
<sup>23</sup> they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.

### **The Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.**

I chose this text before the events of last week took place before the earthquake that created once again so much suffering for the Haitian people and before we witnessed the tragic events that took place and are still taking place in Afghanistan.

How appropriate it is for us today to listen to Jeremiah's great requiem for the city of Jerusalem that lay in ruins, destroyed at the hands of the invading Babylonians. His requiem gives voice to what many felt inside: disappointment, perhaps bitter, in a place of darkness, in a place of chaos wondering where is God?

Lamentations brings out and highlights the heartache of the Israelite's bad ol' days so that it offers each reader Jeremiah's profound portrait of sorrow.

One of the reasons that we read history is so that we can learn from it. Lamentations was written about 530 B.C.E. at a time in which the entire northern region of Israel and the southern region of Judah had been invaded by the Babylonians and many of the people had been carried off into captivity. In its wake the city of Jerusalem, including the Temple, lay in ruins, many people were killed, others had been deported to Babylon. The Babylonians left no one behind that could coordinate the people so that they were no longer a threat to their empire.

In the war's aftermath, the survivors of the invasion faced bitter memories of the war and at the same time faced a devastating famine that racked the city. Not only did the people struggle with physical survival but there were emotional and spiritual dilemmas such as: how will we worship God, is God still here, does God

still care about us? This remnant in Jerusalem felt that God had completely abandoned them.

The first 4 chapters of Lamentations was written in a Hebrew alphabetic acrostic with every phrase beginning with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet (Aleph, Bet, Gimmel, Dalet, Hey, Vav and so forth to the final Tav. It's a tool of memorization. The use of fragmented sentences and unbalanced meter was another tool used by the writer so that each declaration seems broken off in grief.

Lamentations was used in worship, quoted on the ninth day of Ab (the fast day observed in commemoration of the destruction of Jerusalem) in the hope that the people would never forget what took place during this time of history.

The Israelite people held a strong belief that there was a direct correlation between the ruin of Israel and Judah and their lack of faithfulness to God. God had set out specific directives including the 10 commandments; God had set out godly leadership among the tribes; God had instructed the Israelites repeatedly to stay away from idol worship and remain faithful; God had even given the people what they asked for in kingdom leadership; but the people continued going their own way.

This gives you the history of why Lamentations was written, by whom, how it was used as a tool to help the people face the real and profound emotional and spiritual dilemmas of their time.

Theologian Sally Brown in her book "When Lament Shapes The Sermon", talks about the lament as having three primary functions:

1. Critical-prophetic function which asks complex questions about the nature and origin of violence.
2. Theological-interrogatory function, which wants to know where God is during times of suffering.

3. Pastoral function, wherein we are invited to rely on God and the community to carry forth hope on our behalf when we ourselves have no hope in us.

Perhaps that is where we are today. Perhaps we are in all 3 of these areas asking:

- why such terrible violence still happens in our world when we want to believe that our humanity has made progress. That somehow our education and wisdom supersede the need for violence.
- where God is when God clearly sees the inhumanity of God's children towards others and clearly sees the suffering.
- how to hold hope when it is difficult for us to have hope.

The lessons from Lamentations seek to help in all three of these areas.

- Laments and lamenting are important. They are one process that can be used for dealing with sorrow, loss, fear and all the emotions that come with traumatic experiences of life.
- Laments give people the opportunity to grieve and grieving is important.
- Communal lament offers worshipers an opportunity to face the deep unknown together, to feel the anxiety, feel the pain, the fear, the loss and yet look for ways to move forward together. The image of the wailing wall in Jerusalem comes to mind where people from all over the world come to cry out to God, some writing their prayers on small pieces of paper putting them between the rocks. The church can serve as the same type of place. This should always be the place where we can grieve, where we can express our fears, our loss, our pain knowing that this community continues to hold hope.

- Laments witness to the reality of suffering in our world even while we call to God for help.
- The wording of Lamentations reminds us that life is full of crooked paths and blocked ways that are a part of the struggle of everyday life. Life is full of people who think differently than we do, people who we view as being destructive, people that we cannot change no matter how much we want to. Life is full of events such as wars, pandemics, hurricanes, fires and earthquakes that extract huge prices.
- Lamentations gives voice to the experience of loss and offers people a way of coping with the worst by giving voice to it so that regardless of what happens to us we feel the freedom to express our pain. Our expression of pain invites others to carry us when we feel that we cannot carry ourselves, to enter a place of unknowing understanding that the community is there with us.
- Lamentations reminds us that it is okay to live with questions about God and with doubts but encourages us to look beyond despair. Lamentations encourages us to make our confession about the steadfast faithfulness of God and to hold on to what we believe.
- Lamentations serves as a model of courageous perseverance through dark days and even darker nights while being open to learning important lessons. Lessons such as:
  - a. Human suffering will always be part of our world and we should always be prepared to stand with those who suffer.
  - b. Remain open to listening and learning as there is always much we can do to witness to wholeness, to show how to respect all persons regardless of what race, culture, nationality, or way that they express their gender identity.
  - c. Internalize our faith so that we are never indifferent to the suffering of others. Our faith is what we hold onto

when we are taken captive by fear. God wants us to have a faith that brings us hope amid our greatest despair, a faith that can see us through any bad ol' day.

Friends, sisters and brothers, this past week has been incredibly heavy. For those who may be watching us online and who may not know much about this community of faith, we have on staff a refugee from Afghanistan who made his way to the U.S. several years ago but who has family in Afghanistan. For this community, this unfolding of the events in Afghanistan is not only painful it is personal. Several of us made our way to the Capital of Lansing, Michigan yesterday to stand with the Afghan people, to lament with them and to let them know that they have a community of people that stand with them.

This past week has been heavy because we partner with a nursing school in Haiti and have members who have worked and served in Haiti. We lament the great losses in Haiti together and we want Haitian people to know that they have a community of people that stand with them.

As people of faith, we are to move together through these struggles, to move beyond the darkness and stand beside those who are in those places of unknowing while holding hope and holding faith.

**Let us pray:** Holy One, today our hearts ache, many of us have questions that have no answers, we are those people this day to whom Jeremiah wrote his great requiem to. His words may describe the way that many of us feel watching the tragic events of this past week unfold. Remind us again that your steadfast love never ceases, your great mercies never come to an end and great is your faithfulness to all your children everywhere. Amen

