

“Wisdom from the Margins: Lamentations, Part One”:
A Sermon For Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for July 22nd 2018 (Ninth Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Lamentations 1: 12-22

To turn from the 2nd of the five so-called Old Testament scrolls (the book *Ruth*) to the third of the five scrolls (the book *Lamentations*) is to experience a shift in tone and content that is almost impossible to comprehend. Indeed: it is sobering even to consider the fact that so stark and dramatic a book as *Lamentations* forms part of the same scriptural heritage as so delightfully gentle a book as *Ruth*. And yet, there they are: not only in the same Bible but—in the traditional Jewish way of ordering the Hebrew scriptures—side by side, right next door to one another.

And it’s worth noting, I think, that the traditional order of the five scrolls is related to the fact that these five books—the five scrolls—are arranged in such a way as to map in the same order as the Jewish observance with which each scroll is connected. And so *Song of Songs*, which is read during Passover—the **early** spring harvest festival—comes first. Next comes *Ruth*, the book that is read during the Jewish festival known as Shavuot (we call it Pentecost) which is basically the **late** spring harvest festival. Late spring is followed by summer, and so—quite rightly—the third book, *Lamentations*, follows next: correlated to a very un-festive festival, known as *Tish B’Av*, (the ninth day of the month of Av), an occasion which—like all Jewish holidays given the lunar nature of the Hebrew calendar—floats around in our calendar, but always manages to fall in the summer. And yes, it’s hard to think of *Tish B’Av* as a festival; on the contrary, it is one of the two most solemn days in the Jewish year: given that it commemorates the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Babylonians some 600 years before the birth of Christ. Furthermore, Tish B’Av is a date upon which multiple subsequent disasters have befallen the Jewish people, including the second destruction of the Temple, at the hands of the Romans, roughly 40 years after the death of Christ. And yes: by one of those weird twists of serendipity—I did not plan ahead to make this happen but only discovered after the fact that it would work out in this way—today (July 22nd in our solar calendar) just happens to coincide, this year, with the ninth day of Av in the lunar Hebrew calendar. Strange...but true. Welcome to Tish B’Av...and welcome to this very troubling Biblical book...a Biblical book which, intriguingly...

...more than any of the other five Old Testament scrolls—corresponds closely to an actual historical event. While true that subsequent history provided yet further sad connections between this book and fresh instances of disaster befalling the Jewish people, there can be no getting away from the special connection this book bears to the nightmarish events of 587 B.C. when, after a lengthy siege, the Babylonians managed to breach the walls of the city of Jerusalem, and wreak sheer havoc upon the city, its magnificent palace, its magnificent Temple, and the people for whom the city was both precious and sacred. That’s why, in my humble opinion, the location of the book *Lamentations* within the Christian Bible is totally appropriate.

Unlike our Jewish sisters and brothers who place the book within the five scrolls, we Christians place it immediately after the book of the prophet *Jeremiah*. While there is a great deal of scepticism on the part of most scholars as to whether Jeremiah actually wrote *Lamentations*, the bottom line is that Jeremiah **was** the great prophetic witness to the fall of Jerusalem. And so yes: placing *Lamentations* right after *Jeremiah* (and right before *Ezekiel* who was also a witness to the fate of the Jewish people during this horrific time in their history)...placing *Lamentations* right between *Jeremiah* and *Ezekiel* is more than fitting: emphasizing, as it does, the historical context in which the book was first created, as well as highlighting the fact that here is a book which speaks a melancholy note to our time, from the bosom of a melancholy time in the life of God's people. In short: a book of sadness...for seasons of sadness.

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Well. In the time remaining to me, this morning, I want to explore two themes: touching first upon the extent to which this small book can be a tremendous **resource** to us as people of faith, but then proceeding to full acknowledgement of the fact that it is also a book that raises some pretty **thorny theological issues** for us. But let's begin...let's begin by noting how crucial a resource the book *Lamentations* can really and truly be, starting with the book's very title. The sad truth, you see: the sad truth is that we Christians are not always very good at lament. All too often we back away: treating lament as if it were somehow unworthy of a people who know the Lord Jesus.

And this past week...as I pondered *Lamentations*, and as I pondered the reluctance so many of us experience when it comes to giving full voice to our grief—full voice to **our** lamentations—I found myself thinking about my colleague and friend Keith Howard...and some wise words Keith recently shared with those who read his blog. (<http://www.keithhoward.ca>). Those of you who know Keith—now retired from active United Church ministry in Victoria B.C.—those who know Keith may be aware that his son Caleb has struggled with addiction issues for many years. At times Keith, through his blog, shares not only his own reflections, but Caleb's. And recently—during a time when Caleb was struggling—Keith spoke of his own need to lament. He writes:

“Sometimes when people talk with me about the struggles of their own life or query my emotional or spiritual state they are tempted to move from a description of their situation to a counterpoint, ‘but I’ve been so blessed in other ways.’ While that may be correct, it feels as if they are **attempting to balance a ledger**. These hard things have come into my life, but I should not only dwell on these but also focus on the positive.”

Keith goes on to make the point that while—from an emotional standpoint—we may well need to remind ourselves of the positives lest we sink into despair, from a spiritual perspective, we dare not simply sweep the negativity under the rug. And so, he concludes that while he **does** strive to hold suffering and blessing in healthy tension, in moments of true honesty he will “describe being **stretched out** between agonizing

worry about the torturous life of one I love, who is being destroyed by addiction, and hope that extends beyond reasonable possibility.”ⁱ

For my part, I would argue—in response to Keith’s honest naming of his “agonizing worry”—I would argue that the hope for which he yearns would not be real hope were it built on a foundation of lies. Whatever else lament represents in our lives, it represents a place where we can be honest with God by first being honest with ourselves: acknowledging the fact that our lives are pock-marked, and that even the most blessed of lives will eventually be scarred by failure, confusion, heartbreak and loss. At those moments when we secretly—or not so secretly—experience the need to cry out to God in our anguish, *Lamentations* can provide a mirror in which to view the anguish of faithful people who have walked this way before us and who were not ashamed to bring their grief into the presence of God. And it is worth noting one particular paradox about this book, namely:

...namely that *Lamentations* offers its lament in the most highly refined and structured of ways. Like the 119th Psalm, four of the five chapters of *Lamentations* take the form of an acrostic: in which the verses are arranged so that the first word of each verse begins with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, arranged from the first letter *aleph* to the last letter *tau*. That is most clearly on display in chapters 1, 2 & 4: each of which contain precisely 22 verses, corresponding to the 22 verses of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter 3 is even more elaborate, in which there are 66 verses, the first three verses beginning with the first letter in the alphabet, the next three beginning with the second letter in the alphabet, right through the final three verses each of which begin with the final letter in the Hebrew alphabet. As for the fifth chapter: it doesn’t follow that alphabet-pattern although it too has 22 verses, one verse for each letter of the alphabet. And I realize...

...realize that may sound highly artificial: but I actually think that it is the author’s way of saying that here is a book that will take suffering seriously, that will not dismiss it or shunt it aside. Here is a book that will not indulge in make-believe but rather provide a comprehensive look at suffering, a compendium, as it were, of grief in all of its many different manifestations and forms. “Attention must be paid”.ⁱⁱ Attention must be paid to the toil of human living! “Attention must be paid”. Attention must be paid to the myriad forms of human anguish. Grief must be given shape...given structure...above all, given a voice. *Lamentations* does precisely that; we are blessed...blessed indeed, to have it as part of our Biblical canon.

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That having been said. *Lamentations*, blessed resource though it most certainly proves itself to be....

...at Knox in Parksville, on the Sunday after 9/11 way back in 2001, rather than preach a sermon (I had no words), I simply read excerpts from *Lamentations*,

excerpts which spoke to us with an immediacy that made it hard to believe the book was 2500 years old!...

...*Lamentations*, blessed resource though it most certainly proves itself to be over and over again, **does** raise significant theological challenges. To put the matter succinctly, the unavoidable truth is that *Lamentations* is **not** *Job*: not by a long-shot. And the difference—in a nutshell—is that in *Job* the central character laments not merely because he is suffering, but because he believes himself the victim of a case of mistaken identity since he doesn't think he **deserves** the immense suffering that has been handed out to him. Moreover, in the preface to *Job*, we the reader are let in on the secret that *Job* is basically correct: he is suffering not because he is being punished for his wrong-doing, but because God has made a small wager with Satan, and they decide to make *Job* a test-case in order to assess who is going to win the little side-bet into which they have entered. Charming, hey! But the point is that *Job* is an **innocent** sufferer, which gives his book a very different cast than *Lamentations* which involves merited suffering: suffering that is seen to have been deserved because of the sinfulness of those undergoing the suffering, suffering—in short—that God is seen to have rightly brought upon this people, because of their hard-heartedness and their stubborn refusal to return to God.

That—quite simply—is what I am referring to, when I speak of the theological challenge posed to us by *Lamentations*. Who is this God, who would bring such suffering into the lives of His people? That's one of the truly vexing questions anyone who wishes to believe in the God-of-love must eventually face. *Lamentations*, with its insistence that God has used Babylon in order to bring Zion and Zion's people to their knees, in order to provoke true repentance in the hearts and minds of God's chosen ones: *Lamentations* leaves us no wiggle-room in which to escape that most stark of questions. Who is this God? And here...here I am going to be really honest with you.

As I read some of the literature on *Lamentations*—some of the literature specifically addressing the **theology**, the God-talk, of *Lamentations*: frankly, neither my heart nor my mind was as set to ease as I might have liked for them to have been. Yes: I know that God fashioned a world and takes full responsibility for everything that happens in this world, the good, the bad and the ugly. And so I admire the Hebraic insistence that anything that happens must, at the end of the day, be seen to come to us from the hand of God. I get that; amen to all of that. And I also get...I also get that God, like a good parent, must sometimes be stern with us: must sometimes do a few things that will get our attention. I get that: amen to all of that; an especially hearty amen when God has used a good swift kick in the you-know-where to get **my** attention. And yes: I also duly note that Jesus himself appears to be quite at home with the distinctly direct way in which the piety of the Old Testament connects suffering with sin.ⁱⁱⁱ A further amen to that! But really...really! When you read the stories of the siege of cities like the siege that brought down Jerusalem 2600 years ago, when you hear of innocents slaughtered and of life purchased on the cheap: what lessons are truly being learned from such random shedding of blood? And since the innocent in such circumstances are all too often mowed down no less extravagantly than the guilty, how

then can we speak of justice being done—**God's** justice being done—when an entire city is over-run by its enemies, with no distinctions made between the young and the old, the warrior and the civilian, the righteous and the unrighteous. To simply nod my head in silent agreement with the book's insistence that God was the author of all of the horror that befell this people in 587 B.C....

...for that matter simply to nod my head in silent agreement with those in our own day who insist that God is the author of the comparable horrors that have befallen so many people in our time...

...such easy agreement with a horrific possibility is not something I can lightly offer. Indeed: it's not something that I can offer at all.

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The older I get...the longer I live inside the precincts of the Christian faith...the less able I am to provide a neat and tidy rationale for the immense weight of this world's suffering, let alone a cogent account of the role **God** plays in the midst of that suffering. No cogent rationale...and no cogent explanations...other than the stark testimony, the stark account, provided by those two stubbornly adjoined pieces of wood that adorn the front of this and most Christian places of worship. Not an explanation of suffering, but simple testimony to God's inexplicable willingness to become a full participant—on the receiving end—of the ongoing suffering and the ongoing lament of the world God fashioned in the beginning. And you know:

I'm always struck by the subtle guilt-trip we preachers like to lay on folks who bypass Good Friday enroute to Easter Sunday: almost implying that if you don't endure all the really bad stuff that happens on Good Friday you don't really deserve to celebrate Easter Sunday. And yes: of course, Good Friday is a much grimmer day than Easter Sunday: I'll grant you that. But here's my issue with that perspective. If the joy of Easter is that it reveals to us the power of God's love to **overcome** evil, the joy of Good Friday...

...no, that isn't a typo....

...the matchless, incomparable **joy** of Good Friday is that it reveals to us the extent of God's willingness to **endure** evil, as a way of becoming a full participant in the grief and despair that is inevitably part and parcel of our human lot: exhibiting for all who have eyes to see, a divine love that can triumph even in weakness, a divine light that can burn brightly even in the darkest of dark nights. Not an "explanation" of our lamentations...but an astounding willingness to become one with us in our lament: this God who invites us to become part of **His** world by first laying power and pomp to one side, in order to become a part of **our** world. And surely...surely...that gift of God's own Good Friday lament, joined to our on-going lament, is of infinitely greater value, than any explanation, apologetic or rationale for suffering, that even the wisest among us could ever hope to offer.

*As we question and accuse you
out of depths of being tried,
could it be, God! that in weakness,
you yourself are crucified?
Are you with us in our grief?
Help us in our unbelief!^{iv}*

Through Christ! Amen!!

ⁱ <http://www.keithhoward.ca/2018/06/suffering-and-hope-in-the-tipi-and-the-cathedral/>

ⁱⁱ A well known line, spoken by Linda Loman—Willy Loman’s wife—in Arthur Miller’s “Death of a Salesman”.

ⁱⁱⁱ See, for example, Luke 13: 1-5

^{iv} “When, O God, Our Faith is Tested”; lyrics by Fred Kaan, music by Ron Klusmeier.
<http://www.musiklus.com/anthology/item/361/when-o-god-our-faith-is-tested>