

Texts: Lamentations 1:8-22; 2:10-22

Subject: Lament over Jerusalem

Theme: Behold my Suffering

Third Sunday after Pentecost; June 21, 2020, *Online Worship; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and the Lord Jesus,
Amen.

It's been quite a week. In the last seven days, we remembered the Emanuel 9, celebrated Juneteenth, and watched as protests against racial injustice continued in many states as well as here in our city. Here at home, Las Vegas Mayor Pro-Tem Michelle Fiore stepped down from that position after reports surfaced about racially insensitive comments at a fundraiser. We cannot deny that we have a problem with racism in our country. Many might like to deny it, and say that we “don’t see color” or are not responsible for the sins of the generations who came before us. We’d like to think that we would never knowingly discriminate against someone because of their race, or act in a prejudiced way. We don’t even want to admit that those of us who identify as white have not had to overcome the same barriers to success as our siblings who are black and indigenous and people of color. Yet the events of this year have had a way of laying bare our frailties, and exposing the suffering that still remains for so many Americans. When we are frustrated and angered by the effects of systemic racism, by economic inequality that has steadily increased over the last 40 years, by the increasing costs of healthcare, effects of mass incarceration, and over policing of black communities, our pain flows out into the streets of the cities we live in.

People are hurting. People are mad. People are mad at the people who are mad. People are mad about being mad. We even sometimes get mad at God. But anger is a gift. Our tears are a blessing from God. The One who creates us, redeems us, and fills

us with a Spirit of life and breath can handle our accusations, indictments, and insults, and in fact willingly takes them and our pain and suffering and loves us anyway. But what do we do with our righteous anger at injustice? Where do we pour out our frustration at the greed and illness and violence we see in the world? How do we continue living faithfully when we fail to see God responding to our pain?

Lament is the the act of taking our grievances to God. Pouring out our tears, and naming the hurt humanity has experienced due to persecution, famine, and war, we cry out to the heavens. Speaking our deeply personal heartbreaks, grief, and loneliness, we rage against the one who created us. It's a biblical way of expressing the anguish of being human. We lament. We protest against the holy divine, begging for absolution, justice, vengeance, a reason, some deliverance, comfort, a way forward, or an end to it all.

This first chapter of the book of Lamentations begins with the song of some bystander, seeing the destruction of Jerusalem, after the temple was wrecked and looted by the invading Babylonians in 586 B.C. That site of God's presence was gone - Israel's illusion of exceptionalism was no more. Bible scholar, author, and pastor Robert Williamson notes that the language evokes sexual violence done to the holy place, the center of Jewish society. Jerusalem takes on the image of a woman who has been made to be unclean. She's untouchable, unacceptable, unholy. And the assumption is, as it often is for women who endure such violence, that she deserved it. Israel's habit of going after other gods has finally caught up with them, and this is the result. This account is all the more unbearable because of the matter of fact way the narrator

reports the news. Like a funeral singer, Williamson writes, the narrative describes the city exposed. It's disturbing. Jerusalem herself groans and looks away.

When we're driving with the kids and approach a car accident, I get a little nervous. I don't want to expose them to anything disturbing at their age, and you never know what you're going to see. But it happens a lot, and naturally, we want to know what happened, so we look. We say a prayer and hope that everyone is okay.

When we see suffering, we can easily become detached. Many of us will have some empathy, some concern for the tragic events unfolding, trying to understand how it might feel to be in someone's place who has been directly affected. But unless the tragedy happens *to us*, we are only concerned bystanders, watching from a distance, unable to help, paralyzed by self interest, fearing the consequence that might come from personal involvement, or shocked into inaction. Maybe we don't know what to do, so we end up doing nothing. There are still kids in cages near the Southern border. What can we do about that? The Coronavirus has taken more than twice the number American lives lost in the Vietnam war. We can hardly imagine that number. There are still U.S. Troops dying in Afghanistan. Do we remember them? It's not that we don't see it - maybe it's the opposite - we see too much of it. It's on the news, social media, every place we go. We are exhausted by the amount of suffering in the world. We see it. We have chosen not to do anything about it.

So when we are confronted with images of black and brown neighbors being brutality beaten, choked, and worse, and groups of Americans engaging in peaceful protests and those just passing by hit with rubber bullets, gaging on tear gas, and hit by cars, we assume they must have deserved it. Surely, if they would just follow directions,

if they would cooperate, this wouldn't be happening. If they we're breaking the law, then they would not be in this situation. This theology is present and prominent in scripture, of course. A common understanding in ancient Israel even before Moses, but explicitly stated in Exodus and Deuteronomy was the belief that obedience meant blessing and disobedience meant suffering God's wrath - being cursed. Williamson notes it's the same kind of twisted perception that leads to some televangelist blaming victims of tragedy for their own suffering and claiming that God brings hurricanes and earthquakes, even meteors - to destroy gay people. These kind of beliefs can lead to more oppression, not less, more judgement, not mercy, and a deep injury to the neighbor.

That image of God is not comforting. That understanding leads only to fear, not love. Which is why Lament seems to be hard to carry for us. Who is this God anyway, who is supposed to hear and help us? Who is the one who loves us enough to send a Son to be redeemer for all of creation, to be born, and suffer with us, to be raised from the dead - but doesn't show up when we are in very real distress?

Hear Lady Jerusalem herself: "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the LORD inflicted on the day of his fierce anger" (v.12). No longer the detached witness, but the victim herself, we hear the voice of the one suffering. We hear what it means to be blamed for the pain. No one comes to help. Those who know the destruction cannot take it away.

Like those passers-by, we don't always know how to help when people are hurting. So many of us are struggling to survive ourselves. Some think they have the

answers, and offer platitudes, calls for peace, and prayers without action. Most of all we want calm. We want quiet. We want smooth sailing. That just doesn't get us where we need to go. If status quo is all we strive for, the only peace we will have will come with a higher body count. The cries for justice that come from the streets of Minneapolis, Seattle, Baltimore, Miami, D.C., across the nation and across the world will continue. They are lamenting, "Behold my suffering!" Who will hear? Who will come to their aid?

When one of the kids falls down, or gets a scrape or a bump, usually the first thing that comes out of my mouth is, "Oh, you're fine." Why do I say that? Where did I get that? My son or daughter just hurt themselves and I need to somehow cancel out the pain they're feeling? Yes, my instinct is to give comfort and make it better. I want to fix it. But I'm trying to learn to listen first. To respond to the spoken expression of pain. Maybe they're not fine. A lot of people we know are *not fine* right now. Our planet is not fine right now. Our country is not fine right now. Our laments are justified. Our feelings of anxiety and frustration are real, and real people are crying out after centuries of oppression and injury.

This book gives no easy answers. This reading ends with a call for retribution in place of reconciliation or redemption. Only in the next chapter does the detached funeral singer become a witness and advocate. The narrator is the voice of the one who hears and believes and advocates before the Lord. "Look, O lord and consider! to whom have you done this?" 2:20). We are not impotent witnesses to the suffering around us. Even if we are *not directly suffering* the same as our neighbor, each of us has a role a duty to fulfill.

As the body of Christ in the world, as ones baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus, we *have* been freed from working for our own salvation. We don't earn anything by being a witness, a voice for the voiceless, an advocate for justice in the world. In fact the Greek word for witness is martyr, more often associated with one who takes on suffering and even death for the sake of another. We are called to work for the sake of justice for our neighbor, for our children, for the ones we love, and dislike just the same, to live bold lives of faith and give witness to this freedom we have been given through the cross. When we are present with those who lament, we are called to be listeners. We serve by showing up, and learning from them and with them. We are gifted with the opportunity to be allies for trans siblings. We have been blessed to lay down self serving traditions for the sake of those whose ancestry is different from our own. We are broken open to offer a welcome that asks not for assimilation but for full participation. We don't need to transform anyone to make them worthy of our time and attention, our presence, or of God's love.

Behold the suffering in the world. So many are hurting. We can't always fix it. We don't have all the answers. You might be suffering too. But don't look away. Listen. Learn. Lament. Lean into the love of Jesus that has been given to us. That's what the Spirit is for. We have been filled with this power of God that sustains us even in the worst of times, in the depths of our despair. That boldness drives us to persevere, even when we feel like God is far away, and become witnesses to the pain around us. So that the accounts we bring and the songs we sing are not of judgement and blame, but of love and healing, and transformation and life. That all God's children here and everywhere would find a landing place for their tears. Amen.