

Welcome

You'll never hear more bad theology than at a funeral.

One of the most difficult experiences in my pastoral career was in Ohio. A seventeen year old member of our church was killed in a car accident with her friends one night. The whole community was rocked, and as a result, several hundred came to her funeral. As one of the pastors, I stood with her parents in the receiving line, offering handshakes and hugs to mourners before they offered condolences to her parents.

If you've ever stood in those lines, you know that's where people say some truly awful things. Things like, "God needed another angel in heaven."

Really? God's so needy he takes children? God can't just make more angels?

Or, "Everything happens for a reason." As though any reason is adequate to bring comfort in the midst of grief.

We say those things because we're not good at grieving. Other people's grief makes us very uncomfortable. We feel an anxiety that makes us want to push all that away, to fix it, to do SOMETHING to make everything feel less awkward.

So we offer a cheap platitude because then we DID something and we can LEAVE and not feel like we're abandoning someone.

Times like right now, when we're not in the middle of the ickyness of grief, it's obviously the wrong way to respond.

But what DO we do? How DO we respond to pain (and not just individual pain, but the pain in our culture, in our world)? What is a good, helpful, appropriate response to grief?

Today is about how to be WITH each other in our grief. To be honest about the pain, to bear witness with each other. When we can be honest about our grief, we enter into the process of lamenting, which is how God invites us to heal, to grow and to become agents of healing in the world.

Message

How is grieving connected to lament? And why does God invite us to lament? How can being *sad* help us become agents of healing in the world?

We just began a series called Good Grief. It's about how we respond to tragedy in our lives. Last week, Tim Basselin introduced us to the process of lament. When tragedy strikes, we become disoriented, which means we begin in a state of orientation - we just go about our lives, our beliefs and assumptions

intact. But then something happens: a relationship ends. Someone gets sick. A natural disaster strikes. Life gets turned upside down. We're disoriented.

Disorientation is uncomfortable. Our culture teaches us to medicate or avoid the discomfort of disorientation. But it's in the place of disorientation we have the chance to grow. Because in our lament, we are crying out to God. We're insisting that this isn't right - we're not meant to live in a world of suffering and pain. And we're seeing in this series that it is specifically this movement of lament, this sitting in the pain of the disorientation that helps us reorient - to see where we were wrong, to see where we need to stand up to address injustice, to repent of sin.

The life on the *other* side of lament is better. We find better life, deeper wholeness than we had previously imagined. But only if we push *through* the process of lamenting. We'll never get there if we medicate or avoid.

Pastor and author Soong-Chan Rah offers two observations about Lament that are particularly helpful for us:

Lament in the Bible is a liturgical response to the reality of suffering and engages God in the context of pain and trouble. The hope of lament is that God would respond to human suffering that is wholeheartedly communicated through lament...

Lament is a liturgical response: that means it's something we do together, in the context of worship. Lament belongs in Christian worship. This comes as a surprise to a lot of us because we're used to a faith that is only happy, joyful, triumphalist. We're used to a Christianity that's about how to be a good person, how to get healthy, wealthy and wise. We're used to a Christianity that wins.

But that's not the faith we find reflected in Scripture. More than 1/3 of the Psalms (which are the worship songs of the Bible) are what scholars call Lament psalms. A third. So not most, but more than we usually allow room for.

When our faith doesn't have room for pain, it's not an honest faith. We live in a messed up world, and we have to allow that to enter into our worship with us. We have to allow the pain and fear and anxiety of the world into our worship or our worship isn't *honest*. Which leads us to Rah's second observation:

Lament is an act of protest as the lamenter is allowed to express indignation and even outrage about the experience of suffering. The lamenter talks back to God and ultimately petitions him for help, in the midst of pain. The one who laments can call out to God for help, and in that outcry there is the hope and even the manifestation of praise. -- Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament*

Lament is a declaration that the world is broken, that something is deeply wrong. It's essentially calling out to God and demanding God *do* something.

Again, that feels wrong to us. God is up there, and we're down here, and we're not allowed to criticize God or even feel negative emotions toward God. Maybe we're afraid God will zap us, or maybe it's from a place of respect: much like we don't want to talkback to our parents, we want to honor and respect God.

But again and again in the Scriptures, we find Lament. In fact, the Bible teaches us *how* to Lament. When we lament the way the Bible shows us, lamentation becomes an act of faithfulness. Because when we lament, we're pointing to the gap between the way God said the world *should* be and the way we're *experiencing* it. We say, God, Look! This isn't right! Help! Do something! We need you!

Lamentation is a way of remembering that God is faithful and good by *calling on God* to act faithfully and good.

[Scripture Slide] Which brings us to the book of Lamentations. Turn with me to Lamentations 1. Rah describes Lamentations as the pinnacle of Israel's grief. This book was written when God's people were at their lowest point, as bad as bad could get.

The book was written after the Exile, which is how we refer to the event where the Babylonian Empire conquered the nation of Judah. They destroyed the capital city of Jerusalem, slaughtered hundreds, destroyed God's Temple and forcibly deported the city's elite - the priests and government.

The Babylonians left behind a smoldering ruin. Famine, disease and destitution were all there was available for the citizens who were left behind. They had no infrastructure, no leadership, no one to help them pray.

Except the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah had lived in Jerusalem before the Exile. As the Babylonian armies made their way toward Jerusalem, Jeremiah warned the city's elite not to try to make alliances with the surrounding nations. He warned again and again that what they needed was to return to faith in God, that if they persisted in putting their trust in other nations rather than God, they would be conquered and destroyed.

Jerusalem didn't listen, and Jeremiah's predictions came true.

And now, as the city grieves, as they process what happened and why, Jeremiah is with them, among them, grieving with them, shaping their grief into lament.

Each chapter of the book is an individual poem. So for the next five weeks, we're going to work through the book a chapter at a time. There are two primary actors in this poem. The first is the prophet, who in the poem acts as the friend of the griever. In this poem, the prophet is not the one grieving. He's the one with the griever. The griever is the second actor. In Lamentations, she is a woman, who is a personification of Jerusalem - so really the whole people of God.

The poem begins with the prophet approaching the woman, describing her situation. You'll note that he doesn't try to speak to her, to offer platitudes. So similarly, we're not going to pick apart his words. As I read, engage your sense. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell in the scene he describes?

Jerusalem, once so full of people,
is now deserted.
She who was once great among the nations
now sits alone like a widow.
Once the queen of all the earth,
she is now a slave.

She sobs through the night;
tears stream down her cheeks.
Among all her lovers,
there is no one left to comfort her.
All her friends have betrayed her
and become her enemies.

Judah has been led away into captivity,
oppressed with cruel slavery.
She lives among foreign nations
and has no place of rest.
Her enemies have chased her down,
and she has nowhere to turn.

The roads to Jerusalem are in mourning,
for crowds no longer come to celebrate the festivals.
The city gates are silent,
her priests groan,
her young women are crying—
how bitter is her fate!

Her oppressors have become her masters,
and her enemies prosper,
for the LORD has punished Jerusalem
for her many sins.
Her children have been captured
and taken away to distant lands.

All the majesty of beautiful Jerusalem

has been stripped away.
Her princes are like starving deer
searching for pasture.
They are too weak to run
from the pursuing enemy.

In the midst of her sadness and wandering,
Jerusalem remembers her ancient splendor.
But now she has fallen to her enemy,
and there is no one to help her.
Her enemy struck her down
and laughed as she fell.

Jerusalem has sinned greatly,
so she has been tossed away like a filthy rag.
All who once honored her now despise her,
for they have seen her stripped naked and humiliated.
All she can do is groan
and hide her face.

She defiled herself with immorality
and gave no thought to her future.
Now she lies in the gutter
with no one to lift her out.
"LORD, see my misery," she cries.
"The enemy has triumphed."

The enemy has plundered her completely,
taking every precious thing she owns.
She has seen foreigners violate her sacred Temple,
the place the LORD had forbidden them to enter.

Her people groan as they search for bread.
They have sold their treasures for food to stay alive. -- Lamentations 1:1-11a

This is an awful, painful scene to witness. The plight of Jerusalem's people, embodied in the figure of the grieving woman, is something we want to flee from. We want to shut our bibles and pull out Facebook, or maybe at least flip over to the gospels and read some parables.

We want to escape that feeling of helplessness in the face of such raw, naked grief. We want the prophet to say, "Don't worry! Everything happens for a reason!" Or maybe share a facebook post from a

Christian celebrity explaining how this is God's wrath or God's plan or *anything* that will let us walk away from this pain and not face it anymore.

But Jeremiah doesn't look away. He stays. He looks. He bears witness.

Because Lament is protest. That sense of wrong we feel is GOOD. It's an appropriate response to pain like this. Because the world wasn't created to be destroyed. People weren't created to be killed. Cities weren't built to be devastated. Kids aren't supposed to go hungry. We aren't supposed to be afraid all the time.

There's something *wrong*. That's why we get that feeling. It's a good, right and true feeling.

So even though we want to run from it, running isn't the answer. Avoiding and pretending won't fix anything. It won't make the wrong go away.

If we want to have any hope of healing, of growing, of being present when God moves, we have to wait. To face it.

And lament helps us do that. Lament teaches us how to sit in the pain.

The prophet sits with the woman, and now she speaks:

O LORD, look," she mourns,
"and see how I am despised.

"Does it mean nothing to you, all you who pass by?
Look around and see if there is any suffering like mine,
which the LORD brought on me
when he erupted in fierce anger.

"He has sent fire from heaven that burns in my bones.
He has placed a trap in my path and turned me back.
He has left me devastated,
racked with sickness all day long.

"He wove my sins into ropes
to hitch me to a yoke of captivity.
The Lord sapped my strength and turned me over to my enemies;
I am helpless in their hands.

"The Lord has treated my mighty men
with contempt.

At his command a great army has come
to crush my young warriors.
The Lord has trampled his beloved city
like grapes are trampled in a winepress.

“For all these things I weep;
tears flow down my cheeks.
No one is here to comfort me;
any who might encourage me are far away.
My children have no future,
for the enemy has conquered us.”

Jerusalem reaches out for help,
but no one comforts her.
Regarding his people Israel,
the LORD has said,
“Let their neighbors be their enemies!
Let them be thrown away like a filthy rag!”

“The LORD is right,” Jerusalem says,
“for I rebelled against him.
Listen, people everywhere;
look upon my anguish and despair,
for my sons and daughters
have been taken captive to distant lands.

“I begged my allies for help,
but they betrayed me.
My priests and leaders
starved to death in the city,
even as they searched for food
to save their lives.

LORD, see my anguish!
My heart is broken
and my soul despairs,
for I have rebelled against you.
In the streets the sword kills,
and at home there is only death.” -- Lamentations 1:11b-20

With the prophet's presence, the woman is able to give voice to her grief. She names her sense of abandonment, her suffering at the hands of would-be friends. She names her own sin, which led to her pain. She cries out for God to deliver her.

And the prophet is there for all of this. This is where we want him to jump in with the Churchy answers yet again. To offer the platitudes that will make us feel better. But he is silent. He listens.

And the poem ends in that awkward pain, with no resolution.

How can there be resolution in this moment? How can there be anything but pain?

Friends, when we find ourselves in the presence of grief, we cannot turn away. We cannot offer platitudes and answers (even when they're good, thoughtful, theologically sound answers). Answers aren't what the grieving person needs first.

The first movement of lamentation is honesty. Naming the pain. Sitting with it. Refusing to let the pain and fear and awkward feelings chase us away.

We can't begin to heal until we're honest about our pain.

I was asked to pray at the funeral of that teen who died in a car crash. What kind of prayer is appropriate in that situation? How beautiful and flowery do the words have to be before the parents suddenly aren't sad?

I wrote a prayer of Lament. I didn't offer any churchy answers to pain. I didn't try to address the problem of Evil. Instead, I simply cried out. I confessed that I knew this was wrong - God didn't create a world where kids are supposed to die. Though this was an accident, it was an evil in the world. I asked God to be with us in our pain. And that was it.

I had seldom felt more useless as a pastor. I had no answers to give. I could only hurt with those who were hurting.

But a couple of weeks later, a man in the church came to me to thank me for my prayer. He told me how lost he had felt - he had kids of his own, and he couldn't imagine being in the parents' place. And then he said, "Your prayer didn't try to explain everything away. It gave me permission to be angry, to be sad. It let me admit that what happened was wrong. Thank you."

Friends, too often we rush past pain to try to find answers. To make the hurt go away. But that's not how we heal.

We can't move past the hurt until we name it.

We can't begin to heal until we're honest about our pain.

Examen + Communion

[Communion Slide] Before we go any further, we must approach the communion table. It is at this table, we remember that God did not leave us in our pain. Rather, God entered into our pain by becoming human, by suffering everything we suffer, and ultimately taking our sin on himself.

By coming to the table today, we share in Jesus' pain and learn to face the deep brokenness in our world. Jesus invites us to follow him...

1. When recently have you sat with the pain of grief, or with someone else's pain?
2. When recently have you rushed to answers or tried to avoid pain?
3. How in the next week might you be tempted to try to avoid pain and grief?
4. How can you be honest about your pain or someone else's pain this week?

Assignment/Blessing

Are you the prophet? Be with.

Are you the woman? Be honest.