

Welcome

Good morning, my name is Katie Fisher. I'm happy to be with you all today as a guest on the preaching team. This morning I will share about one of the chapters in scripture that I have wrestled and fought with again and again. The art work that is up around the sanctuary is mine and has come as a result of that struggle.

For the last 6 years I have been living with chronic illness. At times I have been so ill I can't get out of bed or take care of myself. Wrestling through dark days and against my own unfulfilled ambitions has led me to stop praying for healing and to reimagine what hope looks like for me.

The struggle has been long and discouraging.

I stopped praying for healing because I was exhausting myself in searching for a solution that was not coming. I wanted a solution in which I could continue to be strong and in need of nothing—and no one.

Thankfully my prayers remain unanswered.

Today we are going to talk about hope. We're going to look at the false hope we want to see in Lamentations 3 and the sustaining hope which the Prophet declares—the same hope Christ embodied on the cross. To this hope, through honest lament, Christ beckons us, his church, to join him.

Message

Today we are continuing in a series called Good Grief following the poetic movements in the book of Lamentations. This study focuses on our response to tragedy and pain in our lives.

The Old Testament book of Lamentations provides a framework and example for honest lament which moves from orientation to disorientation to reorientation. We move through this pattern both individually and as a community. And sometimes go through this cycle without realizing it until we get to reorientation.

We all start out with our attitudes, beliefs, or feelings about something. This is our orientation. Or our direction. Orientation can come from life experiences, our families, or the culture around us. We would continue in that direction except something happens to disrupt our trajectory. The disruption could be a natural disaster, or a tragedy like a death in the family, or an illness. Disruption could also come from meeting a new friend, or even from a movie or book.

The disruption pushes us away from our basic assumptions and beliefs changing the trajectory. It's similar to getting off the trail while hiking. Bushwhacking while trying to climb a mountain is really difficult and can be scary—especially if you are disorientated about which direction you need to go.

Our common reaction to these moments of disorientation in life is to hide them or fear them. In a state of disorientation we are vulnerable. I know I don't like others knowing when I'm vulnerable, scared, or in need. Moving toward community and voicing our fear and pain through Lament helps us sit with the tension of disorientation.

Reorientation happens subtly, or even by surprise. Somehow while following a faint path through the trees it turns into a proper trail and leads to an opening. We often rejoice in the relief on the other side of disorientation. We find things that make us feel like the disorientation was worth it.

But we don't lament *so that* we can be reorientated. We lament because we are humans with complex emotions and *not lamenting*, not having an outward expression of pain and sorrow, suppresses part of our humanity. Through lamenting we find a better, deeper wholeness.

Honest lament is where sustaining hope and life-giving community live. Neither hope nor community can be gained by avoiding or covering over pain, suffering, or disorientation about the events in our lives.

The book of Lamentations, an Old Testament book written by the Prophet Jeremiah, details the cries of lament from Jerusalem as it falls in a siege to the Babylonians.

There was a photo that went viral a year or so ago of a little Syrian boy. He was covered in dust from the rubble of his city and blood from a head wound. He sat on a chair in an ambulance in shock. His hands together on his lap and a blank stare on his face.

When I say that Jerusalem had fallen in siege to the Babylonians imagine the devastation we see coming out of Syria—and so much more. Lamentations says kids fainted in the streets out of hunger. Their skin clung to their bones. The people of Jerusalem were walled in on all sides—trapped between the memory of what their lives and city had been and the black abyss of a forsaken future.

This collection of five poems takes up the metaphor of a woman to describe the city of Jerusalem. The city wrenches in agony, and a poet, the prophet of the Lord, stays within its broken walls. Only this poet attempts to get close. He sits with her. Yet, she turns her face away and refuses to consider his presence a comfort.

Two weeks ago you listened to the grieving cries of the woman as she sat with her pain. Last week you looked at God's anger and his passionate love which invites us toward life. Turn with me today to Lamentations 3 as we consider together the prophet's complex vision of a sustaining hope.

In those rare moments when our sorrow blocks out our joy and we can't get our lips into the right shape to form a smile we turn to Lamentations 3 and pluck out verses 21-25.

**But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:**

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
“The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,
“therefore I will hope in him.”
The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul who seeks him. -- Lamentations 3:21-25

Here, we say, look at this glorious picture of eternal hope in bad times. “Keep your head up and keep praising! God’s mercies and love come new every day.” We repeat this mantra in a variety of ways.

We pull out this section of Lamentations because it fits with a vision of hope that we like. It fits with the narratives playing around us, a narrative that feeds our fears rather than calling us away from them.

When the man who has lost his wife drops a tear in grief we tell him, “Isn’t it beautiful that we don’t have to grieve like non-Christians because you know you will see her again?” To the woman wrestling with breast cancer we say, “God gives us trials so he can better use us. He’s teaching you something.”

We spout off remarks that make us look wise but leave the griever to find God’s comfort—alone. We search for a bright side. We mistake the prophet’s confession for a profession of silver-lining.

We cast the Poet of Lamentations 3 as a lone hero crying out a confession of trust and confidence in the face of everything around him. We marvel at his strength. Despite his circumstances he goes on confessing an impossible confession. We wish we could hold as strong—alone—against our storms of suffering. Our vision of Jeremiah fashions him as a solitary figure in strength and courage.

I’m from Nebraska. My grandparents lived through the dust bowl and Great Depression. My family scrapbooks contain black and white pictures of dirty faced half clothed kids sitting on the front steps of rundown houses. The people who settled Nebraska were hard-working, get-it-done-by-your-own-grit sort of folks. And with so many ways to die—I can see why. In their world, if you can’t help yourself you were a burden. Under those rules you must hide your weaknesses.

We often operate under this notion that the baseline existence of humanity is health, happiness, and ability. And when I am not one of those things I should do everything possible to get back to this sort of status quo position. Anything short of self-sufficiency burdens others and shows vulnerability—which should be avoided at all costs.

Yet, as the Psalmist puts it, life is mostly heartache and pain. And after 70 or even 80 years of this we pass away and are remembered no more. Or as Kevin Kling, a performer and writer said, “If you are able-bodied, it’s only a temporary condition.”

In my long walk with chronic illness I have often wondered about the substance of hope. For years I sought the false hope that we take from the strong, self-sustaining prophet. I strained after a vision of hope which would fix me so I could take care of myself and wouldn’t be a burden. I strained after a vision of hope that required healing so I could return to the status quo and be in need of nothing and no one.

The hope we make from the prophet’s confession centers on our ability to focus on the good and ignore the bad. But you may have noticed those 4 verses we read were at the end of the chapter, it took the prophet 20 verses of agony and pain to get to his 4 verses on the faithfulness of God.

Let us listen to the prophet from the beginning of the chapter and allow his words to re-shape our vision of the hope.

In Lamentations 3 the prophet steps so fully into the pain of the woman that he bares her experience in his own body. He does not stand back and tell her she got what she deserved. He opens the poem afflicted with the separation he feels from God.

I am the man who has seen affliction
under the rod of his wrath;
he has driven and brought me
into darkness without any light;
surely against me he turns his hand
again and again the whole day long.
He has made my flesh and my skin waste away;
he has broken my bones;
he has besieged and enveloped me
with bitterness and tribulation;
he has made me dwell in darkness
like the dead of long ago.
He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;
he has made my chains heavy;
though I call and cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer;
he has blocked my ways with blocks of stones;
he has made my paths crooked. -- Lamentations 3:1-9

His body mutilated and his city destroyed, he cries for help but his prayers blow away unheard. His peers laugh at him. Torn to pieces as if slashed by a wild animal his body fails him. His teeth grind on gravel. He cringes in an ash pile.

He declares that he has forgotten happiness. Endurance and hope both expire. No one comforts him.

In this state he forces himself to recall something to his mind. He declares that the love of the Lord never ends. Just like the day arrives new every morning, so does the Lord's mercy. The Poet sets his soul to wait for the Lord who does not cast off forever.

The prophet proclaims **both** the pain of his reality and the goodness of God. After this comes the most perplexing lines of Lamentations. To the one who waits the prophet says in verse 28-30:

Let him sit alone in silence
when it is laid on him;
let him put his mouth in the dust—
there may yet be hope;
let him give his cheek to the one who strikes,
and let him be filled with insults. – Lamentations 3:28-30

The prophet calls for the one waiting on God to put his mouth in the dust—there may yet be hope; as if eating the dirt was a move toward hope.

What sort of hope comes from pushing into pain and weakness, into the dust and fragility? The hope I have was taught is to wait in eagerness for God's healing. A sort of waiting where I hide my inabilities until I can rid myself of them.

The panel to the left of the stage here shows my process as I visually worked through the tension of this phrase. It's awkward, fragile, and concerning—yet beautiful and elegant, the move of a dancer.

The prophet calls for the eating of dust because he knows that God works in the mysterious gap between the reality of suffering and the goodness of God's promises and character. And where God is at work—hope and life-giving community live.

Like the Poet, Christ knew the goodness of his Father and fully acknowledged the realities of his situation. Christ lived and died in this place of tension.

In the incarnation, Christ came to us. He lived in houses among us. He slept in beds and ate at tables. He cried our tears in the Garden of Gethsemane and at Lazarus' death, and again when entering Jerusalem at the beginning of the passion week. He, like the Poet of Lamentations 3, took into his own body the experience of those he came to dwell with.

Rather than call out our failures to us from a distance, or blame us for getting what we deserve, he accepted the dust of the earth in his mouth. He accepted the public mockery, his body ripped to pieces as if slashed by a wild animal.

The knife in his side. The tomb.

He lowered himself to the point of licking the earth. He accepted all of it—willingly he laid down his own life to join us fully in ours.

Christ calls us into this mystery when he bids us come and follow him. When we unite with him in his death, we will also unite with him in his life. **Unless** we are united with him in his death, **we will not be** united with him in his life.

I grew up thinking vulnerability and weakness were synonymous and both were bad. I was taught it's better to give than receive and that meant I could never be on the receiving end.

If I needed financial help I should figure it out with my own ingenuity. If I was sick I should carry on and hide it for as long as possible. I once played a basketball game with walking pneumonia.

This hope from personal strength requires just that—strength and power. It fails when medical bills turn into medical debt and loan sharks knock on the door. And it fails for single parents working multiple jobs at minimum wage.

A strong, a sustaining hope, a hope that can uphold me through the most difficult moments of chronic illness is the hope that I don't have to be a strong, self-sufficient, lone hero doing my best to find the silver-lining and ignore my pain.

The hope Christ offers me is one of dust in my mouth. I put dust in my mouth by accepting the fragility of my life and sitting in the tension as Christ joins me in it. In coming to Christ I must confess that I am poor and my bootstraps are broken.

God is silent throughout Lamentations. The woman and the prophet go back and forth in their anger and frustration. God remains voiceless, however, throughout their

accusations. Only here, in Lamentations 3:55-57 does God reply with three words. Jeremiah says,

“I called on your name, O LORD,
from the depths of the pit;
you heard my plea, ‘Do not close
your ear to my cry for help!’
You came near when I called on you;
you said, ‘Do not fear!’ -- Lamentations 3:55-57

God’s only words of comfort or instruction are “Do not fear!” This doesn’t seem very comforting. Or like very good instruction. Jeremiah and the people of Jerusalem have so much to fear.

God’s desire for his people in Jerusalem, and for us today, is that we would be in relationship with him and with each other. And, yet, that is the very thing I fear. I’m afraid to be known as a person in need. Afraid that, perhaps, I’m not self-sufficient.

I want Christ to come near to me when I call out to him. He often draws near, however, by sending his body the church. When I stopped praying for healing I started praying for courage to be honest and vulnerable about the reality of pain in my life.

I have learned to be okay with the phrase, “I can’t.” And I have often heard another voice coming near replying, “I can, what do you need?” But never has that voice be Christ’s.

When I listen to God’s comfort and instruction to not be afraid I open myself up to receive from his body and be part of it. I enter into the communion with him and with his church. And this I call to mind and therefore I have hope.

Examen + Communion

We approach the Communion Table today to acknowledge our vulnerability and need. In our sin, we are helpless, victims of an impossible, invincible force. And yet Jesus comes to us. He becomes one of us, the divine Spirit of Heaven who takes on a body made of the dust of the earth like us.

This table invites us to share in the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night before he was killed. That night he broke bread and offered it to those at the table as his body, broken for them. Then he took a cup of wine, told us it was his blood poured out for the forgiveness of sin, and passed it to us to drink.

We approach the table today at God's invitation. God gives us his own body and blood, his union with our suffering, that we might place it in our mouths as a sign of hope, as a grace in the midst of our suffering.

At the communion table, God draws us into community with each other and with God. So you don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive Communion today. If you are willing to be known, to be vulnerable, to need us and to let us need you, then you're welcome to come to the table today.

I'll pray for us, and then as you're ready, please come forward.

Prayer

God of peace, we are gathered here as a people who knows tragedy and pain. We live in a world where every day we see and hear reports of pain. We know the pain of illness, of broken relationships, of hardships in our personal lives.

We confess that too often in our grief, we become isolated, afraid to reach out for the community you created us to crave. We have seen in the words of your prophet this morning that you call us to come together in pain. Teach us to be vulnerable. Teach us how to need one another. Draw us closer to each other even as you draw us closer to you.

We approach your table today, where you made yourself vulnerable for our sakes. We receive wafers and juice and pray they become a spiritual food that binds us to you and to one another. Send us from here to be a holy presence among the hurting and vulnerable even as we hurt and are vulnerable.

We offer these prayers and approach your table in the name of your son, Jesus.