

Welcome

In the years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans, I went to the city to do relief work several times. It was during those trips I learned that what victims of disasters want most isn't necessarily the relief work. Every trip went more-or-less the same:

A big group of us would show up and get to work. Maybe we were gutting a home so it could be cleansed of mold and rebuilt. Maybe we were cleaning up vacant lots to beautify a city block for the other residents. Mostly we were gutting homes - tearing out sheetrock and ripping up flooring. It was brutal, exhausting work, particularly in the New Orleans summers.

The residents would always be nearby, helping if they could or in their FEMA trailers making lemonade for us workers.

And inevitably, over the three or four days we were there, each of us would end up just sitting and talking with that resident. Despite the fact that we were on a schedule. Even though we were working hard to get their home finished.

What they needed most wasn't a new home (though, obviously, that was important). What they needed most wasn't our strong backs and hard work. What they needed most, every time, was human interaction. They needed to tell their story, to be seen and heard, to know they're not alone in their grief.

Again and again, what gave them hope was not the pounding hammers and loaded wheelbarrows, but a person sitting with them, being present with them.

Today, at the close of our series on Lament, we're going to explore what it means to be WITH someone in times of grief. The final movement of Lament is HOPE, an anticipation that grief is not the final word. And that hope is grounded in our common faith in the God who promised never to leave or forsake us.

Message

This is the final week in our series called Good Grief. It's about how we respond to tragedy in our lives. We have been talking about how lament moves us from orientation to disorientation to reorientation. We begin in a state of orientation - we just go about our lives, our beliefs and assumptions intact. But then something happens - tragedy strikes. 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.

[Scripture Slide 1] Our guide in the journey of Lament has been the book of Lamentations. Turn with me to Lamentations 5. Theologian Soon-Chan 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. We've seen 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.

In Lamentations 1, we listened as the woman grieved. We saw that lament requires an honest appraisal of where we are - that rather than rush to fix or explain or avoid, we have to sit with our grief. Then we sat with God's anger in Lamentations 2. We explored God's anger as a manifestation of God's love, and saw that God's punishment is discipline designed to break us free from the grip of the idols we give ourselves to. Last week, in Lamentations 3, we watched as the Prophet refused to spiritualize or trivialize the suffering of the people. Instead, he chose to enter into the pain and grief, to embrace their disorientation as his own. And last week, in Lamentations 4, we saw again how in grief the things we wrongly look to for life are stripped away and we are left with God and God alone.

Today, we'll be in Lamentations 5. This is the final poem, and it's only now, at the end of the book that hope begins to emerge. Unless you're an expert in Hebrew poetry, (which I know MOST of us are but still).

In English, we have different poetic structures. My favorite is the haiku, which has three lines, with 5 syllables in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the third. I'm sure we all love limericks, where the first two and the last lines rhyme while the third and fourth lines have a different rhyme scheme. In school, we had to learn AABB, ABAB and other patterns.

Hebrew has similar patterns and structures, and Lament poems usually follow a very specific structure - it's one of the ways scholars can identify, for instance, which Psalms are Lament songs.

So far in Lamentations, none of the poems have had the Lament structure. They've been patterned as funeral dirges or other kinds of poetry. Some of them have no poetic structure - they're like free-verse poetry.

That's important. Much like in Jerusalem, all the social structures have been destroyed, the poet of Lamentations wants to represent artistically that the people have no structure. So the poems don't follow the rules. Because in grief, in disorientation, life doesn't seem to follow the rules.

We're going to read this final poem together, and it'll sound an awful lot like the previous chapters. But structurally, it is shaped like a Lament poem. That's hugely significant because the poet is telling us that the world is beginning to make sense again. Even though the pain and grief haven't gone anywhere, even though life is still hard, even though they're still in the middle of the mess, the structures and habits of life are beginning to return. They haven't reached reorientation yet, but they can see it just over the horizon, breaking in like the dawn.

LORD, remember what has happened to us.
 See how we have been disgraced!
 Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers,
 our homes to foreigners.
 We are orphaned and fatherless.
 Our mothers are widowed.
 We have to pay for water to drink,
 and even firewood is expensive.
 Those who pursue us are at our heels;
 we are exhausted but are given no rest.
 We submitted to Egypt and Assyria
 to get enough food to survive.
 Our ancestors sinned, but they have died—
 and we are suffering the punishment they deserved!
 Slaves have now become our masters;

there is no one left to rescue us.
 We hunt for food at the risk of our lives,
 for violence rules the countryside. -- Lamentations 5:1-9

That doesn't *sound* like hope. And there's an important message in that. We only know hope is dawning on this community because of the larger structure of the poem.

Because the world isn't fixed for the people of Jerusalem. Their nation is still in ruins. Their leaders are still gone. Their families are still torn apart. Just because they went through this process of Lament doesn't mean everything is magically fixed. There's no automatic amount of time after which everything is suddenly better.

What it *does* mean is that there comes a point in our grief where we realize that pain is not the final word. That no matter whether something was done to us or we did it to ourselves or somewhere in-between, life DOES go on. We begin to see life on the other side of tragedy.

You might also notice, particularly if you've been here throughout the series, that there's no prophet or woman speaking in this poem. It's all 'we' - the artifice of the speakers has dissolved into a collective WE. We listen in as the whole community comes together to share, to be united in their pain.

And it is in the midst of this coming together something powerful happens. The light of hope begins to emerge. The people raise one voice together, and they call on God to speak, to move, to restore:

Our hearts are sick and weary,
 and our eyes grow dim with tears.
 For Jerusalem is empty and desolate,
 a place haunted by jackals.
 But LORD, you remain the same forever!
 Your throne continues from generation to generation.
 Why do you continue to forget us?
 Why have you abandoned us for so long?
 Restore us, O LORD, and bring us back to you again!
 Give us back the joys we once had!
 Or have you utterly rejected us?
 Are you angry with us still? -- Lamentations 5:17-22

There's something truly beautiful about this sort of praise in the midst of deep pain. This is a helpful reminder: that praise and lament are not opposites.

Too often, we're told there's no place for lament, that a person of faith should be happy no matter what. But there's a real danger in that: when our worship is only praise, it's possible for God to be distant.

When things are good, it's hard to need God in the same way we need God when things are hard. It's pain, tragedy, loss that pulls us out of our comfortable shells, that drives us into each others' arms, that makes us raise our voices and cry out, "Rescue us, Oh Lord!" Be near to us! Come save us!

Lament insists God be here, be among us, be with us.

It's like kid with their parents. They might play nearby or in the other room or outside. They may want mom and dad to play with them or they may play by themselves.

But when they're hurt or scared, they scream and scream and scream and nothing will satisfy them until mom or dad scoops them up, holds them close and promises everything will be okay.

This is the hope we find at the end of Lament: the ability to raise our voices to our heavenly Father, to scream and cry and insist God BE WITH US because nothing less than the very presence of God will do.

Everything has been stripped away and we realize that only God dwelling with us will give us the life we have been trying to find elsewhere.

It is only by keeping the voices of the lamenting among us we find God's presence. Lament is an act of faithfulness, a declaration that we believe grief is not the end, that there is life on the other side of pain.

Janet's story

Friends, we know tragedy is not the end. But our temptation is to rush past the pain of Lament, to silence the voices of the grieving. But Lamentations shows us that they belong front and center because grieving voices call God to be with us, dwell with us.

Grief reminds us that there is HOPE because God has been with us before and God will be with us again.

It's no accident that we're ending this series just before Advent begins. Because after the Exile, Israel waited more than 500 years for God's answer. 500 years of crying out, insisting God heal, restore and renew.

The season of Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas, invite us to participate in that season, to enter into that waiting with Israel.

Advent is a season of hope. It's a season of looking around at the world with clear eyes, seeing what's broken. We know how to Lament, so we are not afraid to face these things, even when they're in our own communities, families and selves.

Advent invites us to cry out to God, to hope that the light is coming into the world, that the story isn't over, that brokenness doesn't have the last word.

Because of course we know Israel's story did turn. God came among us in the person of Jesus, called Emmanuel, which means God with us.

[Advent series slide] This year, our Advent series is called To Be Continued because we know Jesus came to Israel and he will come again to heal our world. So we hope - not to ignore the pain in our world, but to embrace it and cry out to God for healing.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus is God with Us

1. When this week have you made space to listen to voices in pain?
2. When this week did you ignore or avoid voices in pain?
3. When in this season leading to Christmas will you be tempted to avoid or ignore voices in pain?
4. How can you make space to be with people who are hurting this Advent season?

Assignment + Blessing

Prepare for Advent: What are you hoping for?