

SCRIPTURE

Lamentations 1:1–6

How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!

She that was a princess among the provinces
has become a vassal.

² She weeps bitterly in the night,
with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers
she has no one to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her,
they have become her enemies.

³ Judah has gone into exile with suffering
and hard servitude;
she lives now among the nations,
and finds no resting place;
her pursuers have all overtaken her
in the midst of her distress.

⁴ The roads to Zion mourn,
for no one comes to the festivals;
all her gates are desolate,
her priests groan;
her young girls grieve,
and her lot is bitter.

⁵ Her foes have become the masters,
her enemies prosper,
because the LORD has made her suffer
for the multitude of her transgressions;
her children have gone away,
captives before the foe.

⁶ From daughter Zion has departed
all her majesty.
Her princes have become like stags
that find no pasture;
they fled without strength
before the pursuer.

MESSAGE – Suffering Alone

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

How lonely sits the city that once was full of people.
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations.

Thus begins a cry of grief and sorrow by Jeremiah after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. Last week I talked about this period in Judah's history – my most recent sermon was set during the time that the Babylonian army had surrounded the great city of Jerusalem with the intent to raze it to the ground.

After an eighteen month siege the city did indeed fall and Nebuchadnezzar poured out his wrath upon her inhabitants. Homes were destroyed, businesses burned. The temple was desecrated, its holy treasures irreverently melted down for their gold and silver. Men were killed, women were raped, children were ripped from their families to serve as slaves in a land far from the home that they would never again return to.

Jeremiah wrote the book of Lamentations as a cry from the heart in response to this tragedy. It is the collective grief of an entire nation expressed in poetry. The level of intensity in these pages is hard for us to bear; we become uncomfortable with it, but it is important for us to hear it. Lamentations gives voice to the voiceless and forgotten. It is survivors' literature. In it Jeremiah invites us to simply sit with Jerusalem in her anguish.

The city of Jerusalem in these pages is personified as a woman; a mother who is mourning the loss of her children and her honor; her citizens and her stature have been torn away.

How lovely she once was – yet how horrifying she now is. She is depicted as a lonely widow who has lost her husband; a forlorn princess from the royal palace who has become a vassal - subjected to others' whims and wishes.

She weeps bitterly, with tears flowing down her cheeks; she has no lovers left to comfort her; all her friends and allies have become her enemies. She has been exiled, without a home of her own, enslaved to her invaders; a victim of every and any pursuer, unable to offer any resistance. She is deserted by former visitors and supporters, groaning, alone, and bitter.

Her children have been taken captive by evil men who now prosper. Her honor and strength have vanished, and her leaders have fled with no resources. Her sanctuary has been violated, everything precious to her has been fouled by the hands of her abusers.

She cries out to all who pass by 'Is there any sorrow like my sorrow? Do you have anything to offer me? Is it nothing to you? Have you no compassion? Will you simply pass by? Take a look and see – is there any sorrow like my sorrow?'

Jerusalem asks us to sit with her in her pain. No more and no less. Just sit and listen. That is something that many of us find almost impossible to do. So often when we are faced with such pain we try to avoid it.

When we encounter someone who is grieving deeply how often do we try to smooth over the situation? Before we even let them finish trying to express themselves we are already trying to minimize their suffering by helpfully pointing out that others are facing much worse situations. We attempt to fix their suffering by offering useful suggestions as to how they might be able to change their situation. And if we want to be particularly insensitive we endeavor to justify their suffering by pointing out the various ways in which they have contributed to their own downfall. We do all these things, but rarely do we listen.

We are all too eager to skip from Good Friday to Easter Monday, from death to life, from heartache and crushing defeat to ecstatic joy and eternal victory, forgetting that there were three days in the silent tomb in between these two events.

Joy comes in the morning, we hear, but for those who are deep in a pit of despair at two o'clock, sunrise is awfully far away. Indeed, some will perish before morning comes. What of them? Where is their joy?

This was true for lamenting Jerusalem – her sons and daughters had been taken to a foreign land, an exile that lasted 70 years. Very few of them would have survived to return, it was their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren that resettled Jerusalem when Nehemiah led them back. Many of them spent their entire lives as dispossessed prisoners.

North America has its own versions of these laments, past and present: generations of black slaves taken by force; indigenous kids ripped from their families, refugees not knowing if they should try to settle into their new communities or wait to be uprooted again.

The tragedies are not only institutional and cultural, but also individual; personal. The light has gone out in many people's lives. Widows and widowers mourn the loss of their partner – they have lost a huge piece of themselves. Mothers and fathers grieve for lost children while other children grieve for lost hope. Youth struggle to find identity and place in a world with no foundations and a doubtful future, and through it all the poor groan as they search for bread, trading treasures for food.

Where is their joy? Will they survive until morning, or die while they are still in the darkness? 'Is it nothing to you?' they cry. 'Is there any sorrow like my sorrow?'

So what do we say in the face of such despair? There is no sorrow like their sorrow. Each person's suffering is unique. It belongs to them and we are powerless in the face of it. We can't resolve their grief; we can't fix their problems and we can't make their pain disappear. Their loved one is not coming back. There is no immediate solution to their suffering. We have

nothing to say; indeed our best response may be to say nothing at all. Silence can speak volumes.

I had a professor once tell me that the Word of God was never so loudly spoken as when it was silenced. He was referring to the cross, to that moment just after Jesus had died, when it was so quiet you could hear the faint whisper of the slight breeze stirring the desert sands. That moment when the awful reality of what just happened was beginning to set in, when the soldier tasked with dispatching Jesus stood numbly, confessing in horror 'Truly this man was the son of God.' The whole world held its breath at that moment, waiting to see what would happen next.

That moment of the cross is God's response to human suffering, and it's an amazing response, especially when we consider the alternatives. God could eliminate suffering by stopping evil, though to stop evil he would have to take away our capacity to act freely, which would also eliminate the image of God within us. God can't stop us from being evil without stopping us from being us – stopping evil is not a solution.

God could remove our pain – wipe it away as though it were never there. However, though I may not enjoy the sorrow I feel when remembering one that I've lost, it's certainly much better than feeling nothing at all. Blankly thinking of someone who meant the world to me without feeling their loss has an element of horror to it. I'll take pain over numbness any day.

The reality is that as finite beings we live in a world in which suffering is going to occur. We will suffer loss, sometimes catastrophic loss. God knows that we can't avoid suffering. But God has made it possible that we never suffer alone.

That is the message of the incarnation. That we don't suffer alone. Jesus did not have to live on earth, nor did he have to be crucified; he was not powerless - yet he allowed it to happen. Why?

God knew full well that life as a mortal includes suffering, and so God decided to participate in our mortal suffering. God decided that instead of being God over us, he would be God *with* us. He was born as one of us, lived and grew as one of us, and suffered death as one of us.

All this to show us that he can be God with us in our suffering. God does not miraculously remove us from our places of pain, but rather *sits with us* there.

And that is what we are called to do as people of God. When we meet people in darkness, who are despairing and grieving, crying out 'Is there any sorrow like my sorrow?' our answer is that there is no sorrow like yours. Your sorrow is unique to you, and I can't fix it. But I can sit with you in the darkness for a spell, listen to you, and be the face of Jesus – not afraid to face pain, not afraid to get dirty, not afraid to get real.

We don't need to flip to the end of the chapter to find the happy ending.

Sometimes there isn't one.

We don't need to pretend it's all Ok when it's not.

We don't need to rush out of a place of grief when we're not ready for it.

We don't need to put on a brave face when inside we are crumbling.

We don't need to escape the darkness to find God;

God will meet us *in* the darkness.

After all, Jesus went there before we did
and lingered there, waiting for us.

The Lord does not abandon us to our pain,

We endure our pain with the Lord at our side.