

Lamentations Sermon

Lamentations 3

The Pictures of War and the Ukraine

In an age before before electronic pictures of destruction
The book of Lamentations draws word pictures of destruction

It begins with a word picture of the destruction of Jerusalem
Following the conquering armies of Babylon.

“How lonely sits the city
That once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become” – Lamentations 1:1

“All her people groan as they search for bread
They trade their treasures for food
To revive their strength” – Lamentations 1:11

“The young and the old are lying
On the ground in the streets;
My young women and my young men
Have fallen by the sword” Lamentations 2:21

And I think of the destroyed cities of the Ukraine
Of the hospitals hit
And the children seeking food
And the father leaning over the stretcher of his teenage son.

This is war,
And it is lamented
And we have to be able to bring this to God.

Lament is a defiant act of faith,
It is to bring this to God,
Not to hide,
To believe that there is a point to this why.

And this gets taken up in Lamentations chapter 3, by a man who is called the “Strong Man”

This has to go to God

I was struck this week by the interview of Oleksandr Zinchenko,
One of Ukraine’s greatest footballers,
Saying
“I weep all the time”
“Night and day I pray for my people”

Try to think of the places that you have grown up in , the places you have played,
And see what they have done to them
This is felt so personally by him.

This is what happens in Lamentations 3
It is the strong man who weeps for the city.

The Weeper

I want to say again what I have said many times during this series
We have to go give to God our pain
Not as a sign of faithlessness, but as an expression of faith
It was Jesus himself who said
“My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me”

The Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich said he learnt this from the psalms
And wrote great works like the Leningrad Symphony
Based on the psalms, based on Jewish writing.

Perhaps the simplest and most inclusive definition of grief is “unfinished hurt.” It feels like a demon spinning around inside of us and it hurts too much, so we immediately look for someone else to blame. We have to learn to remain open to our grief, to wait in patient expectation for what it has to teach us. When we close in too tightly around our sadness or our grief, when we try to fix it, control it, or understand it, we only deny ourselves its lessons.

Saint Ephrem the Syrian (303–373), a Doctor of the Church, considered tears to be sacramental signs of divine mercy. He instructs: “Give God weeping, and increase the tears in your eyes; through your tears and [God’s] goodness the soul which has been dead will be restored.” [1] What a different kind of human being than most of us! In the charismatic circles in which I participated in my early years of ministry, holy tears were a common experience. Saints Francis and Clare of Assisi reportedly wept all the time—for days on end!

And I cannot think that this is a chapter which points to a moment of faith becoming something else, but you only get to get there after the hard work of Grief

Two Disturbing Thoughts

But there is something disturbing when you read Lamentations,
It is that the people keep saying that it is God which has done this.
Not Babylon.

“Her foes become the masters
Her enemies prosper

Because the Lord has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions” Lamentations 1:5

“The Lord determined to lay in ruins the wall of daughter Zion
He stretched the line
He did not withhold his hand from destroying.” Lamentations 2:8

And that this is linked to the sin of the people
“The Lord is in the right
For I have rebelled against his word”
Lamentations 1:18

This is disturbing thought
This is something that I would be very upset if I heard someone from the Ukraine say.

And this comes into this place in Lamentations chapter 3
Where it is the man identified as the strong man who weeps for his country.

And he feels it so personally

“He has made my flesh and skin waste away
And broken my bones”
Lamentations 3:3

“He is a bear lying in wait for
He is a lion in hiding”
Lamentations 3:10

BUT

This is a refusal to say that God had nothing to do this
This is a statement of a thing called Strong Monotheism
Where ultimately nothing happens without God.

It is a rejection of weaker accounts of God
Where God has simply been defeated by Babylon’s God

In strong monotheism, what happens is that you say that God has everything
And so that everything comes from God
It is a refusal to settle for a weaker God
And to own the consequences of that happening.

And you have to go there.

AND

The other place that you have to go is the sin of the people
All the time that they are taking blame for this
And I am simply thing – this cannot be simply your fault
Have you done something which is bad enough that you did this?

“I called to my lovers but they deceived me” – Lamentations 1:19

“You have dealt with me because of all my transgressions” Lamentations 1:22

Pet Shop Boys...

South Africa – Senzenina - Ham

Great is thy Faithfulness

But what then happens in Lamentations Chapter 3,
Happens in verse “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope”

You’ve got to go down the darkest mine to find the most brilliant diamonds
You have to scrape away the excess layers of disordered religion
In order to find God.

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases
His mercies never come to an end
They are new every morning
Great is your faithfulness”

Too often we jump straight to this verse
And it becomes an empty cliché

Go there after doing your grief work, your lamenting, and these verses have a deeper truth.

They mean something
“The Lord is my portion” says my soul
“Therefore I will hope in him” (Verse 24)

“For the Lord will not reject forever
Although he causes grief
He will have compassion
According to the abundance of his steadfast love
For he does not willingly afflict or
Grieve anyone” (Lamentations 3:31-33)

“Great is thy faithfulness” means something when you break through to this

This is a brief moment of a different kind of faith,
A different kind of grace
“For the Lord will not reject forever
Although he causes grief, he will have compassion
According to the abundance of steadfast love”

Prophecy of Jesus

Finally I want to say that Lamentations 3 has been read as a prophecy of Jesus,
Of him being the strong man who bears the wrath of God.

Read these verses

“He has made my flesh and my skin waste away
And broken my bones
He has besieged and enveloped me
With bitterness and tribulation
He has made me sit in darkness
Like the dead of long ago.”
Lamentations 3:4-6

Jesus is God moving not into the place of inflicting wrath
But receiving wrath

This is deep in the mystery of God here
But it is encapsulated in reading Isaiah 53 as being about Jesus
And in a small number of New Testament Passages – which to some theologians lie at the
heart of the gospel
Which talk about a word Propitiation

Now this is a Greek word Hilaskomai
Which can one of two things
The literal Greek meaning comes from Pagan religion and means to turn aside the wrath of
God through sacrifice.

And the other is the Hebrew Word which it translates in the Greek Old Testament
The word Kippur
Meaning Wiping Away
Sometimes translated as Atonement
As in Yom Kippur – the day of wiping away
Is the Day of Atonement

And the answer I think is it's both

Wrapped up in the word Propitiation

This is God moving into the place of the one persecuted by God
This remarkable act of kindness, of mercy, of stepping into God's self
To remove Wrath

This is how Paul put it in Romans 3
"For all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God
And are justified by his grace as a gift
Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus
Whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood"

God moves radically into the place of the tortured one,
The besieged one
God moves radically into the place of the Ukrainian Refugee
The Yemeni refugee
The Afghan refugee

God does one final thing
In the totality of God
God not only afflicts
God also suffers

And then God brings redemption
This is the Good News
This is the Gospel
AMEN