

Lamentations 5 and Palm Sunday

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[0 : 00] Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us. Look and see our disgrace. Those are the very first words in the final chapter, chapter five of Lamentations, the book of Lamentations. They are an impassioned and utterly desperate cry to God to remember and to look and to see. That's what frames the end of this masterful collection of poems that we've been looking at for the past few weeks.

This is a book that trains us in lament. Remember, look, see. That is the wild hope that is thrown to God in every generation in the midst of disaster and trauma. And that is the wild challenge that is thrown out to us this evening on Palm Sunday. Now, over the past few weeks, we've been talking about this book a good bit. Lamentations lingers with the specific pain and trauma that the people of Judah feel after their city has been invaded and occupied by an outside force.

After their homes have been decimated and the temple there, they thought that God resided, had been utterly destroyed. After the collapse of their sense of meaning and identity as a people, lamentations makes us stop and linger with the pain. And we are those who rarely stop.

Rather, we live in a society that encourages us to live our best lives now, a society that is mostly, mostly unable to grapple with genuine pain and to look for very long at real suffering.

We're encouraged to worship progress. And that's usually progress for a few. And we're encouraged to look away from the increasing pain of the many.

[2 : 28] It was just a few months ago. I was looking for this and I could not find the exact Instagram post. But I saw something on Instagram that really struck me. And it said something like, I don't want better TVs and perfected self-driving vehicles. I want affordable housing and a living wage.

And that is the very sentiment that we have been trained to politely agree with and then to basically ignore.

The book of Lamentations challenges us to see the pain, to intentionally practice lament. And unless we as followers of Jesus embrace lament, we are only practicing religion that, as Karl Marx so famously said, is opiate for the masses.

We are only practicing religion that dulls our senses and numbs us into individualism and apathy. We're just practicing religion that puts us to sleep.

We're just practicing religion that puts us to sleep. But in contrast, when we read a book like Lamentations and a chapter like Lamentations 5, we have the opportunity to be awakened and to carry that wakefulness forward in meaningful ways.

[3 : 55] So at the end of this series, I'm going to read chapter 5. If this is a moment for you of difficulty, of pain, of trauma, you might want to step out because it's pretty specific pain and trauma.

I'm going to read it. It's about these people and what they're experiencing under occupation. And just try to see where you are or where folks that you know are in relation to this.

So this is Lamentations 5. Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us. Look and see our disgrace.

Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to aliens.

We have become orphans, fatherless. Our mothers are like widows. We must pay for the water we drink. The wood we get must be bought.

With a yoke on our necks, we are hard driven. We are weary. We are given no rest. We have made a pact with Egypt and Assyria to get enough bread.

[5 : 00] Our ancestors sinned and they are no more and we bear their iniquity. Slaves rule over us. There is no one to deliver us from their hand. We get our bread at the peril of our lives because of the sword in the wilderness.

Our skin is black as an oven from the scorching heat of famine. Women are raped in Zion. Young women in the towns of Judah.

Princes are hung up by their hands. No respect is shown to the elders. Young men are compelled to grind and boys stagger under their loads of wood. The old men have left the city gate.

The young men, their music. The joy of our hearts has ceased. Our dancing has been turned to mourning. The crown has fallen from our head.

Woe to us for we have sinned. Because of this our hearts are sick. Because of these things our eyes have grown dim. Because of Mount Zion which lies desolate jackals prowl over us.

[6 : 06] But you, O Lord, reign forever. Your throne endures to all generations. Why have you completely forgotten us?

Why have you forsaken us these many days? Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored. Renew our days as of old.

Unless you have utterly rejected us. And are angry with us beyond measure. Now the verses, the 22 verses that I just read, form this kind of catalog of catastrophe that is spiritual and physical and psychologically.

They're these verses that are basically a communal prayer. And it's specific. It's specific. It's specifically ask God to engage pain.

And it's interesting that while the other four books of this, four chapters of this book are written in this like really tight poetic form, this acrostic. When you get to the last chapter, this chapter, that dissolves.

[7 : 19] It's as if by the end of this short book, the chaos cannot be contained any longer. The fracturing of the foundation cannot be held at bay.

It's also, chapter five is also the shortest chapter in the book. As if there is not enough energy to even keep talking about these things. As if any of that interests you, I just want to hold up the book that the preaching team has been using, Lamentations and the Tears of the World, if you want to know more about any of this, about this book.

Now as I talk about all these things, I'm aware that many of you may be wondering what, if any, this has to do with Holy Week and Palm Sunday, this week where we're traveling with Jesus to Jerusalem, the week when we travel with Jesus to the moment where he's put to death at the hands of religion and state.

How does this relate to that? Well, honestly, as I've been studying this last chapter, I feel like it kind of has everything to do with Palm Sunday and this journey to the cross.

That desperate cry that we hear, Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest heaven! We just sang it, save! Save now! Save us!

[8 : 42] I want to spend the next few minutes just trying to talk about lament and to wrap up this series, but also to connect lament to this moment, this cry for salvation, this procession into Jerusalem.

All right, so wrap up, overview of the series, a couple things. First of all, lament is critical because it answers a profound desire of those who suffer to be remembered and to be looked upon and to be seen.

And notice that looking and seeing are often different things. They're different in this English translation. Look and see connect our looking and seeing to an imagination and a reality beyond the present, to a historic understanding that refuses the temptation to see events in isolation.

Remember, look, see, pay attention. That is the first step to a faith that embraces lament.

That is the first step to conferring dignity in the midst of suffering. Barbara Brown Taylor, in her beautiful book, *An Autor in the World*, writes this.

[10 : 01] The practice of paying attention is as simple as looking twice at people and things you might just as easily ignore. To see takes time.

Like having a friend takes time. Why should anyone do such things? I cannot imagine. Unless one is weary of crossing days off the calendar with no sense of what makes the last day different from the next.

Unless one is weary of acting in what feels more like a television commercial than a life. The practice of paying attention offers no quick fix for such weariness.

Instead, it is one way into a different way of life. Full of treasure for those who are willing to pay attention to exactly where they are.

Paying attention is full of treasure, even when our paying attention is to things that are difficult to look at, to things that are difficult to really see. There are treasures in the darkness.

[11:12] It's one of my favorite biblical phrases. There are treasures in our individual and collective dark nights of the souls. Those treasures are left uncovered if we're not paying attention.

And I also just want to honestly say, before I leave this point, that you can't look and see all the time. When Tyree Nichols was killed earlier this year, I did not watch the video of his death. I couldn't watch the lynching of another black person. And then this week, because of other more personal grief in my own world, I can't tell you all the details of the Nashville shooting. I only had the capacity to look at those things out of the corner of my eye. None of us will ever, ever be able to fully look at every single tragedy in the world.

Yet the call is to discernment. Sometimes I feel like I say that all the time. The call is to discernment. It's to discern what paying attention means for you, for us in this community and individually.

[12:29] It's probably somewhere, I'm going to guess, between, you know, that kind of like paying attention, trying to pay attention to every single tragedy. It's probably somewhere beyond compulsively scrolling through the news cycle until we have all the information but are completely numb to the real pain.

And it's also probably beyond checking out to pursue our best life now because we think that that's all we can control. Lament begins with letting go.

Lament begins with knowing your default setting and then discerning how to move out of it in order to pay attention. So lament is critical because it answers the profound desire of those who need to be seen.

But it's also critical because it forms us in a way of being that resists the status quo and schools us in the collective work of liberation.

Lament is fundamentally about telling the truth. And our worship must always be about telling the truth.

[13:46] And we can't tell the truth when we cut ourselves off from our own pain or the pain of others. Sometimes here at the table during the service, I have this experience of being aware of awkwardness.

We'll sing a song about God's goodness and then folks from our prayer team will come up and ask us to pay attention to suffering. Or sometime in the sermon, we'll talk really honestly about theological confusion or ambiguity and then we'll sing a very coherent song about God's love and presence.

And I don't know if you ever experienced that, but for me, nearly everything in my faith from the past told me that worship and faith should be neatly packaged.

But when I look at a book like Lamentations or really the whole book of Psalms, I realize that telling the truth about God and telling the truth about the world is messy.

Lamentations trains us. Lament trains us. Lament trains us for that messiness. It insists on telling the truth and telling the whole truth.

[14:58] It insists on telling the truth to the powerful. After all, in this book, the community is unrelentingly telling the truth to God, complaining to God.

And if we are encouraged to complain to God, then certainly telling the truth to people in power, in our city, and in our country, is part of our faith. Lament trains us in resistance to things as they are and teaches us to tell the truth.

No matter how incoherent the truth may sometimes fill or who we might be called to tell it to. The truth of what this leads us to engage the work of liberation.

I hope one of the things you notice that when we read through Lamentations 5, I hope one thing you notice is that it is ridiculously, terribly specific. When we remember and look and see, when we tell the truth, we are pulled toward the specific.

Without encountering the specific, we can never respond in meaningful ways. We can never get to creative action that matters.

[16:14] And the longer that I'm in ministry, the more convinced I am that liberation and transformation is never abstract or general, but it is always deeply personal and local and specific.

Lament is that doorway into telling the truth of those specifics and then to appropriately resisting. So then the last thing I want to say about Lament, and then I'll move into Palm Sunday, this Palm Sunday text, is that Lament helps us maintain a relationship with God.

In Lamentations 5, the community speaks truth to God. They complain, they petition, they suggest that God is unjust, but their words are all directed to God. Even in the moments of our deepest

communal darkness and individual darkness, Lament keeps the conversation with God alive and open.

It honors the mutuality that any real relationship is based on. And through that continued insistence upon God creating a new world, we often gain spiritual and theological insight.

We find ourselves in the midst of truths that we never knew were true before. And you might have noticed this. In Lamentations 5, there's this one moment that stands out from the others where the people exclaim, But O Lord, you reign forever, your throne endures to all generations.

[17 : 53] For a people who believe that God mainly dwelled in a temple that had just been destroyed, this is a radical statement. Somehow that throne would continue.

And if you read the Hebrew Bible, what we sometimes call the Old Testament, you'll realize that the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem became the point at which Israel starts to expand their understanding of God.

They began to think of God less and less as their own, primarily a God for them and located among them, and more and more as a God that is everywhere for all people. But it is only their relentless cries to God, their lament, their willingness to stay in the conversation, that allows them to get to new theological insight.

Okay. So all of this is good. All of this is, this particularly is a beautiful insight. But that's not actually where the book of Lamentations ends.

Instead, it ends here. Why have you forgotten us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days? Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored.

[19 : 04] Or renew our days as of old. Unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure. The book ends on a note of complete hopelessness.

Indeed, nearly all of the book of Lamentations seems to be edging toward despair. Now, some people would say that just the act of speaking entails hope.

One of my favorite writers, Cole Arthur Riley, says, lament is not anti-hope. It's not even a stepping stone to hope. Lament itself is a form of hope.

It's an innate awareness that what is, is, should not be. And then she adds a few lines later, our hope can only be as deep as our lament, and our lament as deep as our hope.

Most of me recognizes all of that is true. But there's something in the book that is edging toward despair, and that makes me think that there is a little bit more to the story.

[20 : 11] That yes, lament may lead to hope, but that it also may lead to something better. Something else. I think that lament has the power to draw us into desperation.

And so often desperation is the only thing that gets us to creative action. And so that's what I see this story, this year in this story, that we often read on Palm Sunday.

I'm going to hold to tradition and read the story, and then I'll take about five more minutes after that to say something about how this relates to desperation. And I'm going to ask as I read for you to try to see desperation in this story.

When they were approaching Jerusalem at Bethphage and Bethany near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been written.

Untie it and bring it. The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately. They went and found a colt tied near a door outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, what are you doing untying the colt?

[21 : 32] They told them what Jesus had said, and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields.

Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming king of our ancestor David.

Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Then he, Jesus, into Jerusalem and went into the temple, and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

In the past, when I've read that story on basically all the Palm Sundays that I can remember of my life, I've always wondered what the people who are entering with, you know, the people who are entering with Jesus, like, why were they with him?

This is Passover. This is the time where these folks are remembering liberation from oppression, and because of that, the Romans would have been in Palestine.

[22 : 46] They would have been in Palestine in force. So why are these people risking themselves by associating with Jesus? It's true that they're entering the city with this person who's on a donkey instead of a war horse, and with a band of marginalized people praising him as king, and that feels like a farce, like comedy almost.

But even farce is a threat to empire. So as I consider why these people were compelled to set Jesus on this donkey and follow him toward death, I remember that most of these people were peasants, and that Jesus was a poor man.

Every single person in this story nearly, this story called the triumphal entry, was a peasant probably. Every single person, including Jesus, would have been familiar with lament, with seized land and displacement, with labor that benefited a system built for elites, with the unjust killing of people that they knew, and the kinds of daily degradation of the soul that comes with colonization. These were desperate people, and they were people who were familiar with lament. Jesus enters the city near the Mount of Olives, a place associated with both past defeat for the Jewish people and future hope.

And during their procession, they discover something between the despair of defeat and the newness of reality, of hope for reality. They discover desperation that leads them to identify with this man who ultimately will be killed to overturn the system of killing violence.

[24 : 46] So this Sunday, as we begin Holy Week, I think our call is to engage lament. And the kind of lament that leads us not to hope, because as Dr. Miguel de la Torre so well puts it, hope is too often associated with middle class privilege.

Our call instead is to join the procession of Jesus toward the powers that will ultimately lead to his death, is to engage a kind of lament that is so often felt among the least and which fosters desperation and ultimately creative action.

And for some of us, desperation is something that feels far off from our lives of comfort. For some of us, desperation is only something that we can pray our way towards. It's something that will only come as we reckon with our privilege.

But the first step to joining that Palm Sunday procession is learning to lament. And may the God who suffers with us turn that lament into desperation for a new reality.

So there's a reason that we can wolle which is necessary and that we can