

Lament as Bearing Witness

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Date: 12 March 2023

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[0 : 00] About four years ago, when I first came to D.C., I started to work in hospice care, and one of my supervisors always used to tell us to linger at the threshold before going to see someone who was ill or dying.

She told us that it was a time to collect ourselves, to find a place of rest in the middle of things before we went to that person, and she also told us that we might feel resistance on that threshold.

She said, that resistance is telling you something. Pay attention to it. What is driving you away from this pain? And I didn't need to be told to pay attention to my resistance, because in many ways, my entire life up to that point had been full of our resistance to pain, loss, grief, and lament.

I grew up in a family where we never talked about our emotions. When my mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia and struggled mentally, we didn't talk about it. When the complications for my mother's health led to my parents' divorce, we didn't talk about it.

And when my grandmother died, who was the glue who held our family together, we didn't talk about it. And so, without her, we struggled to share our grief, and therefore, we struggled alone.

[1 : 25] And looking back, I can see how moving to D.C. to work at this hospice was partly me running away from that place of unresolved grief inside of me.

I was drawn to the idea of doing something good, but I didn't know how much this experience would force me to look at my own suffering and the suffering of others.

For one thing, I needed to confront my fear of death, which is probably one of the scariest things that we have to do as humans. I would have to step over that threshold and sit down beside someone who was dying, and I didn't know how to do that without trying to fix it.

And I also felt overwhelmed and inadequate. The first time I went on a medical appointment with a patient, I had a panic attack because I was scared of anything medical-related.

So when the patient started to talk about his symptoms, I couldn't handle imagining what it would be like to be him. I was too busy imagining the worst and, honestly, feeling more pity than empathy for him in that moment, that I couldn't really be there for him.

[2 : 34] And throughout my three years of working at the hospice, I slowly learned how to cross that threshold and engage with death, to engage with these negative things of loss and grief that were not taught how to deal with.

I had to move from disengaging myself from these things to engaging with these things. And it is something that I am still learning how to do each and every day. And each of us has had some experience with suffering.

I don't know what particular experiences we've all had, but we've all touched it at some point in our lives. And the more I try to see people clearly, the more I realize that we all deal with loss and grief on a regular, if not a daily basis.

But knowing this reality exists and knowing how to engage with it are two entirely different things. There is this threshold between avoiding suffering and engaging with pain.

And I want to invite us to pay attention to that threshold and consider what it might mean to cross over in ways that lead to healing. And I am drawn to Lamentations, because it is such a powerful example of how to do this, of how to cross the threshold and bear witness to grief without looking away and without trying to fix it.

[4 : 02] In Lamentations, we see a kind of suffering that obliterates everything, which is present even in the first verse. Lamentations chapter 1, verse 1 reads in the NIV.

How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nation!

How like a widow is she, who once was great for her? Throughout this entire chapter, there is this sense of barely contained grief at this catastrophic loss. Lamentations was written about this time that Jerusalem had fallen at the hands of the Babylonian Empire.

In the abandoned city of Jerusalem, it's personified as this weeping woman who has lost everything and is ignored and derided by the people around her.

And there is a lot that I could say about the decision to personify Jerusalem in this way. But I think it's important for us to keep in mind that the city woman speaks for herself.

[5 : 16] Throughout the first chapter, she cries out to God several times, like in Lamentations 1, 20-21. See, Lord, how distressed I am!

I am in torment within. And in my heart I am disturbed, for I have been most rebellious. Outside the sword bereaves, inside there is only death.

People have heard my groaning, but there is no one to comfort me. And even in this book, God remains silent.

We don't hear from God directly in this entire book. And we're left with this voice crying out for her pain to be recognized. And if God does not recognize it, she's crying out for someone, somewhere to notice her.

Like in verse 12. Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by, look around and see? Is any suffering, like my suffering, that was inflicted on me, that the Lord brought on me in the day of his fierce anger?

[6 : 29] This emotion of anger and grief, this despair over not being seen, may be deeply familiar.

How often have we experienced deep and profound suffering and struggled to feel seen? I've often asked how people can't know when I am falling apart in front of them, but also, on the other side, how I cannot notice when other people are suffering in front of me.

And what might it look like to see people more clearly? In times of suffering, sometimes the one thing we want most of all is simply to be seen.

By God and by each other. And when we move to the second chapter, we see how this prayer begins to be answered.

In the second chapter, we encounter another voice. From the perspective of a narrator who is witnessing the destruction of Jerusalem. He is one of the bystanders in the first chapter.

[7 : 38] And he has the choice to separate himself from pain or to enter into it. And we see from the first verse that the narrator crosses the threshold and begins to engage both with his own feelings of grief and with the city woman's experience of grief.

And when we do this, it's ugly to start. It doesn't look pretty. Because for the first ten verses, the narrator places the blame for this suffering at God's feet.

It feels like an assault. It's intense. And so I'm going to put some of the language used to describe God's actions on the screen. In the narrator reaches the heights of his anger with verse 5.

The Lord is like an enemy. He has swallowed up Israel. He has swallowed up all of her palaces and destroyed her strongholds.

He has multiplied mourning and lamentation for daughter Judah. And I will be honest that this language makes me uncomfortable.

[9 : 15] It feels like a punch to the stomach because so often we're taught the opposite. That God is always with us. That God's presence is always for our good. But this is about the very experience where that might not be what we feel in the moment.

It's supposed to call out the fact that God promised one thing to the people and now they are receiving the opposite. When Jerusalem was destroyed, all of the Israelites' hope in being God's chosen people was gone.

And so I can get wrapped up in this question of, did God actually cause this? Because it's in the Bible, does that mean that it was God's action where he poured out his wrath on Israel?

But that's not really the question that this chapter is asking. The question of suffering and God's role in it will be addressed in other passages and especially when Jesus arrives on the scene.

But for right now, I want us to remember that Lamentations is full of human voices speaking the reality of human pain back to God.

[10 : 28] God can often feel like nothing more than a bedtime story to make us feel better. Or else God can be used as a way to keep us in line so we don't sin our way out of God's graces.

When we suffer, God often does feel absent. When we see the suffering around us, where is God? Where is God when children do not get enough to eat at night or don't have a place to lay their head?

Where is God when LGBTQIA people are being targeted simply for their existence? Where is God when systemic racism still rules through this country?

And where is God in a country of police brutality and hate crimes? Where is God when drug branches are more restricted than guns? Where is God when justice and righteousness are constantly thwarted?

That's what the narrator is asking. God can handle it when we get angry with God about these things. God can even handle it when we blame God for things that God didn't actually do.

[11 : 47] God gets it. There are moments in our lives when we want to blame God, when we want to throw the injustice of the world at God's feet and say, here, explain this.

How could you let this happen? This book invites us to bring all of that anger, frustration, and blame to God. It is normal to cry out in anger and despair when we see our fellow human beings suffering and it seems like no one is doing anything about it.

When we cross the threshold of suffering, no emotion is off limits. But crossing that threshold is only the first step.

As we continue to read Lamentations 2, the narrator, who is so angry at God, directly addresses the city woman who was crying out for someone to see her.

We can see in verses 11 through 13 how the narrator echoes her language from chapter 1. My eyes fail from weeping.

[12 : 59] I am in torment within. My heart is poured out on the ground. Because my people are destroyed. Because children and infants faint in the streets of the city.

They say to their mothers, Where is bread and wine? As they faint like the wounded in the streets of the city. As their lives ebb away in their mothers' arms.

What can I say for you? With what can I compare you, daughter Jerusalem? To what can I liken you that I may comfort you, virgin daughters' lod?

Your wound is as deep as the sea. Who can heal you? The narrator is moving beyond this gut-level anger and blame towards God, and he's moving toward the sufferer.

He doesn't keep his distance from daughter Jerusalem, and instead he weeps for what the city has lost and seeks her comfort. The best way for me to talk about this shift is by relating it back to my own experience working in this hospice.

[14 : 19] When I did finally gather the courage to cross over that threshold and enter the room with someone who is dying, I am often hit with anger. Many of our patients are dying from HIV-AIDS, a disease that can be treated with medication so well that many people go on to live long, happy lives, which would not have been possible 20, 30 years ago.

Most come to us simply because they could not afford adequate health care, because systemic inequalities make it harder for black, brown, and undocumented folks to find the health care that they need.

It is rage-inducing. But when I cross that threshold and I see the patient in front of me, I try to be fully present with that person and enter into their experience of grief.

What allows me to do this is the fact that I too have suffered. Maybe not in the same way or for the same reasons, but that doesn't matter. At the end of the day, suffering is suffering.

And the most human thing that we can do is simply to meet with others in that moment of distress. And so when I cross that threshold, I am often there to do wound care.

[15 : 44] And I won't get into the details here because it can be a lot. And like I said, still kind of have a medical phobia. But I have seen many serious wounds.

And there was a time when I thought that I could not handle doing wound care because it requires such close proximity to the pain of another person. When the narrator talks about wounds that are deep as the sea, I know what he's talking about.

There are wounds that make healing seem impossible. And the narrator of Lamentations doesn't know what to do with this.

He has crossed the threshold. He has weathered the storm of anger. And now he has fully entered into Jerusalem's suffering. He has felt the weight of it.

And he asks the city woman, who can heal you? This is such a powerful question because it acknowledges on one hand that he is powerless to change the reality of her suffering.

[16 : 51] But in another sense, a more important sense, he offers her precisely what she needs. In the first chapter, we remember how the city woman, the personified Jerusalem, was asking for bystanders to see her, to acknowledge her suffering.

Kathleen O'Connor puts it like this in her excellent book, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*. Although the narrator seems to despair of comforting her, he offers the very things she seeks.

He is her witness. He is a missing comforter. When he searches for comparison for her pain and finds only the sea, vast, unfathomable, and uncontainable, he provides what she seeks.

He sees her in the enormity of her pain and the life-flattening destruction that has befallen her. He apprehends the all-encompassing nature of her losses.

His words mirror back her reality to her and validate her own perceptions of her pain. He acknowledges that her losses are as overwhelming as she experiences them to be, and the effect of his words is to provide her a companion in her pain.

[18 : 21] When we are faced with the reality of another person's pain and suffering, the most powerful thing that we can do is simply to bear witness.

So we could change this question from who can heal you to how can I bear witness with you? In other words, how can I walk with you through the reality of this pain, and how can I feel it with you so that it's a little bit easier to bear?

And this is not about absorbing someone's pain completely into our own identity. It's not about losing ourselves in someone else's experiences of grief and loss.

I learned this the hard way when I was so wrapped up with what I thought someone was experiencing in the doctor's appointment that I couldn't actually be present. Instead, it's more about being able to get in touch with our own experiences of suffering so that we can then be with others in their own experiences.

When I understand that I too am wounded and feel the anger and the hurt and the turmoil that comes with it, I am better able to comfort others in that wound.

[19 : 35] I recognize in them what I felt in myself, what we've all experienced. And so, during wound care, I focus on this idea of being fully present, both to my own emotions and the emotions of the other person.

As I take off that dirty bandage and look at the wound, I am careful not to cause any additional pain because I am reminded of my own deep wounds and I know that they all deserve the same level of scrutiny and care.

I remember that the most vulnerable thing that a person can do is show another their wounds. And so, as I clean the wound, I pay attention to that person and acknowledge the reality of their suffering by making sure that they are comfortable.

I pay attention to my own presence and make sure that I am carrying out this task with the honor it deserves. There are steps to this process, from cleaning to applying antibiotics to packing and bandaging the wound.

And each step requires care and devotion, but without the expectation that the wound will be healed by my effort alone. It is a practice of being with that person no matter what happens.

[21 : 03] And I discovered that it's not so much the act of wound care in and of itself, but it's about what it signifies. Wound care is a practice that says we are willing to cross that threshold, we will not look away, and we will bear witness to that suffering.

You may not be involved in wound care, probably most of you in this room are not, but we all encounter wounds each and every day. Consider what might be hurting inside of you, that deep, tender place that is longing for healing.

And as we go through our lives, we encounter so many things that are crying out for lament. There are wounds that are difficult to see, like the wounds of loneliness, disconnection, grief, uncertainty, anxiety, and doubt.

And there are wounds that seem impossible to heal in our society, from systemic injustice to the planet itself crying out for wholeness. It is painful to confront these wounds, but it's the only thing that makes healing remotely possible.

I am reminded of the story at the end of John, when the Apostle Thomas, the disciple Thomas, asked to touch the wounds of Jesus to make sure that he is truly alive.

[22 : 33] And Jesus agrees. This question is not a sign of little faith. It is a sign of Thomas' deep faith that he does reach out his hand, he does touch the wound, he bears witness to the deepest sign of Jesus' death, the wounds he wears on his physical body.

even his resurrected body. And Jesus honors Thomas by allowing him to come so close to his own vulnerability, his own pain, close enough to touch the holes in his hands from the nails.

the last verse from Lamentations 2 that I want to mention is verse 19.

Arise, cry out in the night, as the watches of the night begin.

Pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord. Lift up your hands to him for the lives of your children who faint from hunger at every street corner.

[23 : 45] After the narrator witnesses Jerusalem's pain, he becomes Jerusalem's advocate. He begs her to transform her pain, to bring it before God, and cry out for justice.

Often, in the face of trauma, we can feel numb, and it can be hard to talk to God, regardless of whether we're thinking about personal trauma or collective trauma. When we get the phone call that chatters our world, when we get the diagnosis that makes us question everything, grief threatens to lead us to despair.

We also hear news of these global events every day, from the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, to the war in Ukraine, and the gun violence and hate crimes sweeping our streets.

I don't have to list all of the tragedies we face, because we live them all. The book of Lamentations is so powerful, because it teaches us not to turn away from that pain, but to bear witness to it.

It reminds us that we can also bring our suffering to God, too. We don't have to blame ourselves for our suffering. We also don't have to answer the problem of suffering with, this is all part of God's plan, and we just have to accept it.

[25 : 09] And we don't have to blame others for their suffering. Sometimes, people just suffer, and it's not because they brought it on themselves. And we can go before God and demand God's response.

And God might not directly respond in the way that we wish God would. But that doesn't change the fact that someone does respond.

We respond to each other's pain. We cross that threshold and bear witness to the suffering of the world. We find the courage to look at our pain and the pain of others and move toward healing.

In moments of deepest suffering, sometimes we are the very glimpse of God for a friend that needs it the most. We may be the only sign of God's presence someone ever has.

So there are moments when it does seem impossible to cross that threshold and witness grief, loss, and death. But we don't have to do it alone.

[26 : 24] When we suffer with one another, we can breathe a little easier. It doesn't make everything better, but it does make it a little less lonely.

We can remind each other of what we deserve and we can remind each other to bring that pain not only to each other, but to God. In those moments when God seems most absent, the most faithful thing that we can do is cross that threshold and bear witness to our own pain and the pain of others by being with one another and crying out for God's response.

So I want to leave us with just one question to ponder throughout your week. How can we be present with ourselves and to one another in element?

If this feels too hard or too overwhelming to cross that particular threshold, pay attention with love to that place of resistance inside of you and instead consider how we can practice presence with our friends and our loved ones.

How could we be with one another with no agendas, no hidden plans, but simply a desire to see and be seen? How can we lead into our community during the season of Lent?

[27 : 51] At the end of the day, it could be as simple as pulling up a chair, sitting down beside someone for a while and being with them in the highs and lows of their lives.

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