

“All the Feelings”

June 27, 2021

Sermon by Dawn Jefferson at TriCon Church on Zoom

Lamentations 3:23-33

Will you pray with me?

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God's mercies never will come to an end. They are new every morning, new every morning, great is thy faithfulness oh lord, great is your faithfulness.

Over the last few days we have been traveling back towards the East Coast from California; that means that we have been passing through a great deal of dry and arid landscape. The still, spacious, and foreboding desert has a way about it that reminds me a great deal of the spectrum of emotions present in the book of Lamentations. Most of this book is down right sad. It deals with sorrow, rejection, and loss. While it is expressing in poetic form the political and personal loss of Israelites during the siege of Babylon. This moment in Biblical history represents not just a political disaster but a theological crisis because Jerusalem was supposed to be indestructible as the theological center of the universe for the people of Israel, where David's kingdom would reign on earth, and by extension God's reign forever. But there they were, captured, dispossessed, and lamenting.

Lament in lamentation is less a personal lament and more likely a COMMUNAL lament. Be clear, the lamenters are struggling to understand God's role in the disaster and their language demonstrates that roller coaster. Not unlike incidents like 9/11 or even the condominium collapse in Florida, many ask why and how God could “let such a thing happen.” They point out children and innocents who are suffering in the midst, and confess that surely *their* “sin” had nothing to do with this supposed judgment/justice. The struggle of lamenters is real on several levels since it is physical, financial, emotional, psychological and spiritual.

But lament is not just for the purpose of a good cry, the function and purpose of Biblical lament is to identify and express the feelings of those suffering and their hopes for change. It is a proclamation of what is absolutely wrong with the present moment and a kind of inquiry about God's role in making it different. It also speaks to our moments of loss and pain as a human community. But unlike dirges or funeral songs, “laments tend to have a hopeful element expressed, for example, in the form of an appeal to God for relief.” The

section of our text for today is the highest and most hopeful climax of the entire book of Lamentations. It has taken a long journey to get to these hopeful thoughts, returning to belief that God will in fact intervene after having been so long silent.

While there is a victorious element to lamentation in that those who “get” to sing a song of lament have indeed survived. And that alone could be worthy enough of praise. Survival is not the point of lament. Instead, lament redirects our attention to the suffering itself. All of the suffering.

I know, I know you didn’t wake up early on Sunday morning to turn on Zoom to hear the part-time preacher talk about sad stuff. Nobody wants it. Even I of late have avoided the news and dramatic movies during COVID. Instead I’ve tried to watch comedy. My parents and in-laws have said to me at one time or another “why should I watch sad stories? there’s enough of that in the real world!” I understand watching movies to escape.

I can support that but only to a point. What I’ve taken from my study of lamentation this week is that the writers of scripture are way more aware of and acculturated to expressing their full spectrum of emotions than I think we are in modern culture. The fact that so much sadness precedes and follows the 21st verse is important to understand. It tells us that these people of faith who believed in God were realists and were in touch with the crummy, hard brokenness of their own world. Enough so that they brought it all straight to God. I have preached and spoken of lament during the last year at other times, but I just feel like we can and should do it more often. Again, the function of lament is not just the ending, not just the hopeful refrain, but the slow walk through all the other emotions that these people are feeling together. There are some of you listening who could be lamenting more to God. It does not anger God to hear lament. God can handle it. God knows about it anyway.

I’m afraid that our culture is so afraid of sadness that can be out of touch with compassion. Verse 22 talks about mercy. I found a good description in the work of Bryan Stevenson, writer of *Just Mercy* who says that mercy is our ability to be proximate to pain and suffering. While you may likely know all of this already and lived a good, long life full of your share of pain, I feel compelled to preach today to remind us of our call to compassion. And also to name how much compassion relates to emotion and feeling. I’m interested in how compassion is a major characteristic of God here in Lamentation. I’m interested, as always, in how adjectives or characteristics of God are attributes that I am also supposed to ascribe to myself and take on. As a lover and follower of this God I am called to be compassionate. I am called to understand the feeling of being proximate to pain. Not all

the time. Not forever. But enough that I don't overlook it or convince myself that it's not there.

Unfortunately, our culture has lots of aphorisms like "don't cry over spilt milk." I hear parents telling their sons to "suck it up," or their daughters, "Oh no, not with the tears again." Many of us have an unhealthy relationship with feelings when they are not obviously joyous. "Don't cry, you'll make me cry." "Come on, Don't bring me down with all that." All very logical, but not very probable that we will actually continue for very long without truly feeling tough things.

Two summers ago, while completing my clinical pastoral training, I was told by my advisor during my mid summer review that I sometimes ran from sadness during consultation. At times, when I encountered patients who were down or upset, I took too many steps to encourage them prematurely or offer them hope without truly hearing what it was they were telling me about their experience. I rushed through their processing pain because I didn't want to feel sad. I think I certainly learned this from somewhere, and I know our larger culture suffers from it. What is even more unfortunate is that it seems even more rampant within church culture. And while, yes, the joy of the Lord is our strength, the compassion of Christ asks that we sit for a moment to hear the pain. Jesus doesn't run through towns just healing people. He takes time to hear what people are feeling, what they want. He stands near enough to the woman with the issue of blood to feel something. I must speak on this as a reminder because the alternative is a kind of numbness. A kind of compassion fatigue. A kind of rationalized religion that jumps to solve problems without being in relationship with the lamentations. That moves to missions work without feeling the feelings alongside our kin in pain.

Which brings me back to the desert drives this week. We drove past some desolate places this week. Some spaces were impoverished, others more colored by a choice to be out in the wilderness. But driving past shanties and deserted towns was nothing compared to driving past the wall built between California and Mexico to keep out Mexican people fleeing oppressive circumstances.

As we drove for hundreds of miles in 105 degree heat that was covered in desert rocks and mountains, sandy fields of dust bowls and brush. As we passed border patrol cars and as I prayed that we not run out of gas or have any car trouble in those deserted parts of Interstate 10, I was convicted in my Spirit. As I thought of people who would risk their lives to walk through that landscape for a job and a new opportunity. Many of you have likely seen pictures of this burning hot landscape that was difficult enough to drive through so much that I can't even imagine what it would be like for a soul to walk through.

I believe it's criminal to wait for a person to cross that border wall tired, hungry, and emancipated and put them in jail. You don't need to agree with me, but my opinion is formed by persuasive scriptures and picturing my life without my friends who are naturalized citizens and dreamers. Abandoning such cries of mercy when we hear them toward God is judged as callous, God wouldn't do such a thing. Well, neither should we. That is not what scriptures tell us about how to respond to the stranger, to the hungry, to the widowed, or destitute. And I want to be careful for myself that I do not use legal reasoning to rationalize away my compassionate mandate. I want to be careful that I do not so prioritize my own safety and comfort over doing what God wants me to do.

Quite honestly I believe in order and the laws. I also believe in justice. I know that God's justice is sometimes accompanied by anger and holy boldness. As he turned over the tables in the temple, he expressed many just emotions. Friends, while we drove past the wall, I had a flash of seeing myself running toward that wall and tearing it down. I started searching in those desert shadows for someone who needed shelter. And of course I didn't need to go searching. I didn't need to wait to be driving through the desert near Mexico. There are more than enough displaced people. There are more than enough children and families in my state alone not to mention the detention centers in AZ and TX.

And I have been listening to this voice of the suffering servant in chapter 3 of Lamentations who is heartbroken that God has forsaken him and left him for dead. This servant after the verses quoted for today around verse 55 calls on the name of the Lord and God hears his pleas. AND I wonder how we think it is that God answers cries like that. How exactly do we imagine that the God of salvation executes goodness and mercy? I wonder how much of God's hope is meant to be actualized through me. How much am I an instrument of God's compassion?

What would it take sometimes for me to remove myself from my platforms of intellectual hypothesis? What would it take for me to make myself more proximate to the pain of people near me? It would take God.

Some young people from TriCon Church have just come back from their mission trip to Rhode Island. I can't wait to hear some of the stories of what they experienced. What might they now understand of the immigration narrative of Liberian Americans or even former refugees who moved here for an alternative future. Perhaps they will have heard a testimony born out of proximate compassion where they couldn't help but to feel along with and not just feel for.

And I wonder what it would feel like to feel all the feelings during compassion. The feelings we don't normally feel or experience. The emotions we're afraid of...Could it be liberating and healing? Sometimes people we love or who need our compassion are in terrible agony, deeply embittered, completely frustrated, unfortunately misunderstood. How long do we let ourselves sit next to that feeling or pain? This I believe is part of what we are called to as believers. We are not meant to jump to the 21st verse in our relationships with others. Yes, there is great hope and resurrection in Christ. Christ is most certainly the lifter of our heads AND at the same time (even in this lamentation scripture) there is also great injustice. Both are possible and simultaneous. And to have God's compassion is to be near the pain and willing to hear and respond to it.

When you look up the word for compassion in the King James version of the text, you will find the word "Rakham" which literally means "compassion" but can also be translated as "womb." Womb in the Hebrew is a masculine noun. I've been thinking a lot about that. Again, about what cultures do to words and meaning. It would seem we have feminized the womb, only female presenting people can have them in order to give birth. But it would seem that in this translation of Lamentations 3:22 - which reads "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not." It would seem to read that God's womb doesn't end. I think it significant that compassion is related to the belly or the womb. A place of vulnerable feeling and emotion, a place for birth. In this metaphor, it could also make sense that mercy is born out of compassion, but nothing can be born without pain. Don't get me wrong, it's not my intention to glorify such pain or suffering. But merely, by highlighting these texts in Lamentation, as a lament, I wish us to give attention to the feelings of pain proximate to mercy work to compassionate Christian loving and living.

So I've been wondering how much compassion would it actually take to address the cries in our wildernesses. Do we envision an animated God, some old man in a beard with a cloak coming to answer these cries? Is it for someone else to do?

I know that I have never fought for something that I didn't feel first. I have never waged a purely intellectual battle with a problem that deserved resolution. When I heard of kids not ever having had a teacher of color in their whole school system it made me want to teach more - to be that teacher for some. When my friend shared about being excused from the communion table because he was gay, it made me want to be ordained more so that I could administer communion to all who wanted it. And all I know is that there are dozens of other fights that I need to consider making myself more proximate to. But, I can't do them all. Donations are wonderful and necessary but it is not the same as proximate compassionate presence. So, in my prayer today, I will be asking God for both

compassion and courage. Compassion so that I will never stop feeling the pain of others and courage enough to actually sit through the feeling of it.

I contend that the real hope present in this scripture is that true lament is a dialogue. There are some crying out and some hearing the cry. Surely if the cry is piercing enough, persuasive enough, the hearers will respond. God, help us in our compassionate responses. That one day someone will say that because of **our** great love for them, they were not consumed.

Amen

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