**From Lament to Hope: Embracing the Grief**

**Selections from Lamentations**

**Towson Presbyterian Church**

**June 26, 2022**

You read in the e-mail blast that the theme of the sermons today and next week were chosen to mirror the theme of the 225th General Assembly which is currently meeting in Louisville. When I agreed to be a sub during Rob’s well-earned sabbatical it seemed like a good idea as a way of reminding ourselves that we are part of a greater whole and in some conscious way to join our minds and hearts with those of others throughout the denomination as we seek to discern how God is leading our church in this time and place. But I also have come to think that there is deeper wisdom in this theme worth exploring for its own sake.

In crafting the theme “From Lament to Hope” the Committee on General Assembly clearly had the changes and loses of the past two years in mind. Some of you may remember that the assembly, prior to the current one, was set to take place here in Baltimore. In those good old days this bi-annual national conference of Presbyterians was like a cross between a huge family reunion and a session of the Maryland state legislature. But it was big and festive and sometimes fun…..though some of the work could be excruciatingly tedious. It would take two years to plan and worship was unfailingly glorious. TPC member Patricia Jackson was on the planning committee for GA worship in 2020 so you know that what was being planned would have been artistically breathtaking.

Instead, that year, the Office of the General Assembly got a refund on its deposit for the Baltimore convention center and the assembly met virtually to conduct essential business. This year is a hybrid with committees meeting in 4 day shifts at the Presbyterian Center in Louisville and most of the large plenary sessions are on-line. We’ve been through two years we could never have imagined and neither the Assembly nor the Church is the same.

TPC, thanks to excellent leadership….really excellent leadership….has weathered the pandemic storm better than most . You might even say we are more inclusive, curious, compassionate and courageous than before the pandemic. But not all navigated the chaos so well and across the denomination the loses are accumulating and sustainable ministry seems increasingly like a mirage in countless congregations and presbyteries. Demographic trends are discouraging. The denomination is having to confront some hard questions about how we are being called to be the Church after so much loss not just over the past two years but over the past two decades. In addition, the Assembly is taking up business which seeks to acknowledge and address past injustices perpetrated by the church in the distant and recent past. And so, the theme of the season of discernment and planning in the PCUSA appropriately begins with Lament.

But what is it? Lament is not a word we often use, is it? We talk often about being sad…..nostalgic….regretful. But lament, I think, is something qualitatively different than being sad or nostalgic or even regretful. It is, I think, experiencing the loss of something so profound…so essential to the way we understand ourselves and our world that words can merely point toward a pain of unspeakable loss. And this is the reality out of which the Biblical book of Lamentations arises.

The book is a collection of five poems written during and following the siege of Jerusalem and its fall to Babylon in 587 BC. Thousands had died and the lives of the survivors broken and shattered. Many of the ruling elite were hauled away from their homeland into the land of their archenemy. Those left behind found the horror of war replaced by the horrors of starvation, disease and death on a massive scale. The poet uses the metaphorical image of a woman in describing the new reality of Judah and Jerusalem. Reading only a few verses from the opening chapters is almost more than we can bear:

1:1 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.

11 All her people groan

as they search for bread;

they trade their treasures for food

to revive their strength.

Look, O Lord, and see

how worthless I have become.

3:11 My eyes are spent with weeping;

my stomach churns;

my bile is poured out on the ground

because of the destruction of my people,

because infants and babes faint

in the streets of the city.

12 They cry to their mothers,

‘Where is bread and wine?’

as they faint like the wounded

in the streets of the city,

as their life is poured out

on their mothers’ bosom.

It takes virtually no imagination to hear in these ancient words the suffering of so many in our own time….from Ukraine to Uvalde. But it is not just war and gun violence and poverty and the hate and prejudice at their roots that are lamentable….but the desolation caused by fire, famine and floods,. All increasing in our day, ripping communities from all that once seemed so secure and familiar, also gives rise to Lament. Whatever the circumstances, lament is that anguished cry that recognizes in the horrific grief that that something precious and essential has been lost.

But the poet of Lamentations doesn’t stop there. Instead, he enters a more perilous territory and blames much of the suffering on God and God’s anger. He shakes his fist at the heavens before breaking down into inconsolable grief…

5 The Lord has become like an enemy;

he has destroyed Israel.

He has destroyed all its palaces,

laid in ruins its strongholds,

and multiplied in daughter Judah

mourning and lamentation…

The Lord determined to lay in ruins

the wall of daughter Zion;

he stretched the line;

he did not withhold his hand from destroying,,,

In the midst of the pathos there is anger. We can understand that too. When everything around us is breaking down into chaos why not blame the one force we know we can’t control. And this is where many stop…becoming cynical and agnostic or defeatist….nothing we can do. Or they let their anger get the best of them and multiply the suffering.

But this poet doesn’t stop there either. Even in his unfathomable grief he recognizes something else…and this is probably the hardest thing…that much of the suffering and loss that the nation experienced could be traced back to a failure to live by God’s standards….caring for each other, building communities of justice that worked for everyone…to care for the garden of creation. Instead, in a recurrent pattern, priorities had become skewed and wealth became god and before all collapsed it had been rotting from the inside for a very long time.

Jerusalem sinned grievously,

so she has become a mockery;

all who honoured her despise her,

for they have seen her nakedness;

she herself groans,

and turns her face away….

she took no thought of her future;

her downfall was appalling,

with none to comfort her.

In this brief moment of self-awareness the poet offers another critical dimension of lament. In fact, I’m beginning to think it might not be lament if it doesn’t embrace truth telling…even when it is hard. Sometimes this involves some truth telling about ourselves. Sometimes, simply the willingness to tell the truth about the depth of the loss is what it takes. Because, let’s face it…some of the pain might be dulled if we stay in the shallow waters of denial and falsehoods. As we move through life and through history, there is a great temptation to stop at the level of “regret….” A general sort of feeling bad about something. But lament is an existential agony that moves us to action.

Joel’s Juneteenth blog post last Sunday raised up this dimension of lament…the grief we experience when we can finally admit that we have been less than we are capable of being…that we have violated the values that we perceive as being at the heart of who we say we are…and of our human calling. He wrote that, while June 19th is a day to celebrate the proclamation of freedom and emancipation to those who had been enslaved he continued: “…this is a day to lament that our country once enslaved African Americans. This part of our nation’s history needs to be, he wrote, continuously grieved. While we celebrate the good news [of emancipation] that reached Galveston, Texas, [that] day in 1865, Joel concluded, at the same time we lament this part of our history.” We tell the truth about the injustice and horror of chattel clavery. We come to grips that this was us….our history….our shame. Because only then can we address the injustices that still haunt us in a way that is successful and hopeful. Joel used the word Lament because it is the only word that works.

This is hard. This whole idea of lament with its deeply felt grief and its bold truth telling. By this point you may be wondering why you came to worship today. Most of us want something a little more upbeat on a summer Sunday. I know. But there is one more thing the poet of Lamentations does that begins to move us to a different place. At the end….while still expressing the wail of lament……he introduces for a moment another truth….

19 The thought of my affliction and my homelessness

is wormwood and gall!

20 My soul continually thinks of it

and is bowed down within me.

21 But this I call to mind,

and therefore I have hope:

22 The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,

his mercies never come to an end;

23 they are new every morning;

great is your faithfulness.

25 The Lord is good to those who wait for him,

to the soul that seeks him.

26 It is good that one should wait quietly…

28 to sit alone in silence….

What is this? Is this simply a shot of optimism…. a wish upon a star that God will magically make everything OK again. God’s faithfulness in the midst of lament is the ground of the poet’s hope, and we will explore that more next week. But take note: it is not a sentimental hope. It does not ignore the reality of the suffering. It does not pretend the loss doesn’t exist. It tells the unvarnished truth about what is happening. It is a hope that arises out of the ashes of lament, and I think this is significant and intentional.

Here’s the thing I have learned. Lament is not possible if what is lost is not loved deeply. This is true in the case of the agonizing loss of life, health, home, country, all of which the Biblical poet has suffered. But it is just as true when the loss is a loss of a dream….or a belief in how things were going to be…or of our self-image or when our rose-tinged perceptions of reality that turn out not to be true. It is terrifying to come face to face with the knowledge that we are not who we believed ourselves to be as individuals, as a nation or even as Christians…. that we have not lived up to our own values, not honored our commitments, not taken the courageous stands that followers of Jesus are called to take. Lament….as painful as it is…. comes both from love and from truth-telling. And the love and the truth implicit in the act of lament is the place where the angels minister and where God’s transforming love and grace are recognized for the powerful transforming force they are and not just a word that we toss around in church world.

The human pathos reflected in the poetry of Lamentations echoes through our lives and the current events of the day. Lament is enshrined in Scripture as testament to its place in our lives…to the need we have for it as a fundamental act of our humanity before God. General Assembly in its worship and in significant items of business is beginning with a posture of lament in the faith that God will meet is in those moments of sorrow filled truth telling to help us walk into what might become our finest hour.

Only you know what the personal losses are that you are lamenting. But we all have them….every one of us. In our own lives, as in our communal lives, we are called to name the grief, tell the truth, lament what is loved and lost, in the bold faith that in those acts are the very seeds of transformation and hope that the grace and love of God always scatter abundantly through our lives. Thanks be to God.

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