

First Baptist Church of Augusta
Lamentations 3:19-24 (Matthew 5:3-10)
PainFULL – Grief
November 2, 2008

Lamentations 3:19-24

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. [24] "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."

Pain. If at all possible, most of us would rather just avoid it altogether. We take pills, read books, go to therapy, and sometimes just deny it, in order to rid ourselves of pain. Pain, however, is real and unavoidable. C.S. Lewis wrote that it was one of things that make us human. So it is with the pain of grief, which is our focus this morning. The first Sunday in November is traditionally set aside as “All Souls Day,” where we remember those who have passed from us and share our grief.

In this life, we shall all, from time to time, visit the house of grief. Do you recall the first time someone close to you passed away? Mine was my grandfather, and I was 12 years old. Summer had just begun, and one morning I was still in bed pondering what I was going to do that summer day. Ride my bike, play at the creek, wander in the woods – the day and the opportunities seemed without limit. But my summer plans for that day were rendered meaningless, when my daddy entered the room, and with eyes full of tears, told me Papa had died in his sleep. Papa, the man I am named after, and the one who taught me to chew tobacco, and eat potted meat from the can, was dead at 59. There would be other deaths of course, and more yet for me, until my time of death comes, but, I will never forget that morning of June 2.

Of course, grief isn’t just about the death of a relative or friend. We grieve over all sorts of things. We grieve when a beloved pet dies. We grieve over moves. We grieve when we change schools, or homes, or careers. Grief comes when the marriage fails, or when the child disappoints. Grief comes when something that is precious to us is lost. That is why we often hear or use the phrase “loss,” when referring to a person’s death.

This old book called Lamentations in the Old Testament of our Bible, is about losing. It is a collection of five poems, mourning the siege and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC. A city that was once called a city of God, now was a place of destruction and despair. It was the death of the city. Everything precious to the people of God was no more. Even the great temple - where people would often make a once in a lifetime pilgrimage – was dismantled, and the brightest and best of Israel were either dead or gone. This book was written so that the survivors could express their grief. “How could God let this happen?” Have you ever said that while enshrouded in grief?

We don't have to experience a siege of our city to begin to understand the immense sorrow of the Hebrews. Uncertainty and human suffering is all around us. This book, however, has much to teach us about bearing the pain of grief.

First, grief should be named.

Grief is real and should be expressed honestly. Our culture has taken to privatizing our grief to the point of denying it. We put on a strong face or facade, and are commended with how we are handling our pain. Here, in the book of Lamentations, the Hebrews are being brutally honest. They name their grief through tears, through anger, through resignation and through mystery. Listen how this book begins in the first verse of the first chapter: *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 She is now a slave.* Lamentations 1:1

The book recognizes and names the pain. It is a way to help a people survive. *For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me, one to revive my courage; my children are desolate, for the enemy has prevailed.* Lamentations 1:16

Ten years ago, I was the pastor to a wonderful mother and daughter in the church. The mother was a widow and a prominent judge in the city. She had raised her daughter, her only child, by herself since her daughter was eight years old. Alexis grew up, and one afternoon just before the start of the school year, which would be her senior year, she was returning from placing flowers on her father's grave. The car she drove flipped and she did not survive the accident. This was unspeakable and terrifying grief for everyone that knew Alexis, especially her mother. A year or two after Alexis died, her mother passed along some advice to me that went something like this: "I wish people would not avoid speaking about my daughter by name. I like to hear her name spoken. When you say her name – Alexis - you acknowledge that she was alive and real..."

Lamentations names what is wrong, what hurts, which opens one up to what can be made right. Being honest with grief and naming it for what it is, channels the pain into hopeful destinations. Denial of the pain of grief, however, compromises healing.

True, in the midst of crises, denial is a way to help us cope. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, whom most all recognize as an important author in the area of grief, describes a stage of grief. Sometimes the pain is indeed unbearable. Remaining in the denial, however, constricts hope and depletes life. Remember pain and suffering has no intrinsic value or meaning. It merely points to something that has gone wrong.

Kathleen O'Conner writes: "The book of Lamentations practices truth-telling" (NIB, p. 1034). We are invited into the affliction and rawness, not as spectators into someone else's pain, but to identify, and even participate.

In Lamentations, we also learn that not only the pain of grief needs to be named, but grief needs to be shared. In chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5, the grief expressed is particularly communal. All are invited in to name, hear, and share in the grief. In the fifth chapter, the prayerful lament is directed to God: *Remember, O LORD, what has befallen **us**; look, and see **our** disgrace! 2 **Our** inheritance has been turned over to strangers, **our** homes to aliens.* Lamentations 5:1-2

This prayer is not laced with detached piety. It is earnest and earthly. It takes a faithful person to pray as we read in Lamentations.

What does the writer of the Hebrew people ask? Not restoration or retribution – Israel asks to be heard, for her suffering to be recognized. The people of God did not want their pain to be ignored or to be forgotten. Grief needs to be shared, for in the sharing it is validated, the suffering is not in vain.

When someone dies, friends are called, neighbors bring dishes of food, the Sunday School class moves in to alert others. Grieving can be lonely work, but it should be shared. When we tell people to cheer up or smile or say something trite like, "everything is going to be alright," we are not sharing with their grief. We are only making the one grieving all the more alone.

Seeing and acknowledging pain validates it. Right now, we are reading in the newspapers the plight of Congo and the refugees. There is also the dire poverty of Afghanistan. Atrocities are their daily food. The book of Lamentations does not assault their situation in life – it validates it. There is no covering up the ugliness of the situation.

Several years ago, I heard a former flight attendant speak to my Rotary group about how she survived an airplane crash. She was working a commuter flight, when her plane went down. Many people did not survive, including the pilot, and many more were horribly injured. It was traumatic. She said that part of her therapy was

to retell the story over and over again. In the telling of her tragedy, she was able to find catharsis and healing for her daily wound.

This happens most every time I am invited into a church member's grief. They will share about their loved one, telling funny and familiar stories. Many times, they will also share how they died, sometimes going into vivid detail. Telling and retelling the stories, attempting to come to terms with what has happened.

In Lamentations, both naming the grief and sharing the grief is a coming to terms with the tragedy of Israel, God and their future together. The pain of grief, however, is not the final story to tell.

Out of the labor pains of grief, Lamentations gives birth to hope. It comes right in the middle of the book – Eugene Peterson describes it as a “pool of hope.” [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.*

I should quickly point out, that this hope is not once and for all and triumphant. The author will soon go back to lamenting, expressing the pain of grief. Kathleen O'Connor writes: “In times of profound suffering and disorientation, hope comes and goes.” (p. 1057). In this ancient text we hear the echoes of that old spiritual: *Nobody knows the troubles I've seen; Nobody knows but Jesus.*

We have a tendency to assume that hope is a place we should “get to,” and once there, never have to worry about going back. Grief does not work that way. Some days we feel as though we have it all together, and assume all of the pain is now in the past, and then a word, a thought, a picture or a comment brings it all back.

Hope on this side of eternity, is not a destination, but a journey, a process. Albert Camus writes: “If there is a soul, it is a mistake to believe that it is given us fully created. It is created here, throughout a whole life.”

As I reflect, not only over this book, but throughout the Bible, I do not see that the suffering of grief can be explained away, defined or otherwise minimized. What we are called to do, is engage this grief. This is precisely what Lamentations does – it engages the grief, the pain, the loss.

Of course, as a struggling follower of Jesus, I also see this is what God has done and does still: He enters into our grief, speaking, listening and bearing. No, it does not dismiss it or explain it or solve it. Yet, we are not left alone bearing the pain.

Newtonian Physics, inspires us to believe in the bigness of God. The problem for many, however, is that God has gotten too big to know. Quantum physics, inspires us to believe in the smallness of God. A smallness that connects, that relates, that rejoices, when we rejoice and weeps when we weep.

Moment by moment God is subtly dawning anew in every life: [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.*