

A Season for Lament
Lamentations
March 6, 2011

Little did I know when we set the theme for our Lenten sermon series that today I would be feeling as far away from the need to lament as the earth is to the sun. As the rest of the EDCC staff will tell you, I've been verging on giddiness all week long—I can't keep from smiling my joy that Don Stokes wants to marry me.

I guess, Don, we could have waited until Easter Sunday to share our good news with the congregation—after all, what we've been experiencing is the joy of new life—of resurrection, in a way.

But like the preacher and writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven."

Lent is a season for Lament—a time set aside to give voice to the broken places in our lives, in our world. It is, as the Hebrew preacher wrote, "a time to weep and mourn, a time to rend."

And so, for the next 40 plus days, starting with our Ash Wednesday service this week, we'll spend some time sharing our lamentations with our God and with one another.

There's no lack of Biblical resources for laments. We find them aplenty in the Psalms, upon which many of our Lenten scriptures will be based. We'll also hear those places where Jesus cried out in the gospels, and those points where Paul acknowledged his own lamentations.

But perhaps the best example of biblical lament literature is found in 5 chapters in the First Testament of our Bible that appears to be the work of one man who lived in Jerusalem between the years of 609-586 BCE.

A later edition of what was originally known in Hebrew as the book of *Eka*, translated into English as the word "alas," included a verse that gives us a clue as

to who wrote the book that now has been called "Lamentations." That verse reads, "Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented this lamentation over Jerusalem."

The Jeremiah for whom the poetic lamentations are attributed was the prophet whose own life story precedes the book of Lamentations in the Bible. It is through the voice of Jeremiah that we hear of about how he and his fellow Judeans faced one crisis after another.

Lamentations is an acrostic poem (one that follows the Hebrew alphabet) that incredibly and poignantly tells of the impact of the downfall of Jerusalem, from the siege of the Holy City by the Babylonians to the consequences of famine, death, disgrace and loss of all that had been promised by the Patriarchs. The end came in 586 BCE when the city was leveled by the Assyrians, and the citizens were deported to lands far away.

This piece of literature stands as a nation's expression of grief and loss at what happened to them.

(AnnaGrant-Henderson<http://www.oldtestamentlectionary.unitingchurch.org.au/index.yearC 2010pentecost>).

We hear their cries even as the book opens with a picture of solitary desolation—"How lonely sits the city that was once full of people! How like a widow has she become, she that was great among nations."

It continues with groans of dismay throughout the book like these verses:

1:12 "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted upon me on the day of his fierce anger."

1:16 "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..."

How many of you have read the book of Lamentations before? If you're curious, we're starting a new Bible study next week in the Connections class at 9:30 led by Joe Milazzo.

Some of us may have encountered the book as we've attempted to read the Bible from front to back. One man, as he began his disciplined study of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, took two colored highlighter pens. "Whenever he read a sentence that made him sad or depressed, he highlighted it with a blue marker. Any parts that were uplifting and joyful he marked in yellow. All the rest, anything that was not particularly depressing or uplifting he left blank. Blue for the "blues." A bright sunshine yellow for the cheery parts.

"It would not surprise anyone to know that every book of the Bible contained a combination of passages that were both uplifting and depressing. Each book of the Bible is a complex mixture. Except for the 25th book—the book of Lamentations. The whole thing was marked in blue by the man—from the first verse to the last. (taken from a sermon by Thomas G Rogers "Uplifted by the Blues." [www.esermons.com/Lamentations.](http://www.esermons.com/Lamentations))

The book of Lamentations, like the other laments we will study in the weeks ahead, gives voice to a part of ourselves that many of us have tried hard not to reveal. As a society, we have become uncomfortable with complaint, with anger, with grief. We consider it impolite, boorish, and rude to inflict on others our pain and dis-ease. Some of us even consider it "unchristian" to be negative—that by doing so we might seem ungrateful to our God who gave us Christ.

We all heard sometime along the road that we need to "count our blessings and quit bellyaching—think of those poor people in _____."

Walter Brueggemann, the great Hebrew Bible scholar, points out, however, that our Jewish foreparents of the faith understood the need for lament—both public and private. Brueggemann observes from our holy texts that the very act of being able to lament loudly and publically was, for our ancestors and for us, an act of faith and an act of justice.

In his study of the Psalms, Brueggemann discovered that the people of Israel used the process of lamenting to help them heal from deep hurts and wounds. In every lament save one in the Psalms, there is an "articulation of hurt and anger, followed by a submission of them to God, and finally a relinquishment" that allows the hurt to be let go.

According to our Hebrew ancestors who may have known a little more about psychology than we gave them credit for, they found the only way to heal from brokenness is to name the brokenness, to address our complaints to the ones in power—and in particular-God; to let God deal with them, and then to move on after having left them in God's care. (Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament" Eden Theological Seminary, 1986)

And boy, did they let God have it! Not only did their laments chastise the people in power who were the cause of the downfall of the nation; not only did their laments accuse their enemies of evil—they also took God to task for not doing God's work of bringing things back together again.

Turn in your Bible and let's read how the book of Lamentations ends—starting in 5:19—"But you, O God, you reign forever—your throne endures to all generations. Why have you forgotten us forever—why have you forsaken us so long? Restore us to yourself, O Lord, so that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old! Or have you utterly rejected us? Are you that angry with us?"

Jeremiah doesn't hold anything back from God. He asks hard questions. He holds God accountable. He even has a tone of voice that some would take exception to.

So how does that make you feel? Have you ever allowed yourself to question God? To be angry at God? To hold God accountable? Does Jeremiah—and others who wrote their laments--make you feel uncomfortable—like it's disrespectful to question the Most High God? That it's not trusting or even faithful to address God in that manner?

Brueggemann, in his study of laments, discovered that those who lifted their voices as a fist to God, who allowed their anger out at God and cried tears of deep grief to God were some of the most faithful believers of all.

They were strong in their faith because they believed in a God who could handle their anger—the Almighty/omnipotent God who could deal with any pain or

curse or angry accusation. They believed in a God who could bring right out of wrong; who could clean up the messes of humankind.

They believed in a God who heard their hearts, and responded.

And if God didn't respond in a timely manner, like the writer of Lamentations complained—"Why have you forsaken us so long?"—they kept persistently praying and calling out to God because they believed in God—they believed God would answer sometime—in some way.

If that's not faith—than I don't know what is.

Lamentations gave those who were feeling great negative emotions a chance to vent those emotions—to cleanse the heart's palate so that something new could emerge.

And in nearly all the laments, by the end of the rant, you can almost hear the heart quiet down, the spirit soothed by the divine reminder that God is with us always, and will never abandon us. Nearly every lament, then, ends with a word of praise—

And even the book of Lamentations has its moment of praise when the writer remembers in 3:55, "I called out your name, O God, called from the bottom of the pit. You listened when I called out, 'Don't shut your ears! Get me out of here! Save me!' You came close when I called out. You said, 'It's going to be all right.'"

In order to get to praise and thanksgiving, in order to find serenity and peace, sometimes—in some situations that are a result of great pain and horror and brokenness—we have to give in to the need to lament.

A week ago yesterday, our Chair of the Elders, the Rev. Ron Somers-Clark, shared with us during our Elder's continuing education event his struggle with the aftermath of the horrible brutality that he endured while in Phoenix last year at TCU's appearance at the Fiesta Bowl.

Many of you might remember that Ron and his wife Carole were staying at a resort in Scottsdale, and were already in bed after the Horned Frog's loss to Boise State, when they heard a noise outside their bedroom door in the living room of their suite. Ron went to check out the noise, and as he opened the bedroom door he found himself tackled by a hulking brute of a man, who threw him across the bed and onto the floor on the other side of the bed and proceeded to beat Ron in the face.

Ron shared with us that he thought he might be facing the moment of his death as the man pummeled his face and as Carole pulled on the man's hair trying to pull him off her husband.

After hotel security and Scottsdale police finally arrived and carried the man off to jail, Ron was shaken to the very core of his being. He shared that he suffered post-traumatic stress syndrome, and a year later he still felt a twinge of discomfort when making the trip out to the Rosebowl this year.

In the intervening time, though, Ron allowed himself to lament. He gave voice to his fear, his rage about the young man—a fellow TCU alum who was so high on something he wasn't thinking straight. He gave voice to his struggle with his not wanting to forgive the young man, even though the guy's lawyer used Ron's ministerial calling in his plea with Ron for a lighter sentence—even forgiveness of any penalty.

Ron gave voice to his lament in a public trial setting, saying to the judge and all who would hear that the young man had to be held accountable for his behavior. He had done an evil thing, and needed to face the consequences of his action.

And as he shared this story with the elders of this church last week, Ron was able to say that he had been able to move beyond—that he wasn't fettered by fear or anchored by anger.

So for the next few weeks, as we embark on our Lenten journey together, we'll spend some time looking at our laments—acknowledging our pains and articulating our complaints. We will offer them to God as prayers of faith, and

share them with one another as we are able—knowing that Christ knows all because of the cross.

And then—and then—we'll see how God helps us to move past and into the light of laughter and love.

That is what Easter's all about, after all.

And even though I'm kind of already anticipating Easter's resurrection in my own life, don't get me wrong. Both Don and I will tell you that in each of our journeys we've had incredible moments of pain and heartache that we have lifted up as laments in prayer.

My friend Marcus Hummon went to Vanderbilt Div. school with me, but his path took him a different way. He is now an award-winning songwriter in Nashville, and those of you who know country music have heard many of his songs.

One of my favorites of his that I remember hearing him sing all those years ago when we were all students and he'd take his guitar and play in the commons room of the Divinity school—has more recently been recorded by Rascal Flatts and also by Carrie Underwood. Its title is "God Bless the Broken Road," and it's a love song for sure.

But it also illustrates that seasons of lament could possibly be making way for seasons of laughter and joy through Jesus Christ.

The chorus of the song goes:

Every long lost dream led me to where you are

Others who broke my heart they were like Northern stars

Pointing me on my way into your loving arms

This much I know is true

That God blessed the broken road that led me straight to you.

God can bless our broken roads; for all of us who know lament also know that God hears, and guides us straight to into the loving arms of Christ.

Thanks be to God.