

A Service of Remembrance Meditation

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

October 16, 2022 - PM Service

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Lamentations 3:31-33

We do this service every year. Every year around this time we come to this place to remember our loss. It's a little bit melancholy. It's a little like a corporate funeral. When everyone comes forward you can feel the weight of grief and memory in this place.

Why do we do this? Many of us will be remembering people we lost years and years ago. Why do we create this space where we come back to our grief? Grief is pain, why revisit pain? Why create this worship service that will bring it to mind?

We do it of a number of reasons. We do it because it's good. A few weeks ago I mentioned Frederick Buechner, the Christian author who died a month ago. I told the story of how his journey to Christian faith began with grief. It began with a death. When he was ten years old his father committed suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning in the family garage. The act was completely unexpected and it shook the family. Buechner's family was a tribe of agnostic, buttoned down New Englanders. They were a 'stiff upper lip and put on a good show' kind of a family. So after his dad died and the funeral was over, no one talked about the loss. No one talked about the suicide. His mother simply internalized everything, set her jaw and got on with her life.

Ultimately it wasn't good for her. Years later, Buechner wrote this about his Mom and her handling of grief: "*The sadness of other people's lives, even the people she loved, never seemed to touch her where she lived. I don't know why. It wasn't that she had a hard heart, I think — in many ways she was warm, sympathetic, generous — but that she had a heart that for one reason or another she kept permanently closed to other people's suffering, as well as to the darkest corners of her own.*" In shutting herself off from grief, she shut herself off from the pain of others to and, unintentionally closed down her capacity to love.

Buechner went the other way. He was open about his pain. He became very open about the hungers in his heart and soul, and that became part of what the Holy Spirit used to lead him to faith. Buechner's favorite play was Shakespeare's *King Lear* whose last line, you may remember, is "*The weight of these sad times we must obey, speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.*" His mother only ever spoke what she ought to say. Buechner spoke what he felt. He shared his grief. Sharing our grief is good.

It's also Biblical. The Bible calls us to speak what we feel. The Psalms express the full range of human emotion from hope and joy, to anger and grief. The Psalms of lament are given by the Holy Spirit to help us speak what we feel, to bring our feelings out into the light. And

there are other Bible books that help us with the same kinds of expression: Job, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, and then of course, the book of Lamentations.

The book of Lamentations is an entire book devoted to grief, in this case the grief of a people who've had their whole world turned upside down. Lamentations is five chapters of grief over the destruction of Jerusalem and all the loss that came with that. The loss of a city and its neighborhoods, the loss of the temple and the infrastructure of their faith, and most personally the loss of people, neighbors friends, husbands wives, brothers sisters – all swept away in a tide of blood and cruelty.

Lamentations expresses that loss in 5 poems, one poem per chapter and each of these poems pour out the heartbreak of the loss. The feelings expressed are familiar to any of us who have been through deep grief. *“My eyes fail from weeping! I am in torment from within. My heart is poured out to the ground.”* 2:11 *“The Lord has besieged me with bitterness and hardship. He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead.”* 3:5-6 *“Joy has gone from our hearts. Our dancing has turned to mourning.”* 5:15 The author of Lamentations does not hold back his feelings. He speaks what he feels, not what he ought to say.

But here's a really interesting thing about Lamentations, and this is an insight I owe to Michael Williams, emeritus Hebrew prof at Calvin Seminary and member of this congregation. The grief of Lamentations isn't just in the words of the book; it's in the *structure* of the book. It's in the *form* of the book. Lamentations is made from 5 poems. Each chapter is a poem, and each of these poems is in the form of an acrostic. An acrostic is a poem based on the alphabet. So if you were to write an acrostic in English, the first verse of your poem would start with the letter a, the second verse would start with the letter b, the third verse would start with the letter c, all the way down the line to z. Hebrew has 22 letters in its alphabet, so if you go to Lamentations and look at chapter one you will notice that chapter one is 22 verses long. That's because it's an acrostic and each verse starts with the next letter in the alphabet. Chapters 2,4, and 5 are also 22 verses long. They too are acrostics. The middle chapter is 66 verses long. But that's because each letter of the alphabet gets three verses instead of just one. It's still an acrostic but it's three times as long.

The acrostic was a pretty common Hebrew poetic form. There are a number of them in the Psalms. Psalm 119 is the most obvious of those. But the author of Lamentations does something different with the form. Chapter one is a straightforward acrostic. All the letters are there in their proper order. But in chapter two something changes. The verses start out in normal order- alpha, beth, gimel, dalet, everything is going on as expected, but towards the end, two letters are switched. Ayin and Pe come in the wrong order. Why are they switched? It's not because the poet has forgotten the alphabet; it's sending a message. The poet is saying Jerusalem has fallen to pieces, our life has fallen to pieces, and now things are so bad it's like cracks are starting to appear in the alphabet itself. The foundations of our language is starting to crumble,

that's how bad things are. In chapter 3 the letters are reversed again. In chapter 4 the letters are reversed again. Then in chapter 5 the crack turns into a collapse. It's still in the form of an acrostic – there are still 22 verses – but the letters are all jumbled. There is no order anymore. Like the walls of Jerusalem, the alphabet has fallen into ruin.

Chaotic chapter 5 is the last chapter in the book and here's how it ends. *“Renew us as in days of old, unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure.”* It ends with fear and uncertainty. Lamentations is not a ‘keep a stiff upper lip and pretend everything is OK’ kind of book. It is a book that speaks what it feels, not what it ought to say.

But in the middle of this lament and in the middle of the chaos the poet does one more thing. Remember the verse structure of the chapters and how it mirrors the alphabet? Chapter 1 and 2, 22 verses each, one for each letter of the alphabet. Chapter 3, 66 verses – three verses for each letter of the alphabet. Chapter 4 and 5, 22 verses one for each letter of the alphabet. So if that's the structure, what is the middle verse of the book? 22, 22, 66, 22, 22. It would be the verses I read before the meditation, verses 31 to 33, verses associated with the letter kaph.

In the middle of all the chaos of Lamentations, In the middle of the tears and the groans and the shouts and the imprecations and the destruction and the grief, the Holy Spirit plants these words, like an anchor in the storm, like a still point in the middle of the chaos, like a point of light that cuts through the darkness. *No one is cast off by the Lord forever.³² Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love.³³ For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.* So the poem doesn't just speak the truth about grief and chaos and how it feels. It speaks the truth about where our hope lies. The structure of the Psalm proclaims that in the middle of loss, God's compassion does not fail, his unfailing love persists and it is stronger than the darkness.

In that sense, our verses point to Jesus and for me they point especially to the cross of Jesus. In the middle of his chaotic poem, the Spirit inspired the author of Lamentations to plant these words. In the middle of the chaos of history, God has planted the cross. In the middle of a storm of chaos and human sin, Christ was crucified, and three days later was raised from the dead. And through that act God has planted a hope that cannot be moved. No matter how bad things get, no matter how deep our grief, no matter how disoriented our loss makes us feel, we can turn to the cross, and there Jesus says, *“Don't be afraid. Death is beaten. Your loved one is not lost, for I have conquered sin! I have conquered death. I was dead, but behold I am alive for ever and ever.”*

Friends I can't explain your loss. I can't explain why it happened and why it hurts so much. But I can show Jesus. I can bring you to the man who has already beaten death. I can urge you to take refuge in him. His voice isn't always louder than the voice of chaos, but it's always stronger. And it's a voice of eternal life.

