

St. John's Episcopal Church

Sermon Proper 8 B, 2009

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The reading from Lamentations that we just recited together was written to mourn the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in the 6th century BCE, about 2500 years ago. We know that although Jeremiah witnessed some of the city's destruction, he is probably not the author of the Book of Lamentations. Most scholars think that it is a compilation of a series of laments about the ruined city and the enforced exile of the people, taken as captives to Babylon.

During this exile the Jews who remained in Jerusalem would gather at the ruins of the temple and mourn, probably with these or very similar words. Laments over a city, songs of mourning over national catastrophes, were common in the Middle East at that time. And mourning over the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple persisted for centuries. When Jerusalem was occupied by the Ottoman Empire for 400 years, the Ottoman rulers allowed the Jews to return to the western retaining wall of the destroyed Second Temple only once a year to mourn its destruction by the Romans. The Jews would wail and lament. Hence the common, but erroneous, name of the Western wall as the Wailing Wall.

And, to this day Lamentations is read by Jews on the 9th day of the month of Av in the Jewish calendar while people fast and pray, sitting as in a house of mourning. Tisha B'Av is the day to hear again these words from Lamentations whether you live in Jerusalem or Brookline or Shanghai and to mourn over the ruins of the temple and the destruction of the city.

But, it is not only Jews who use this text in worship. I remember vividly Holy Week services when I was a Roman Catholic. On Maundy Thursday, which we called Holy Thursday, we would sit in a darkened chapel, lit only by the candles of two candleabra. Each verse from Lamentations was chanted in Latin preceded by a chant of the Hebrew letter that begins each verse. When the verse was concluded a candle was extinguished. And so it would go until we sat in total darkness. Anticipating liturgically the death of Jesus the next day- the destruction of the temple as Jesus foretold-both the physical temple and the temple of his body.

Judaism and Christianity are historical religions. Liturgically, we commemorate specific historical events that you can read about in textbooks. We have liturgies about things that really happened in the past. We create vivid images of real places you can visit today- Egypt and Sinai and Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Especially Jerusalem- the site of the temple,

the place of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the symbol of our final home- the heavenly Jerusalem.

Now, we know that national crises and personal suffering are not things of the past. Images of ruin, violence and destruction are all around us today. We have only to watch the news for half an hour or read **one** newspaper to be bombarded with graphic images of failed political systems, injustice, discord, cruelty, violence and warfare. It goes on and on. But, our religion and our liturgies and scriptures give us a way to make some meaning out of this suffering. To understand in some dim way, to mourn and lament in worship and to cling to hope that God's forgiveness will come to us, that God's justice will triumph in the end.

My spouse's former church in Cambridge had a service of lamentations on Good Friday. The congregation would gather to mourn and lament all the brokenness of our world and of our own lives. Lamenting is a traditional way of praying and a way which we might want to refashion for our own time. We can express anger and outrage and grief in our prayer as we watch CNN or read the NY Times. We can lift up the faces of victims of injustice and violence. Lift them up to God in prayer.

When I read Lamentations I see in my mind's eye the people of Iran who have taken to the streets asking for personal freedoms and for a

hearing. Asking, quite literally, to be counted. I see Palestinians, both Muslim and Christian, whom I have met in Jerusalem and in the Holy Land who continue day after day a seemingly futile struggle for political autonomy, national recognition and personal freedom. When I ask what sustains them they say that God is a God of justice. That God will not permit unjust systems to go on forever. When I speak with Israeli Jews who are working for peace they tell me that justice is integral to who they are and who God is and so they will spend their lives working for justice for Palestinians and Israelis.

The book of Lamentations is very short- only 5 chapters. And what we read today is the middle chapter. Chapter 3 is inserted into the mourning and lament of the other chapters. Chapter 3 promises God's presence, promises consolation instead of mourning and says: "It is good to wait even in silence for the salvation of God, to sit alone clinging to hope even when tasting the dust." Believing as we do that God is in the midst of our human life and human suffering, in our midst present to save.

We know that God is present to save us in our personal lives. What we need to remember, as well, is that God has promised to be present as redeemer and savior in our political and national struggles, in our moments of historical crisis. On the days we vote, or hope to vote, or demonstrate for

a recount of votes. On the days when we march or call the White House or write to our representatives about issues of justice, of care for the poor, of the end to violence and war.

We have a form of prayer to bring suffering and God face to face as we lament. But we do so in the assurance that God will save us- that God's justice will prevail- someday, somehow, somewhere. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. says: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." What we do is mourn and express outrage and cry out for justice and hope steadfastly in God. And we do them all at the same time. And we do them every day. Because we are people of hope, children of the resurrection. Because we know in our very bones that "God's mercies are never-ending." That "they are new every morning."

And so we pray: To God whose power now at work in us can do infinitely more than we can even ask for or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.