

**Overview**

I will offer the devotion on Tuesday the 30th on the general theme of LAMENT in the midst of the pandemic. The scriptural reference will be Lamentations, dating from about 580 bce following the destruction of Jerusalem by the army of Nebuchadnezzar. I will reference selected verses from Chapter 2, and several verses from Chapter 5, and I will read these myself. The context for my message will likely focus on the Black experience in America, including some laments coming out of slavery, but also a word of hope. The point I will make is that lament is a proper theological response in the current context, recognizing the pain and anger felt by many people of color, and challenging the white majority to repent of our complicity in maintaining the status quo. I will ask Melissa for assistance with two hymns, the first being “Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child “ (perhaps Tiya can sing this??) and the second Hymn 707, “Hymn of Promise.”

**Scripture**

**Lamentations:**

**2:1-2, 5-6, 10-12, 21-22, 5:1-3, 16, 19-22.**

**2:1-2.**

**The Lord in His wrath  
Has shamed Fair Zion,  
Has cast down from Heaven to earth,  
the majesty of Israel.  
He did not remember his Footstool  
On His day of wrath.**

**The Lord has laid waste without mercy  
All the habitations of Jacob.  
He has razed the city in anger,  
Fair Jacob’s stronghold;  
He has brought low in dishonor  
The kingdom and its leaders.....**

**5-6,**

**The Lord has acted like a foe,  
He has laid waste Israel,  
Laid waste all her citadels,  
Destroyed her strongholds.  
Within Fair Judah he has brought  
Mourning and moaning.**

**In his rage He has spurned  
both King and priest....  
Her prophets, too,  
Receive no vision from the Lord.  
The maidens of Israel  
Now have bowed heads to the ground.**

**10-12,  
My eyes are spent with weeping,  
My heart is in tumult.  
My being melts away  
Over the ruin of my poor people.**

**The babes and sucklings languish,  
Asking their fathers,  
Where is bread and drink?  
They languish in the squares of the town,  
As their life runs out, they cry  
As does any child who is motherless....**

**21-22,  
Alas, priest and prophet are slain,  
In the sanctuary of the Lord.  
Prostrate in the streets,  
Both mother and child.  
Our maidens and youth,  
All fallen by the sword.**

**5:1-3,  
Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us,  
Behold, observe our disgrace.  
We have become orphans, fatherless,  
Our mothers are now like widows.  
Gone is the joy of our hearts,  
Our dancing has turned to mourning.**

**16, 19-22.**

**But you, O Lord, are enthroned forever,  
Your throne endures thru the ages,  
Take us back, O Lord, unto Yourself,  
And let us come back,  
Renew our life as of old,  
Renew our days of old.**

I hope you can pick out the several themes here...  
Clearly you can get the sense of lament in these words....  
The cry out to God who appears to be absent from the suffering being  
experienced by the people, the sense of being abandoned at these  
very moments of despair...

Consider the lament in this old slave song:

O I been 'buked and I been scorned,  
Done had a hard time sho's you been born.  
I don't know why my sis will stay here fuh,  
Dis ol' worl' ain't been no friend to huh.

If de blues was whiskey, I'd be drunk all the time,  
I write dese blues, gonna sing 'em as I please,  
I'm de only one to hear dem de way I'm singing 'em,  
I's swear to de Lawd – ain't no one else to please.

And then the distress of those who are orphaned and completely vulnerable when  
fathers are killed in the invasion – or sold off down river as slaves – fatherless...  
and mothers widowed – some, of course, themselves killed or snatched away,  
the situation of finding oneself perhaps fatherless AND motherless.

Here's a chant that came out of the cottonfields...

Ef you ever been down, you know jes how I feel,  
Lake a broken-down engine with no drivin' wheel.  
I wish I knew how it feel to be free,  
I wish I could break all the chains holdin' me.

And yet, thirdly, the recognition that God is still present... and the hope  
that in the end, God will indeed makes things right, perhaps even  
restoring the people to their homeland... remember, remember, O God.  
Bring our moaning and mourning to an end with our restoration....

Here's one more that was still being sung in the 60s on the marches in the South..

Oh.. Oh Freedom! Oh Freedom,  
Oh freedom how I love thee.  
And before I'd be a slave,  
I'd be buried in my grave,  
And go home to my Lord and be free.

Listen now how those in slavery put their experience into songs of lament...

Tiya sings...

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child<sup>[SEP]</sup>Sometimes I feel like a motherless child<sup>[SEP]</sup>Sometimes I feel like a motherless child<sup>[SEP]</sup>A long way from home<sup>[SEP]</sup>Sometimes I feel like I never been born<sup>[SEP]</sup>Sometimes I feel like I never been born<sup>[SEP]</sup>Sometimes I feel like I never been born<sup>[SEP]</sup>I know my father is gone.

Sometimes I feel like I'll die from this toil<sup>[SEP]</sup>Sometimes I feel like I'll die from this toil<sup>[SEP]</sup>Sometimes I feel like I'll die from this toil<sup>[SEP]</sup>A long way from home<sup>[SEP]</sup>Sometimes I feel like a motherless child<sup>[SEP]</sup>Sometimes I feel like a motherless child<sup>[SEP]</sup>Sometimes I feel like a motherless child<sup>[SEP]</sup>A far way from home

Let's pay attention to what theologian James H. Cone was saying about this aspect of the Black experience, and those who constituted the Black Church in America:

This is a quote from Cone's classic book God of the Oppressed:

"The folklore of Black people in America centers on the ability of the weak to survive through persistence and cunning, trickery, and sheer deception in the face of the master and in an environment controlled by the powerful. Br'er Rabiit tricked Br'er Fox into slinging him into the briar patch and then singing out "Born and bred in de briar patch"... Likewise, High John outwits the master and another slave survives... This same theme shows up continuously in sermon, prayer and song, including seculars, spirituals and blues. On the one hand, Black people expressed the contradictions they faced in the throes of oppression, affirming the need to live through history without being conquered by it, and on the other there is the theological emphasis that God will liberate the weak and powerless and usher in justice in spite of the strong."

To quote the Harlem Renaissance poet Zora Neale Hurston, "I've been in Sorrow's Kitchen, and licked out all the pots," and some folks would add, "and licked them clean." So this is the lament of those who are mired in suffering and despair... but what of the rest of us, those who are yet comfortable in our place, even though we may not have had anything directly to do with creating the original situation of despair and abandonment... Yet we are the ones who still have all the benefits of sharing the spoils of the dominant culture?

This is Holy Week, when WE are called to remember the suffering, the agony, that Jesus experienced... the accusation of sedition that Jesus faced from an oppressive, exploitative, dominant Roman imperial regime? We don't suffer very much at all, do we? Even when we do join occasionally with those marching in the streets calling for justice, when we return to our familiar shopping malls and our comfortable homes, .. it is all easily compartmentalized isn't it. We know we will have dinner on the table tonight. We know when we see a police patrol car in our neighborhood, we are being protected or the neighbor's poodle is being returned home safely... we know our young sons and daughters will return from school safely and enjoy visiting with their friends on tic-toc or facebook after homework is over.

Yesterday morning we heard Pastor Doug read the story of Jesus upsetting the table in the marketplace of the Temple in Jerusalem...the text using the words – “ a house of prayer has become a den of thieves...” Significantly, all four of our Gospels include this story (although John places the incident into his narrative in a different place), but as Pastor Doug pointed out, virtually all NT scholars attribute this incident to Jesus' final week, and agree that this was the “final straw” so to speak that cemented the determination of the temple authorities (the “scribes and pharisees” but more accurately the Sadducees) to bring charges of sedition in order to get the Roman procurator to execute Jesus.

Was this incident an anomaly? Was this act of Jesus – attested to in all four Gospels – a sudden act of defiance, or perhaps even a misplaced temper tantrum? After months of teaching the disciples and people across the land techniques of what we today call passive resistance to Rome, and non-violent protest by withholding the temple taxes from the Jerusalem authorities – how is this act explained? Well, maybe we have misinterpreted Jesus' prior message, maybe we have missed the central message of the new Kingdom that Jesus was preaching and exemplifying. As Pastor Doug said, “As tempting and as accommodating, gracious, polite tolerance can seem today for people of faith, the gospels clearly invite disruption in the face of oppression.” unquote. – Did you get that? “Disruption.”

And then Pastor Doug asked: “Would you have been there, with the resistance? Would you have resisted the marketplace, or the witness of an activist?” Take note of the words here – “Disruption.” – “Resistance” in the marketplace... an “activist” witness for social justice.... Sure, we love to hear the words during the High Holy Days from the second Isaiah “Comfort ye, Comfort ye, my people>” and we surely want all our “rough places” to be made plain... but “my people” means everybody... not just the privileged. “Everybody” – not just those of us who enjoy the benefits and opportunities for advancement in the dominant culture, while people are sleeping every night on the grates along 14

<sup>th</sup> street, or people living in lead paint apartments without plumbing and rats coming out of the woodwork every night. If “faith” in the NT sense is *pistis* – more verb than noun – then we have a sacred responsibility to remember the struggles of the earliest Christians to replace, to redefine, to reconfigure the institutions of oppression that they faced....and the continuing struggles of those trapped in our minority communities by what Dr. James Lawson calls “predatory capitalism>” The first followers of Jesus were resisting – not just oppressive hierarchies and purity codes, but the very definition of religion itself. The “principalities and powers” were not limited to Rome -- They included the religious establishment, whose legalistic maze of rules brokered access to the divine and – to quote the text – “devoured widow’s houses” with impunity. To be a disciple of the “resister of Nazareth” was to challenge more than individual sin – it was to resist theological perversion as well.

Resistance.... This is a word I cannot get out of my head. Resistance. Is this a theological word? Who might be so crazy, so foolish to think of the church today as a defiant community? Who among us would be so bold to define faith as embodied resistance to the principalities and powers of our age?

Whatever we might think of the early Jesus movement, we must recognize that it was born and took hold in opposition to the status quo. It’s central figure was crucified as an unacceptable risk to the established religious authorities and to the *Pax Romana* of the empire. It’s central figure, a poor peasant “full of God,” as Bishop Spong often says, preached a message that was so counter-intuitive and subversive that the people in his home town, who presumably knew him for all his years growing up, questioned his mental health. Who among us today should want to follow such a foolish one?

None of us here today were around to witness the emergence of the social gospel in the United States during the first decade of the twentieth century, But in those days the people called Methodists were at the forefront, calling for justice for those recognized as the least, the lost and the left behind. Then it was a previous generation who watched the last ounce of prophetic courage disappear from Christian communities across our land. Oh, for sure, we mean well. We gather on Sunday mornings and sing our hearts out. We pray long prayers, we support ministries for the homeless, we underwrite Campus Kitchen and collect food here for distribution in Southeast. But who among us could make a credible claim that the church in America today is an effective change agent? Where is the leaven in the dough today? What if Baptism were to come with a pledge to disinfect the status quo? Is it too harsh to say that we have been absorbed into the dominant culture of exploitation that we are called to resist?

I am not one who derives much comfort from what has come to be known as the “theology of the Cross.” Too much of a notion of sacrifice for me, a sacrifice that appears to let me off the hook for my own life of neglect, my life of comfort, my walking away from suffering that persists even today, the habit of casting a blind eye, of blaming the victim, and the absence of a sense of complicity in the structure of racism and injustice.

Do we have anything for which WE should raise a lament?

Yes, I think there is a deep call today for a theology of lament. The point I am trying to make is

that lament is a proper theological response In the current context. We should lift a cry that we have become a handmaiden of the dominant culture. We confuse ancient creeds and outmoded concepts with righteousness, and we confound faith with doctrines in which we secretly don't believe, we substitute charity for social justice. And my lament, my personal lament, is that I fit in with everyone else. I lament that I can so easily succumb to the comforts of capitulation while so many don't know where their next meal might come from. I lament that so many people of color suffer continuing indignities with nothing but pain and anger when their children are hungry.

I lament of my failure to challenge the white majority to repent of our complicity in maintaining the status quo.

So after all this, I have no solution to this problem facing the church today. I can advocate no grand strategy that will transform our relationship to the dominant culture. All I can recommend is that we live consciously concerning those powerful forces that try to suck us up with glitter and gold. Beware of anyone who confuses faith with absolute truth. Lead me to the one who is a seeker of truth – spare me the one who has found it. Beware of the one who is in love with being right rather than being right by being loving. The prophet Micah shares with us the watchword: Micah asked, “What does the Lord require of you – only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

To close this meditation with a prayer, I'd like to share the thoughts of a poet named Anna Kamienska, a poem called “Utterly Ordinary Revelations:” It's a poem that celebrates God's grace that comes to us through the small things in ordinary life, so small that we usually don't recognize the simple gifts of God's grace. Let's be in a mind of prayer:

Grace usually starts with just one word,  
reveals itself in one smile,  
sometimes a lonely daisy in  
a splash of light on the rocky path.  
It shows forth in laundry hung neatly across a balcony,  
It reflects in hands steadily kneading dough.  
It seeps out when you pour tea for a friend,  
It shows in a drop of blood from the prick of a needle,  
And when you knit a cap for a newborn babe,  
Or when you sew a button on the burial shirt of a partner.  
It comes with immense fatigue in the evening  
after a day of toil bringing water from the well.  
Grace seldom comes from the events we call “grand” -  
Grace is found in the tiny things,  
As if someone might be building a swallow's nest  
out of clumps of passing moments....

I pray in the spirit of my brother Jesus.... Amen>

