

The ABCs of Grief
Lamentations 1:1-3, 3:19-24, Mark 14:32-36
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I was ordained in 1972. In the past 38 years, I'm guessing I have preached almost 2,000 sermons, and never once have I preached a sermon from a passage in the book of Lamentations. It's probably about time.

In the spirit of full disclosure, the reason that I have never preached on Lamentations is that I just don't like reading Lamentations. It's a book about suffering, pain, sadness, grief. I don't like going into Lamentations because it's dark and gloomy in there.

However what Lamentations has going for it is that it is real. The book is real because suffering and pain and sadness and grief are real. No one has ever gone through life pain free. In the Gospel lesson that we read, we saw that even Jesus suffered and experienced "deep distress." Suffering, loss, grief—these are universal human experiences. And what Lamentations does is to wade right into these dark experiences and face them head on.

The Bible never really attempts to explain or eliminate suffering. What the Bible does is to engage suffering at its deepest level. The Bible tells of a loving God who enters into the life of a suffering world and shares that suffering with us. One writer has said,

Scripture is not a lecture from God, pointing the finger at unfortunate sufferers and saying, "I told you so: here and here and here is where you went wrong; now you are paying for it." Nor is [the Bible] a program from God providing, step by step, for the gradual elimination of suffering in a series of five-year plans. [In the Bible] there is no progress from more suffering to less suffering. Suffering is there, and [the message of the Bible is that] where the sufferer is, God is. (Eugene Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, p. 94. A great deal of the material in this sermon is based on work done by Rev. Peterson; I acknowledge my gratitude to him.)

And that is the reason for reading a book like Lamentations. It acknowledges the reality of suffering, pain, grief in our world and helps us to face those dark experiences honestly, and redemptively. So let me begin by reading several verses.

Lamentations 1:1-3, 3:19-26

In his paraphrase of the Bible entitled *The Message*, here's how Eugene Peterson opens this book:

Oh, oh, oh...

How empty the city, once teeming with people.

A widow, this city, once in the front rank of nations,
once queen of the ball, she's now a drudge in the kitchen.

She cries herself to sleep each night, tears soaking her pillow.
No one's left among her lovers to sit and hold her hand.
Her friends have all dumped her.

Her enemies have become her masters. Her foes are living it up
because God laid her low, punishing her repeated rebellions.
Her children, prisoners of the enemy, trudge into exile.

And on it goes like that throughout the book. Lamentations was written at the very lowest point in the life of the Hebrew people. The once great nation of Israel had been defeated in war by the Babylonians, and the leading citizens of Israel had been exiled to live as slaves in Babylon. The Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem, pulling down the city walls, turning the once beautiful Temple of Solomon into a pile of rubble. There was rape, murder, pillage and plunder of the worst sort.

We thought the attacks of 9/11 on our nation were bad, but they cannot compare to what the Hebrew people experienced in the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. When Jerusalem fell, their entire world fell. When the Temple was destroyed, the structure of their religion was destroyed.

In that day, the accepted world view was that if an individual or a nation was prosperous, it was because that individual or nation had found favor with God, and God was blessing them. And, conversely, if an individual or nation was suffering, it must be because God was punishing them. Clearly, for the Hebrew people, this time of Babylonian exile and the destruction of Jerusalem was unimaginable suffering and was therefore undeniable proof of God's punishment on the people for their failure to live according to God's commands.

That's the setting for this dark and gloomy book—Lamentations.

However, Lamentations is not just a hopeless wringing of hands that gives up in the face of suffering. Instead, it helps us to take on the suffering, the hurt, and face it honestly...and hopefully.

So how does Lamentations help us deal with our dark times, our suffering and grief?

One of the most remarkable features of this book of Lamentations is the way it is written. So to get us into the book, I want to ask you to take out your Bible or look in the Pew Bible on p. 706. Stick with me here, because I think there is something very important going on. Lamentations has 5 chapters: chapter 1 has 22 verses. Each verse is a three-line stanza. Chapter 2 is exactly the same. Even though chapter 3 has 66 verses, the form is the same—22 three line stanzas. (Don't forget the original writers didn't use chapter and verse numbers—those things were added later.) Then chapter 4 looks exactly like chapters 1 and 2. And chapter 5 has 22 verses. Since we are reading the book in English, and not its original language of Hebrew, we might think that it is just an interesting coincidence that every chapter has 22 verses (or in the case of chapter 3, a multiple of 22). However, if we were reading it in Hebrew it would immediately become clear that this is no coincidence; it is a very intentional act on the part of the writer.

The Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters—*Aleph, Beth, Gimel, Dalet*...all the way to the 22nd letter *Tav*. The 22 verses of chapter 1 work their way through the entire Hebrew

alphabet. So verse 1 begins with the first letter of the alphabet—*aleph*. Verse 2 begins with *beth*; verse 3 *gimel*—all the way through the alphabet. In English it would be like going from A to Z.

And then the entire process begins again in chapter 2. In chapter three the intensity increases as each line of the three line stanza begins with that letter of the alphabet—A, A, A... B, B, B....

What the writer of Lamentations has done is to use this very disciplined structure of working through each letter of the Hebrew alphabet to describe this terrible experience of suffering that the Hebrews were going through. If you're like me, you want to get through to the other side of the suffering as quickly as possible; we want to give it as little attention as possible. But here in Lamentations this writer takes on the suffering head on, looking at every aspect, every detail of the suffering. Why would he do that? Why use this A, B, C form? Frankly, Bible scholars have no idea. They can't agree on why he would use this very set structure. So, I think that gives you and me permission to come up with our own reasons for why he would employ this technique. So let's make some guesses why he might do this.

Most of the time we use this A, B, C form, it's in order to help us remember. When I was growing up, I had a Sunday School teacher who taught us a Bible verse for each letter of the alphabet: A—"Ask and it shall be given to you." B—"Be ye kind one to another." C—"Come unto me all you who labor and I will give you rest." She used this A, B, C form as a way to help us remember these Bible verses. Could it be that the writer of Lamentations is doing the same? Might he be using this alphabet form to help the people to remember—to remember the suffering?

But there's also another reason we use this A, B, C form: it's to show that we have covered all the bases, nothing left out; we've covered it from A to Z. You remember the inane little song that Perry Como used to sing: "A, you're adorable; B, you're so beautiful; C, you're a cutie full of charms." He was covering every aspect of the things he loved about this person—nothing left out. So maybe that's the reason this writer of Lamentations is using this alphabet form: to deal with the entire range of the suffering, face it all, leaving nothing out.

One of the things that this alphabet form does is to take a very emotional experience of suffering and force it into a structure that engages the mind. It moves the experience of suffering and grief out of the purely emotional cry of pain. It's not just a paroxysm of grief, not just Charlie Brown's AGGGGH! It forces us to engage our mind, to think about the suffering and to think about every aspect of it.

Why? Because that's where the healing begins. As we face the pain and name it, we begin to heal from it.

OK, let's look at chapter three—with its triple form—A, A, A; B, B, B. There's something else you need to know about chapter three. Up to this point, the writer has been talking about the community's experience of suffering. The nouns and verbs have been plural. In chapter 3, they become singular—this is now about me and my suffering. I'm not just talking about the grief and loss that the whole community felt; I'm talking about me—my pain, my hurt, my suffering. It hurts and it hurts bad.

But the writer can only sustain that intense personal pain for so long before going back to the plural words, back to the experience of the community, so that's what he does in chapter 4. Again I think that this is a very intentional act on the part of the writer, and

it tells a very important truth. The pain of the individual is surrounded by the experience of the community. It's a way of saying that I am not in this by myself, but am surrounded by a community of brothers and sisters who know exactly what I am going through because they are going through it too.

I think about Alcoholics Anonymous and the individual who stands in front of the group and begins, "My name is Chuck, and I am an alcoholic." He is talking about his own pain, his own individual struggle. But he is doing it surrounded by a community who understands full well what he is going through because they've been there too.

That's one of the things that happens to us when we are a part of a church. We are surrounded by a loving community who supports us as we go through the dark night of suffering. I want to bear witness to the fact that in my life when I have been going through some experience of suffering and pain, I have been strengthened and helped by the community of faith that was sharing that pain with me.

There are just a couple of more things to say about this obscure book before we leave it. Look in your Bible at chapter 5. Note that the form is different here. Chapter 5 is a prayer. In chapter 5 the writer takes his intense feeling of pain and suffering and offers it up before God. Where the suffering leads is to prayer. Someone has said that the best result that can come from an experience of suffering is prayer. Prayer makes it possible for that experience of suffering to draw us closer to God, to pull us into a deeper relationship with God.

Which brings us to one last reason that the writer might have had in mind for using this A, B, C form: that eventually there is a Z. In contrast to numbers that just go on and on infinitely, the alphabet has a beginning and an end—there is an A, but there's also a Z. Such it is with our experience of suffering—even though it may seem endless when we are in the middle of it, the truth is that it does not last forever.

Over and over again, the Bible talks about how God's steadfast love is forever; but never does the Bible say that God's anger is forever. That's the reason for remembering our suffering; that's the reason for facing it head on and dealing with every aspect of it—to remind us that even in those darkest of times God has been with us, leading us through to the other side. That's how we are able to affirm: in all things God works for good in the lives of those who love him. Nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen. †