

## Lessons in the Wake of Disruption (Lamentations 3:17-33)

It's good to be back among you—Teresa and I appreciate your generosity in providing time away for us. We enjoyed catching up with family spread out over the country, and we were able to meet some interesting folks along the way. We spent the night in one camp spot with a couple who were traveling in a converted school bus, spray painted purple. They were moving from Pennsylvania to Portland. They'll probably do just fine in Portland; they may find that theirs is not the only school bus painted purple there. Given the unprecedented heat wave we're experiencing, I momentarily thought about changing the text for this morning to Psalm 68:6 where the psalmist says, "the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land" in the hope of persuading the rebellious to repent so that our temperate climate might return. But then it occurred to me that the weather was pretty agreeable here while we were away, and hot wherever we traveled, so...I believe I'll stick to the passage Kim read for us moments ago.

The text before us is the high point in an otherwise low reflection in the wake of Jerusalem's fall and the exile of its people to Babylon. Lamentations is a fitting title for the book and it is generally held to be written by Jeremiah. A lamentation is the expression of deep sorrow recognizing the reality of devastation, but for the people of God, a lamentation isn't simply complaint—though sometimes that is also present. It isn't self-pity that recounts what is lost and ends in despair. For the people of God, a lamentation faces the reality of disorientation—it admits radical change and a departure from what's been, but then it turns towards God placing the speaker and the community represented in the hand of God for a way forward presently unknowable to those affected. In the face of loss, it expresses trust in the care of God even when the immediate circumstances seem to suggest otherwise.

The scale of loss that prompted Jeremiah's lamentation is difficult for us to comprehend so far removed from us in time and place. If you remember the scenes from Sarajevo when they hosted the Olympics and compare that to the pictures of its destruction from civil war not long after; or more recently in the news, the newly surfaced pictures of the Greenwood subdivision of Tulsa, OK—the prosperous, thriving black Wall Street of its day—after the white community burned it down in the early part of the 20th century—if you hold those images in mind as you read Lamentations, you begin to get the picture of what Jeremiah experienced. His description of the devastation is graphic and explicit—there is some poetic license at work as well, but only to amplify the scale of destruction visited upon that city. Recording the devastation exacts a price on Jeremiah summarized at the end of vs. 20: my soul is downcast within me.

And were it to end here, there would be nothing remarkable to note from this. It wouldn't be different in character than the natural response to trauma. But it doesn't end there. "Yet," said Jeremiah, in spite of all of this, "this I call to mind and therefore I have hope. Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, The Lord is my portion, therefore I will wait for him." Thought like this will cross our minds as Christ followers on bluebird mornings when the sun is shining, the air is sweet, and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee surrounds our time of devotion as we're counting our blessings. But friends, the origin of this thought developed amid ruin as smoke curled from smoldering dwellings and as the center of their faith—the Temple dedicated to the splendor of God lay reduced to a pile of rubble. What accounts for such inspired thought in the face of incalculable loss?

Two lessons emerge from this to answer that question, and the first is this: Jeremiah knew God well. He didn't just know of God, he knew God—he knew the substance of God's character, he knew the arc of God's love bending towards him, he was on speaking terms with God. It is true that tragedy will sometimes turn hearts towards God. It is also true that tragedy can cause faith to shake among those who follow God. Jeremiah could well have been among that number as he admitted in vs. 18 of our text: "I say, My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the Lord." For some in faith, this represents the threshold of abandonment, departure—I held up my end, but God has failed me for I have not gained what I hoped for. Thoughts like this can circle in the mind of the deeply faithful, but what keeps this from settling

and prompting departure is the understanding that our faith isn't based on what we have, but in whose we are, and nothing in our circumstances changes that reality. We belong to God, and knowing God well supports our level of trust in times of great challenge. Because Jeremiah knew God well, he was able to say in absolute trust: "The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him." When we know God well, we are able to allow what we know to be true of God to lead us through times that might cause us to question God's plan or presence or character. The root of Jeremiah's faith is found in chapter 9, vss. 23 & 24 of his prophetic book: "This is what the Lord says: Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight, declares the Lord." Boasting in this passage leans more in the direction of trust. And in the face of devastation Jeremiah was able to reflect on the emptiness of trust in the world's wisdom, power, and wealth—all swept away in conquest. But kindness, justice (which at its heart is truth exonerated), and righteousness, that is right standing and right living, these sustain the people of God for these are aligned with God's character and prevail circumstances notwithstanding. Knowing this kind of God leads Jeremiah to the conclusion: it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord, meaning in a time of disorientation the people of God trust the goodness of God and listen for the way forward.

The second lesson overlaps the first in this sense: we can choose that which our minds dwell upon, and what you dwell upon in desperation matters. "Yet this I call to mind," said Jeremiah. He had a choice—he could dwell upon the scale of destruction and his personal loss, his disdain for the oppressor, his dislike of the upheaval, perhaps indignation that he, the faithful one should suffer the consequences of the faithless, all of which could have fed spiraling emotion leading either to anger or despair. Instead he caused his mind to dwell on the Lord's great love, the Lord's compassion, God's faithfulness, God's goodness. It was an act of will on his part—a choice he made that allowed his spirit to dwell in God's rest, God's care in the moment of distress.

Why these lessons at this time? Not to belabor the point, but we are in a place of disorientation in our time. We, in this place, are not experiencing the scale of loss that Jeremiah faced, but there are places in our world that do. There are people in our community experiencing distress, even among ourselves, given the upheaval brought on by the global pandemic, the strident political atmosphere that has enveloped our country, the tensions unleashed by racial conflict, social inequity, financial uncertainty—there is arguably a broadening sense of unrest where the slightest provocation can ignite a violent response. And the effects of these issues have seeped into the fabric of the church as a whole to the place where fellowship and unity are disrupted on the basis of political alignment rather than kingdom convictions. We're beginning to gather again, but cautiously in light of the lingering possibility of infection—some are longing for a return to what was normal prior to the pandemic and the social unrest that's emerged since, but normal is a moving target for the moment. The longing for return reflects, perhaps, the desire for something predictable, something steady in the shifting winds of culture, but what that should be isn't clear at present. It isn't clear because we're not the same people we were—we've all been impacted to some degree by what's taken place around us, some more than others; the community and world in which we live is different, perspectives have changed, trust has eroded, the consequence of social distancing and work from home has caused us all to be a bit more insular, our souls have shriveled because they haven't been nourished in the fields of faith fellowship.

In the face of this type of disruption, now is the time for the people of God to seek God diligently, determining to know God intimately, and allowing what we know to be true of God to lead us into a new normal. Jeremiah found hope in the understanding of God available to him. How much more do we have available to us on the basis of Christ Jesus who is the ultimate revelation of God? In Jesus we have the character of God—kindness, justice and righteousness—personified, expressed in a life of service poured out in love for God and for the sake of those loved by God. And we have the promise that his life is alive in us—we are

near to him, more than this, Jesus is near to us. Let your mind dwell upon him, on his love, his goodness, his compassion, his faithfulness, his promise. Plead with him for these to fill your life, and then lift your eyes from what's been lost, to what's now possible. As you see brokenness around you, be the one who repairs in the grace of Christ. Joined together in him, we will listen carefully to him for the way forward, and walk confidently in that way so that as the world's wisdom, power, and riches are exhausted, Christ's kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth will prevail. AMEN