

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

June 5th, 2022

*Cry Me A River*

Rev. Susie Maxwell

*Let us pray . . .*

Today is Pentecost Sunday — marked by the color red for the Holy Spirit. Also known as the “Birthday of the Church,” Pentecost celebrates the day the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus’ 12 apostles, causing them to speak in tongues.

A few weeks back, when we talked about discernment we talked about hearing God's voice, meaning recognizing how God speaks to us.

Besides through God's Holy Spirit as experienced at Pentecost, another way God communicates with us is through our emotions, our feelings.

Since I'm a very "emotional" person, I figure God must be talking to me A LOT.

But the truth is, it's not just me — it's each of us with whom God is talking. The only thing we have to do — and this is a very big "only thing," — the only thing we have to do is listen. And we listen to God when we are brave enough to feel our emotions — especially the difficult ones. It's often not easy work.

Emotions can feel overwhelming at times and yet, feeling them, encountering them is the only way through them.

Mercifully, our ancestors from about 2600 years ago understood this wisdom, leaving us the lesson in the Book of Lamentations.

The Book of Lamentations was likely composed in Judah for the community that remained in the land after the catastrophic fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. The Israelites are captured and exiled.

The losses are catastrophic because God promised Abraham the land and God had given David the victory needed to make Jerusalem Israel's capital. So Jerusalem is *everything* to Israel's identity:

From David came the royal line of kings.

God's presence was understood to be in the temple

Priests maintained the rituals of Israel's worship

500 years of all this history and in 586 BCE,

and it is decimated.

While the 2nd Book of Kings details the history of this war, the Book of Lamentations is about the emotions that get *processed* because of this

war. So, Lamentations is a memorial to the pain and confusion the Israelites suffered following Jerusalem's fall. Pushing back against God's character and promises, the book deals with raw emotions and vents confusion about the suffering.

It's not in a hurry to feel good.

As one commentary writes, the laments give a sacred dignity to human suffering — And in doing so, Lamentations becomes part of God's word to His people — which might be another way of acknowledging that God is with us in our despair *and* while we despair.

The short 5 chapter book is brilliantly and intentionally organized through a poetic structure called an acrostic, the poem is built around — in this case — the Hebrew alphabet. In the first 4 chapters, this order counters an event that was completely chaotic and insane.

But chapter 5 breaks that structure ending the order to align with the chaos and confusion that grief brings to our lives.

Let's have a brief look of the layout of one of my favorite books in the Bible:

In chapter 1, Jerusalem, represented by a figure called Lady Zion, pours out her grief and shame. Her traumatic loss can only be expressed as attendance at a funeral and the death of loved one. As a bereaved widow she sits alone — with no one to comfort her and so she calls on the Lord to notice her fate.

Verse 12 reads *Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.*

Chapter 2 focuses on the fall of Jerusalem. While acknowledging that their disobedience has justifiably produced God's wrath — which is understood as a form of God's justice, not an explosive anger — the poet still asks God to once again show compassion.

Hear the despair in verse 11: *My eyes are spent with weeping. My stomach churns. My bile is poured out on the ground.*

Then, chapter 3 — the center of the poem — is the voice of lonely man who represents the whole people. Speaking out of suffering and grief, he understands the hardship but can hold on because of hope in the goodness of God.

The poet reasons that if God is consistent enough to bring His justice to human evil then God is also consistent enough with his covenantal promise — consistent enough to not let human evil get the final word.

And therein lies the hope: That God has the final word.

So in a strange kind of irony, God's judgment is the fertile ground for future hope. While I had Ken read only the verses of despair from chapter 3, the subsequent verses speak of hope rooted in remembrance. As if drawing in a deep breath in the midst of this despair, the author laments:

*I'll never forget the trouble, the utter lostness,  
the taste of ashes, the poison I've swallowed.  
I remember it all—oh, how well I remember—  
the feeling of hitting the bottom.  
But there's one other thing I remember,  
and remembering, I keep a grip on hope:*

*God's loyal love couldn't have run out,  
his merciful love couldn't have dried up.  
They are created new every morning.  
How great your faithfulness!*

Chapter 4 is a vivid and disturbing depiction of the 2 year siege in Jerusalem with a lot of comparative language and shocking contrasts in

order to show the depths of suffering that Israel has brought upon herself like the words in verse 10:

*Happier were those pierced by the sword than those pierced by hunger.*

*The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children; they become food in the destruction of my people.*

And finally — in a poetic move, chapter 5 breaks the alphabet pattern and the order is gone. Grief ends in chaos and the poem becomes a communal prayer for God’s mercy. The people lament on behalf of others — much like we’ve been lamenting the war in Ukraine, the endless shootings, pandemic exhaustion, worries about our church’s future, and our own deep pain and grief from our own losses.

I love this book because for Lamentations, suffering in silence is not a virtue. Lamenting is for others and for ourselves. No one is asked to

deny their emotions but instead to voice their feelings — voice their own intense pain *and* the pain of others.

In the end of the book, while we are reminded that God is the eternal King of the world, circumstances can make us feel like God is no where to be found.

Sometimes our intense feelings can leave us feeling that things are left unresolved. As Renee read for us, *unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure.*

So much like our own experiences of pain and suffering, there's no nice neat conclusion but only a reminder that lament and prayer and grief are a necessary part of a journey in faith with God in a broken world and in the broken places in our own lives.

It's not necessarily satisfying for me to preach this to you.

And I'm aware that it doesn't sound like good news at all. It more sounds like confirmation of bad news . . .

So the challenge is always to see where God might be at work — or at the very least — be present in the confusion, in the brokenness, and in the pain of grief.

In Judaism — and our Christian roots are firmly planted in Judaism — God is a verb, an action word.

So what if when it comes to our more difficult feelings, God *IS* the lament? God *IS* the ability to name our pain instead of being held captive by it?

In this view, God takes the form of awareness and claiming. And there's nothing to fix because your feelings don't mean you're broken. They mean God is alive in you.

In a culture that doesn't value the value of feelings, teaches us to say, "Im fine" and to wear dark sunglasses at funerals, a culture that offers medication in the face of intense feelings, a culture that still considers crying a weakness — in the face of all that

*Lamentations* holds are bereft faces in its hands.

*Lamentations* is an ancient reminder that we are created by a God who in fact gave us a broad spectrum of emotions and feelings in order to talk to us through that broad spectrum.

And *Lamentations* says, feel your feelings.

Don't hide. Don't deny. Don't push them away. Let them pour out of you.

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I believe the good news is in our ability to in fact feel our feelings with the reassurance that we are cradled in a history that has gone before us

doing the same. Our ancestors get it — there is nothing that our ancestors have not known when it comes to despair.

And oddly enough, that might be enough to move you to thanks.

And it is that profound act of thanksgiving where you might begin to glimpse and feel God's grace.

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In just a moment we will break bread like so many other believers around the globe — Remembering that Jesus took the bread *after* giving thanks.

It was such a stunning moment.

He'd had some difficult and exhausting weeks.

He was let down in places. Judas betrayed him. Peter denied him.

He was to be handed over and crucified.

He was in deep grief.

But he had complete faith in God and so first he gave thanks.

Beloveds, while I don't fully know the burdens on your hearts or in your souls, God does because God *is* those places that allow you to be alive and to feel.

Lest we forget, we come into this world crying and when we die, our loved ones stay behind crying. Our lives are bookended with intense feelings.

My prayer for you this week is that you will trust the greater witness of the Book of Lamentations. Feel your feelings and know that in doing so you are created this way and in communion with God. God doesn't stand by while you weep or rage or fall apart.

God IS your ability to do so.

And yes, it is sometimes so excruciatingly painful

but you're here, you're alive.

On a hard day, you'll survive.

And on a good day, in your own stunning moment, may you too give thanks that when it comes to your deepest sorrows, you and God speak the same language.

*Amen*