Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

June 27, 2021

Lamentations 3:22-33

Now and then, someone asks me how I pick what text I’ll preach on. I often preach on the Gospel text, but I like to preach on the Old Testament texts, too. Especially when they come from a book we’re not as familiar with, like today’s reading from Lamentations.

This is the only time in our 3-year cycle of readings that we hear from the Book of Lamentations on Sunday. There’s a pretty obvious connection between it and the Gospel text. I imagine that the unnamed woman spent a lot of that 12 years lifting up her voice in a lament. And, had Jesus not come along when he did, Jairus and his family would have lifted up their voices in lament, as well.

The author of Lamentations came from a place of deep pain and grief. Lamentations was written as a response to the defeat of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, which led to the people being exiled and the temple being destroyed.

The verses we hear today come from the middle of the book, offering a reminder of God’s presence among the people in the midst of their despair. Since the temple had been destroyed, they needed to hear that God had not abandoned them.

Lamentations’ presence in the Bible, along with the fact that nearly half of the Psalms include a lament of some kind, tells us that lifting up our voices in sorrow and grief — and even anger and frustration — is a legitimate and necessary part of how we express our faith. God welcomes our laments as much as our thanksgiving and praise.

For as long as humans have known pain and suffering, we have tried to figure out why we suffer. It seems to me that suffering and pain are part of being human. If God took away our ability to feel them, we would lose a core part of what makes us who we are. Joy and love and delight would be diminished without knowing frustration and anger and sorrow.

So, perhaps our efforts are better served in learning how to respond to pain and suffering.

And we don’t always do that well.

Other people’s grief makes us uncomfortable. As a society, we’ve privatized grief. We’ve made it something people largely feel like they have to deal with on their own.

While Job’s friends may have had some questionable theology, I give them credit for not abandoning Job during his trials. They sat with him in silence for days before speaking. I have to think that their presence with him was a comfort for Job.

Even though we know there are no words to take away the pain of a loss, we still try to find something to say. We reach for cliches and platitudes, because we feel the need to do *something*, because someone we care about is hurting.

Here, Job’s friends offer us an example of what *we* can do when someone we know is grieving. Just sitting with them, without saying anything, is a powerful gift to offer. The mere act of presence like that legitimizes the pain of the other person, gives them permission to address their grief and sorrow.

Grief and pain and suffering are journeys. They aren’t neat and tidy. They resist our efforts to ignore them or to process them as if we had a checklist of things that we could complete and move on.

I have spoken often the past 15 months of all of us being on a journey through the valley of the shadow. And now, to borrow again from the psalmist, our wailing is turning into dancing. The dawn is breaking — at least for us. There are still far too many people who are clothed with sackcloth, waiting for the signs of morning’s arrival.

We gather in this place to lift up our voices in worship. We praise God and give thanks for the blessings we have received.

But today, we will also lift up our voices in a lament.

We have lost so much these past 15 months. People have moved away. Jobs have been threatened. Family members have grown ill and died. We’ve missed opportunities — celebrating birthdays and anniversaries and graduations, travel, time spent together with friends and family. We can never get these back.

Along the way, we’ve searched for signs of God’s presence among us, reason to believe in the hope that the psalmist and the author of Lamentations speaks of.

As the light of the new day breaks into the world, as we gather here again to lift up our voices in praise, we should be asking ourselves what we’ve learned from our journey through the valley of the shadow.

Because pain and grief and suffering change us. They leave their marks on us and those scars cannot be ignored.

Lifting up our voices together in a lament — as we will do in just a few minutes and as the people did thousands of years ago while in exile — reminds us that we are not alone. It legitimizes our grief. It allows us to be more fully honest with God and each other about the innermost thoughts of our hearts.

And it allows God to start filling in the cracks of our souls.

Our lament will not take away all of our pain. Indeed, it may sharpen some of the pain that has become dulled over time.

But when we lament, when we lift up our voices in sorrow and anguish to God, the burden of our pain is, at least momentarily, eased. Because a shared burden is an easier burden to bear.

When we lament, we place our trust in the promise that God is always present, that God loves us. We place our trust in the words of the psalmist, that God lifts us up and restores us. And we grow to see that perhaps God answers our prayers not by changing the circumstances, but by changing our hearts.

Both Jairus and the unnamed woman reached out to Jesus out of desperation, convinced he could offer healing. But the healing he did went beyond curing the unnamed woman and raising up the little girl.

The healing was in their restoration to their community. Their mourning was turned into dancing, and they were no long clothed in sackcloth, but clothed in joy.

As we begin to move about more freely, we are finding ourselves restored to our communities. Forever changed by the past 15 months, may we find confidence in our faith, peace instead of fear, and hope instead of sorrow.