**“She Lives Now Among the Nations”**

**Lamentations 1:1-6a**

**World Communion Sunday**

**Lamentations 1:1-6**

1How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!

How like a widow she has become,

 she that was great among the nations!

She that was a princess among the provinces

 has become a vassal.

2She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks;

among all her lovers

 she has no one to comfort her;

all her friends have dealt treacherously with her,

 they have become her enemies.

3Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude;

 she lives now among the nations, and finds no resting place;

her pursuers have all overtaken her

 in the midst of her distress.

4The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to the festivals; all her gates are desolate, her priests groan; her young girls grieve, and her lot is bitter.

5Her foes have become the masters, her enemies prosper, because the Lord has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions; her children have gone away, captives before the foe.

6From daughter Zion has departed all her majesty.

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The Sermon

It was about 15 minutes before the service was going to start in a church I used to serve, and she was standing in front of me at my office door, and smiling.

She was a respected professional, a married mother of four, and they were a family who had joined a few years earlier and were sort of serially involved in church; they’d be around for a little while and then gone for a few months before showing up again for a while.

They had been in one of their “out” modes for a while when I had received word that her father had died, and the service was going to be held in a church not too far away, so I found the date and place and time and went to the service, and shortly after that, they were back in fairly regular attendance again.

So, just before worship on this Sunday morning, she and I had found a few minutes to stand there at my office door, she telling me how pleased she had been to see me at the service, and me asking her how she was doing.

And as she told me about the pain of losing her Dad, I recognized an aspect of her being a kindred spirit I had not previously picked up on, namely: every time she told a particularly hard part of the story, a big smile would unfurl itself across her face. It didn’t appear to be a smile of happiness; the things she was saying didn’t call for it and somehow it didn’t seem to extend to her eyes.

And I remembered myself having had that exact phenomenon brought to my attention during seminary, that whenever I responded to questions about some of my toughest things, that big smile would just pop onto my face; you could practically hear the ding.

And a guy who was very helpful to me during preparation for ministry said, you know, the smile doesn’t really match the narrative, and it might be a good idea for you to reflect on why you tend to do that whenever you’ve got tough things of your own to talk about.

And now here with this bereaved church member standing in front of me, I just wanted to reach out and say, you know what? When you’re with me, when you’re in this church, when you’re in God’s company, you don’t have to plaster on a smile.

I know you’re being strong. But you don’t have to be strong for us.

*How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!*

*How like a widow she has become,*

 *she that was great among the nations!*

*She that was a princess among the provinces*

 *has become a vassal.*

*She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks…*

*Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude;*

 *she lives now among the nations, and finds no resting place;*

*her pursuers have all overtaken her*

 *in the midst of her distress.*

*From daughter Zion has departed all her majesty.*

It has become a tired cliché to rehash the narrative of the mainline church in America since the mid-20th century: from a long-held, prominent place at the center of all social life, rural and urban and all points between,

to Sunday morning images of smaller and smaller groups congregating in overlarge sanctuaries;

stacks of yellowed curriculum and quaint-looking, typed bulletins; old minutes and church rolls that now look like artefacts from a hundred-year time capsule.

Meanwhile, shiny, new, pre-packaged and mostly warmed-over approaches to church revitalization come and go. Churches with diminishing or disappearing Sunday School attendance assume it’s their fault, and long for the days when everybody was more dedicated.

Lamentations is about life and death issues, which I do not mean to reduce to a question of the popularity level of church programs.

The writing itself acknowledges that by this time in Jerusalem’s history, it’s past the point of trying to come up with the right new idea, or just do the old things harder and with more self-discipline.

It honestly recognizes and rightly mourns the position that Jerusalem is now in.

And the narrative of the mainline church in the United States—the church and culture that nourished my upbringing and served me the gift of faith that the Spirit was giving—is a narrative of a people who are accustomed to being a people of privilege,

facing the prospect that the Holy Spirit is actively eroding our privilege and dismantling things that I for one long thought had been blessed by God with a permanence that precluded any need for asking the kinds of questions that the Church of Jesus Christ is asking and is being asked in 2019.

There is so much more to say about the image of the abused and displaced woman which is, in Lamentations, the personification of Jerusalem.

I apologize that this morning I am not adequately prepared to explore with you what needs to be considered, much less what can be said, particularly by me or someone in my position about the image, as F.W. Dobbs-Allsop of Princeton Seminary calls “a single woman ravished, abandoned and uncomforted.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

There is so very much that needs to be considered, and there are so many more appropriate voices than mine to talk about that, and I just don’t want to do those long-unheard voices a further injustice by just giving it with an eloquent sentence or two and then moving on.

For today, I simply want to notice that the book of Lamentations is appropriately titled.

I really wanted there to be a silver lining, from which I could paint us all a big smiley-face on Lamentations, on the Church, on everything that happens and everything that exists.

I had wanted to distill for you the good news that with the Church having been knocked off its pedestal—or having knocked itself off or just deteriorated or whatever—that we are now entering a new day of the Church.

Now, by necessity, we are being moved out from our wood and stone and financial structures; now we can again be the true church, which must be where it belongs: not behind fortresses of privilege, but wandering out in the world among all the peoples, where the real pain and the organic joy are found.

And I think that is very good news. It’s news of the Spirit being actively and effectively at work “despite our best efforts.”

It’s the very good news that Christ will keep sending us out into the world, that the Spirit will keep teaching us how to be Church no matter what time we live in or the world we live in or the conditions in which we testify.

It’s the good news of yet another reaffirmation that God, far from being a disinterested observer, has something to say and do in this world, and you and I have the high, holy privilege of carrying and embodying that message despite being far-from-perfect messengers.

That is all true, and it’s all Gospel/good news, and it is a privilege and a joy for me to be in a position to deliver it.

The thing I cannot seem to do, though, is get that spray can to work with which I was hoping to plaster a big smiley face on everything.

Sometimes, the truest way to express our unshakeable faith in God is to recognize that there is a lot of pain out there that does not have to be that way, and we have a lot of work to do.

And also, that if we are really going to recognize that pain among the people, we will need to learn to lament.

The message of lamentations is not just about the Church being liberated from its lofty position to go and walk in the world.

It is also that the spirit of the Jerusalem Temple, the spirit of the Covenant People, the People of God, the spirit of the Church, now wanders homeless among the nations, displaced, violated, like unclean spirits who pass through dry and waterless places seeking rest, and do not find it.[[2]](#endnote-2)

“Save me, O God,” says Psalm 69,

for the waters have come up to my neck.

I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold;

I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.

I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched.

My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God.

And Jesus says, I know you’re broken. I’m broken, too.

In 1934, a 27-year-old named Kathleen Hamilton left her home and church in Scotland, saying, “Leaving the church was no easy step…I saw sincere individuals in the church, and would not cast a slur on anyone. But the church must be more than a collection of sincere individuals. It is the miracle of Pentecost—life and fire, and unity.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

She traveled to a religious community called the Alm Bruderhof, and over the following years, she wrote faithfully to her mother.

In 1936, the world was deep into the Great Depression; the Nazis had taken over Germany and had begun gathering up and murdering Jews and reaching their clawed talons into Europe; Japan had invaded Manchuria and was brutalizing Chinese and Russian populations there.

With all of that and more going on in the world, Kathleen Hamilton wrote to her mother in November 1936:

I have been thinking, Mother, of the time when Christ shall truly reign on earth, and when the kingdom of heaven will be realized.

This is the great goal of our life, which stands as a little signpost amid the deadly confusion and relativism in the world today. It is only a signpost, and an imperfect one, that points toward the coming kingdom of God. But at least we can follow it, here and now, and hope that it says to those who despair of peace and justice and love that there is a way out of all the division and distraction and hatred and fear among men.

God is love, and it is God’s will that all should live in love. And what is more, if they are ready to risk all—economic security, worldly fame, yes, life and limb, for him—the Power to do so will be given them, even in the world as it is...[[4]](#endnote-4)

And today on World Communion Sunday,

Jesus says to everyone who is hungry:

Let us break bread together.

And Jesus says to the lonely, isolated and displaced,

Let us break bread together.

And Jesus says

to you who cannot even talk about what was done to you,

Let us break bread together.

And Jesus says to all the kids

who feel like they are worthless and grotesque,

Let us break bread together.

And Jesus says to the crying parents who will not be consoled,

Let us break bread together.

And Jesus says to the ones who can no longer remember

the names of their closest family members,

Let us break bread together.

And Jesus says to the people

who have to hold their frustration inside,

because they know from experience

that it only makes it worse when they try to share it,

Let us break bread together.

And Jesus says to the world,

Let us break bread together.

And Jesus says to the world,

Let us break bread together.

And Jesus says to you, and me,

Let us break bread together.

And Jesus says to the world,

Let us break bread together.

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1. F.W. Dobbs-Allsop, Lamentations (Interpretation Series; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Matthew 12:43; Luke 11:24 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Kathleen Hamilton, “According to Love: Letters Home.” <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/discipleship/according-to-love> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Hamilton, “Letters Home” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)