

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lamentations 1:1-6; Psalm 137 or Lamentations 3:19-26; Luke 17:5-10; II Timothy 1:1-14.

Lamentations 1:1-6 is a portion of this book's first lament in a collection of five, all of which grieve profoundly over the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian Empire in 586 BCE. Each of these five laments was clearly meant for liturgical worship and was likely used by both the remaining Israelites in Palestine and Egypt and by the exiles in Babylon to mourn their devastation as a nation. They are all acrostics, except for chapter five which, although not strictly an acrostic, is confined to precisely 22 lines corresponding to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet (so one can argue that it is acrostic-like). As acrostics, this means that each lament is tightly and skillfully constructed, constrained both by vocabulary and word order; that, in turn, means they were very carefully constructed for liturgical use.

There is no hint in the laments themselves that they are authored by Jeremiah. Rather, that perspective comes from tradition dating back to the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament in c. 250 BCE, or more than 300 years after their composition). II Chronicles 35:25 states that Jeremiah wrote laments for King Josiah, but it is highly unlikely that these are those laments since Josiah died in 609, twenty-three years before Judah's destruction and when the nation seemed to be at the height of its power. Rather, it seems certain that these laments were composed carefully and skillfully after the fall of Jerusalem by priests or prophets left behind in the fallen city (Jeremiah had been exiled to Egypt soon after the fall of Jerusalem).

But if Jeremiah did not write the Lamentations, they are certainly Jeremiah-like in their content. The authors obviously embraced essentially the same theological perspective as did Jeremiah – a perspective that owes much to Deuteronomy and the prophetic tradition that saw authentic religion as being engagement in public life, working for justice and economic equity and a dynamic personal and communal relationship with God. The authors of Lamentations, like Jeremiah, opposed religion that was understood as strict adherence to liturgies, burnt offerings and sacrifices, and priestly rituals that privatized faith and blessed the misuse of political and economic power that built a privileged class. Therefore, we can conclude that if the Lamentations was not written by Jeremiah, they were written by people radically influenced by him!

The first lamentation is 22 verses in length (remember, it is an acrostic), but the Old Testament lesson for the 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time examines only the first six verses. Those verses speak in a most poignant way.

“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; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies” (1:1-2).

The image is a powerful one. Jerusalem is personified as a widow. The last, great hope of Judah's continuance as a nation, Jerusalem, has been taken by the enemy, its walls razed, its magnificent Temple burnt to the ground. The author pictures Jerusalem as a woman sitting in

the midst of broken and destroyed potshards, not only destitute of her husband (Yahweh, who has initiated divorce proceedings against her – thus mixing the metaphors), brought low before everyone, removed from her royal place, made into a slave, rejected by “all her lovers” (all the other nations) so that she stands isolated in the world, the nations that she once depended upon now betraying her in order to save their own skins, totally bereft and thoroughly broken. The scene is heart-breaking, the authors of the lament taking no delight in what they predicted all along would happen to their nation if it did not embrace and act upon God’s intentions for the world.

What has happened to Jerusalem, the former bride of Yahweh? The author of Lamentation, in these six verses, state that she has been defeated by conquerors (vs. 1), betrayed by former allies (vs. 2), been subjected to the contempt of enemy Babylon (vss. 1, 3), been decimated of both her people and her political, economic and religious powers through death and deportation (vss. 3, 6), seen her Temple profaned and destroyed and the festivals around which Israel built its life cancelled (vs. 4-5). Why has God allowed Judah and God’s city of Jerusalem to be treated in this way?

The reason for Jerusalem’s annihilation is stated clearly by the authors of this first lamentation in its fourth verse. “Her foes have become the masters, her enemies prosper because the Lord has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions”! Her situation does not exist because fate befell her, or some political errors of judgment were made or not even because of the military prowess of Babylonia. “Her enemies prosper because the Lord has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions”. She has been destroyed because of nearly 450 years of kings acting to build their power rather than to work for justice, nobility building personal wealth rather than working to build the whole economy so poverty would be eliminated, priests turning Yahweh worship from relationship to ritual in order to serve their own purposes, and prophets who would declare only what kings and nobility and priests wanted to hear. Yes, there had been occasional exceptions to this trend – like David, Hezekiah and Josiah. But they had been few and far-between. The primary thrust of the nation for these 450 years had been to be “like all the other nations of the earth”, and by seeking to be such, denying the very purpose for which God called Israel into being – to be the purveyors of God’s shalom community to the world! Therefore, her ultimate destruction became inevitable!

Lamentations 3:19-26 contains probably the most famous lines in this small book. And those lines place into context both the lamentations of this author regarding Israel’s Babylonian exile and the suffering that all people must experience.

The passage begins, “The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me” (vss. 19-20). Like the rest of the book of Lamentations, the author mourns over the inevitable result of Israel’s injustice and greed as realized in their captivity and exile. But he also mourns over the suffering and affliction that each person experiences, each in his/her own particular way. For life is pain as well as pleasure, gall as well as gift.

But then there is a significant shift on the part of the writer. “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (vss. 21-23). Grief is acceptable, but one cannot spend all his time in moaning one’s (or his people’s) affliction. Even in the midst of the deepest persecution or suffering, God’s *chesedh* love breaks through to us, and we recognize that Yahweh is always faithful and committed to us.

This testimony of this author is pure emotion. In the midst of grief and despair, the realization of the unmerited and undeserved grace-filled love of God breaks through to him, and he erupts into song! The faithfulness of God to him, to all Israel’s people and to the nation itself, even in the midst of their well-deserved punishment comes as refreshing good news “every morning”!

But emotion lasts for only a brief while. It is an absolutely-necessary part of anyone’s turn toward the Lord, but it is an insufficient base to sustain such a turning. Continual and permanent centeredness in God and in God’s call to justice and love requires a theological foundation. And this author moves to that foundation.

“The Lord is my portion, says my soul; therefore I will hope in him. The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord” (vss. 24-26). If the first response is despair and the second is hope, the third is stability. This third portion seeks to ground the cautious hope of verses 21-23 in the enduring nature of God expressed in verses 24-26.

The author assumes that God is both the powerful shaper of both national and individual life, and is also One who is deeply in love with his people. Therefore, suffering and judgment are not ends in themselves but are God’s means both to punish injustice and sins, and to bring about repentance. Punishment, this author suggests, is for the purpose of disciplining God’s people and to restore them. Therefore, “it is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord”, rather than resisting, rebelling or simply allowing one’s self to sink into despair. For whether God is seeking the salvation of the individual or the transformation of one’s nation and its political, economic and religious systems, God knows what God is about!

Psalm 137 is one of the most poignant psalms in the Psalter. It begins, “By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land” (137:1-4)?

The grief and despair in this psalm is so painfully apparent! Israel had been conquered by the Babylonian empire, and its political, economic and religious leaders had been rounded up and marched over 600 miles of sand to the city of Babylon where they had become the servants of their captors. This exiling of Judah’s leadership had a double affect. First, it deprived the captive nation of all its leadership so that the country would be completely dependent upon Babylon and couldn’t rise in revolt. Second, to exile Israel’s leadership and then make them the

servants of their captors would be to humble and even humiliate both them and their nation. This policy guaranteed a defeated and even dispirited nation.

But there was a third result probably not appreciated by the Babylonians (because they didn't understand Israelite theology). At that time, the Hebrews believed that God was enthroned in God's Temple; this was God's territory (since all gods were territorial). Therefore, for Judah's leaders to be in exile in the land of their captors was not only for them to be absent from their country and capital city; it was for them to be absent from God, because God would not go with them to Babylon (that was the territory of Marduk, not Yahweh). Therefore, these exiled leaders were totally bereft, for they had lost their position in society that had formerly defined them, they had lost their self-respect, and they had lost their god!

Thus, these exiled former leaders sit by the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and weep for their immense loss. They hang their harps on the willow trees there because they are so heart-broken, they cannot sing any longer or praise the Lord. They are in complete despair.

But to add insult to injury, their captors demand that they sing songs of Zion! They demand their most-recent captives to not only serve them, but to entertain them as well – and to entertain them by singing the hymns of Zion which only cruelly remind them of their great loss. “Sing us one of the songs of Zion”, they demand. But the Israelite captives can only despondently wail, “How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?”

The Psalm then magnificently captures the profound sorrow and despair of these exiled Israelites, deprived of their nation and city, of their position in society, of their self-respect and deprived of their God. They cry out, “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy” (vss. 5-6). Their despair gives way to relentless resolve. If God has abandoned them and they are made slaves in Babylon, they need not abandon their nation, their city and their god. If they will not sing the songs of Zion to their captors, they can at least sing those songs of Zion to each other, thereby not forgetting their nation and fueling their passive resistance against the Empire! They can determine to not forget Jerusalem!

But they then go even further. Their despair and grief, and even their resolve give way to anger (the root word for the English word, “anger” is the Norse word for “grief”). May these Babylonians themselves feel the horrible results of their crime. The Common Lectionary stops the Psalm at verse 6, before the unseemly words of verses 7-9 can be uttered. But they must be uttered, for anger is the emotion upon which the resolve to change a situation (rather than simply enduring it) is based! No substantive change occurs without anger at things as they are! Thus, the author of Psalm 137 cannot help but pray for an evil end both to the Babylonians and to Israel's neighbor, Edom that gloats over Israel's defeat.

“Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall; how they said, “Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!” O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us. Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock” (vss. 7-9)!

Thus the Israelites pray, let what goes around come around! May Babylon and Edom one day experience what Israel has experienced! May they one day suffer what Israel and Israel's leaders have had to suffer in the loss of their nation, their self-respect and their god!

And, of course, they did – in 539 BCE when the Persian Cyrus conquered Babylon and utterly destroyed the Empire!

Luke 17:5-10 concludes a larger section of Luke (13:10—17:10) that dealt with the question, “Who will participate in Jesus’ kingdom of God?” Throughout this section, Jesus has compared and contrasted those who follow him and the Pharisees, who have no compassion for the “little ones” (peasants, the “expendables”, widows and orphans) or commitment to working for justice, and who are possessed with a heightened concern for recognition, power, wealth and prestige. Jesus’ message has essentially been “Beware the yeast of the Pharisees” (12:1), “be on your guard” (17:3)! What God wants out of those who follow Jesus is as forgiving a spirit toward people, and a hunger to see them experience justice and compassion as God has toward us. Nothing less will do.

But how could someone be so forgiving? How could one be so committed to the poor and marginalized of Israel (the disciple’s “world” at the time) that they would stand in stark contrast to the exploitive and aggrandizing ways of the Pharisees? The disciples think it would take great faith to act in such a faithful way. Therefore, they say to Jesus, “Increase our faith” (vs. 5).

Jesus’ response is, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it would obey you” (vs. 6). In this statement, Jesus compares the tiny mustard seed to the sycamore (or mulberry) tree, a deeply rooted tree that is almost impossible to dig up. Thus, what he is saying is that only the very smallest of faith, just a smidgen of a smudge of faith is necessary to accomplish actions and practices that boggle the mind! True faith, Jesus is essentially saying, is not believing convictionally in certain doctrines or holding to blind allegiance to a person; true faith is a commitment on one’s part that leads to faithful behavior. This is a common theme throughout the Gospel of Luke (cf. 5:20; 7:9, 50; 8:25, 48; 16:10-13). True faith is believing firmly in the coming of the kingdom of God (the shalom community of Jubilee) that is constantly and consistently manifested in working for justice, equity, empowerment of the poor and bringing people into relationship with God. And whether you have such faith is manifested by the direct investment you make in the liberation and empowering of people.

Jesus then illustrates his point by telling a parable. “Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’? Would you not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink’? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done’” (17:7-10).

This parable is somewhat hard for 21st century people to understand, partially because it flies in the face of our belief in the equality of everyone (“Who does he think he is, putting on airs?”)

and on proper social behavior (in polite circles) where all are treated with respect – even servants. But to people who would have heard this parable told by Jesus, they would have immediately understood his point and even the humor behind the point (what humor, you might ask? That just illustrates how far removed we are from the Israelite culture of the first century).

What Jesus is doing is building a parable upon the well-known and greatly respected social mores of Israelite village life in order to teach about the nature of faith and faithfulness. In this parable, Jesus tells of a small owner of a farm, just above the level of the farmer peasants, who could only afford to have one slave. Because he could only afford one slave, that slave had to play many roles within the household. In this case, he plowed fields and tended the sheep. And the owner worked every bit as hard right next to him. But when that task was done for the day and the two men returned to their house in which both of them lived, the slave was expected to prepare supper for his master, act as butler in serving the meal, clean up after the master, and then, and only then, when his day's work was done, he would sit down to his own meal (even if it was to share out of the same pot as the food prepared for the master). Every Israelite who heard this parable could think of a small owner who ran his business this way and would expect such multiple services out of his servant.

What would the slave expect out of the master? Would he expect the owner to say “thank you” for this service? Would he expect the master to be grateful for the slave “going the extra mile” and providing the owner with his evening meal? Of course not! Such a suggestion is the height of absurdity (and that's where the humor comes in; it is such an absurd suggestion that people would chuckle or even laugh at such an insane thought).

You see, in the Israelite society of Jesus' day, saying “thank you” would not be an act of social politeness (as it would be in our society) or even of gratitude. Rather, for the master to receive the service of the slave as a gift given to him (which is implied by saying “thank you”) would place the master in the debt of the slave. He would “owe” the slave a comparable response of serving him at the next meal (or some other compensation).

But the whole point of the parable – and of the master-slave relationship – was that the slave, in serving the master his meal after their common labor in the field all day, was doing nothing more than what Roman law, Israelite custom and the mores of the day expected of him. He was doing nothing more than what was already his daily duty. Why should he expect praise for doing that which was required of him, and over which he had no choice?

The point Jesus was making is captured in the parable's closing sentence. “So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done’” (vs. 10)! “Worthless” doesn't mean “useless” or “lazy” but “one who expects too much”.

Jesus' point is that our faithful acting out of our faith in Christ and His Kingdom is the expected, appropriate response to Christ. It is not something unusual or novel! How can you tell a person is a Christian? You will know her by her love! How can you tell whether someone is an authentic follower of Jesus? It is not by how often he uses the word “Jesus” or prays in public or loudly sings hymns. You can tell he is an authentic follower of Jesus when you see him working

for the empowerment of the poor, earnestly seeking after justice in the world, treating people with the love and compassion of Jesus and working to transform society into the kingdom of God! You will tell faith by observing faithfulness! This is the infallible means of separating an authentic Christian from a Pharisee.

So, don't try to build favor with God by acting faithfully. Don't expect God to honor you for doing what God is calling you to do as an obedient servant. Don't engage in justice and righteousness (like the Pharisees do) to get a reward from God. At the end, when you stand before God, all you can say is "I have done only what I ought to have done". And if God chooses to declare, "Well done, good and faithful servant", that is up to God to decide. For God expects from us nothing more than what he expects of all – to do justice, to love each other tenderly, and to walk humbly with our God!

II Timothy 1:1-14 continues the theme of the Gospel lesson for today that one's faith is manifested in one's faithfulness. This letter of "Paul" to "Timothy" ("my beloved child") begins by reflecting on Timothy's faith. "I am reminded of your sincere faith", he writes, "a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you" (1:5). Paul has seen faith in Christ passed from grandparent to parent to son. But he urges Timothy to live out that faith in his faithful actions within the church and in public life. "Rekindle the gift of God that is within you", he urges Timothy, "for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self discipline" (vss. 6, 7).

How is faith in Christ to be lived out in faithful action? In the ministry to which Timothy is called, what should faithful action look like? Paul states that he expects of Timothy "power", "love" and "self-discipline". He does not expect "cowardice". And Paul adds, "Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, join with me in suffering for the gospel, rely on the power of God, carry out God's purpose and grace" (vss. 8-9). He expects Timothy not to be embarrassed at the gospel, to be willing to suffer, and to carry out God's purpose in his ministry.

These, then, are the signs of faithfulness, and therefore, of authentic faith: power, love, self-discipline, a lack of cowardice, not being ashamed of the gospel, a willingness to suffer, and a total fixation on carrying out God's purpose for one's church, one's self and one's community or city.

Paul then moves on to reflect on his own faith and its faithful living out in the public arenas of both church and state. "For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him" (vss. 11-12).

Paul has invested his life and all his service in the belief that Jesus is Lord and Christ, and is sufficient for Paul's salvation. God's redemptive grace "was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (vss. 9-10). And he has lived out that embrace of belief by becoming a bold herald of the gospel, an apostle

and a teacher of the Christian faith, drawing people to Christ, founding churches and getting those churches engaged in public life. “For this reason I suffer as I do” – often the consequence of living such a convictional life. Thus, Paul is implying, Timothy ought to imitate Paul. Timothy can know that Paul’s faith in Christ is authentic because of the concrete ways that faith has been lived out in Paul’s actions.

Thus, Paul ends this section, wishing the same for Timothy. “Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us” (vss. 13-14). Paul has invested much in the spiritual formation and leadership development of Timothy, as has both Lois and Eunice. And now he is asking Timothy to wisely use that investment in acting out his faith.

There is a very intriguing word that Paul uses in his instructions to Timothy that gives us insight into Paul’s perspective of his relationship with Timothy. The word “standard” (vs. 13) in Greek has the sense of a model or a preliminary draft or design about it; it was used a great deal in the discipline of architecture to suggest a preliminary drawing or actual construction that tests out the architectural worthiness of a structure before it is built of permanent materials and can no longer be changed. Thus, what Paul is saying to Timothy is, “When you were being mentored by me and learning from me (as well as from your grandmother and mother before I came along) how to live and act as a Christian and as a church leader in today’s Roman and Jewish worlds, you constructed for yourself a model of what it means to do ministry. Well, now it’s time to move from model to reality! Take all that you learned from those years Lois, Eunice and I invested in you, and carry out that model in your ministry as you go forth into the real world with all of its trials and temptations. “Guard the good treasure entrusted to you”, and use it wisely so that the church is strongly built, people come to know Christ, and the church impacts the society around it bringing that society closer to God’s intentions for it. Do this, “with the help of the Holy Spirit living in (you)”. Thus, Timothy, you are now called to faithfully live out and practice the faith invested in you by us and which you so eagerly embraced for yourself! That is our call to you for ministry.”

(Copyright © 2010 by Robert C. Linthicum)