

## Lamentations **3**

I am one who has seen affliction  
under the rod of God's wrath;

<sup>2</sup>he has driven and brought me  
into darkness without any light;

<sup>3</sup>against me alone he turns his hand,  
again and again, all day long.

<sup>4</sup>He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,  
and broken my bones;

<sup>5</sup>he has besieged and enveloped me  
with bitterness and tribulation;

<sup>6</sup>he has made me sit in darkness  
like the dead of long ago.

<sup>7</sup>He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;  
he has put heavy chains on me;

<sup>8</sup>though I call and cry for help,  
he shuts out my prayer;

<sup>9</sup>he has blocked my ways with hewn stones,  
he has made my paths crooked.

<sup>10</sup>He is a bear lying in wait for me,  
a lion in hiding;

<sup>11</sup>he led me off my way and tore me to pieces;  
he has made me desolate;

<sup>12</sup>he bent his bow and set me  
as a mark for his arrow.

<sup>13</sup>He shot into my vitals  
the arrows of his quiver;

<sup>14</sup>I have become the laughingstock of all my people,  
the object of their taunt-songs all day long.

<sup>15</sup>He has filled me with bitterness,  
he has sated me with wormwood.

<sup>16</sup>He has made my teeth grind on gravel,  
and made me cower in ashes;

<sup>17</sup> my soul is bereft of peace;  
I have forgotten what happiness is;  
<sup>18</sup> so I say, "Gone is my glory,  
and all that I had hoped for from the LORD."

*Second reading:*

<sup>19</sup> The thought of my affliction and my homelessness  
is wormwood and gall!  
<sup>20</sup> My soul continually thinks of it  
and is bowed down within me.  
<sup>21</sup> But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:  
<sup>22</sup> The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,<sup>[b]</sup>  
his mercies never come to an end;  
<sup>23</sup> they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.  
<sup>24</sup> "The LORD is my portion," says my soul,  
"therefore I will hope in him."  
<sup>25</sup> The LORD is good to those who wait for him,  
to the soul that seeks him.  
<sup>26</sup> It is good that one should wait quietly  
for the salvation of the LORD.  
<sup>27</sup> It is good for one to bear  
the yoke in youth,  
<sup>28</sup> to sit alone in silence  
when the Lord has imposed it,  
<sup>29</sup> to put one's mouth to the dust  
(there may yet be hope),  
<sup>30</sup> to give one's cheek to the smiter,  
and be filled with insults.

<sup>31</sup>For the Lord will not  
reject forever.

<sup>32</sup>Although he causes grief, he will have compassion  
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;

<sup>33</sup>for he does not willingly afflict  
or grieve anyone.

October 6, 2019 – World Communion Sunday

Lamentations 3:1-33

Kerra Becker English

“I have forgotten what happiness is.”

Depression –

It can be a temporary set back or it can feel like a permanent condition.

It can be the response to a situation, or it can be the situation that has no adequate response.

Lament is the outward expression of this inner feeling.

And we don't like lament much.

Don't be a “Debbie Downer,” they say.

Cheer up. Get a grip.

Or better yet – if you are a Christian – *turn it all over to Jesus.*

Whenever I hear that, to me it sounds like the person saying it thinks that Jesus works like Prozac.

Take a dose of Jesus, and talk to me when all that negative energy has cleared.

Lament is uncomfortable language – that part is true.

We can find a whole host of ways to deny that pain exists.

And even when we do acknowledge that pain exists, we don't do what this book of the Bible does –

And BLAME GOD for our pain.

GOD brought me into darkness. GOD turns his hand against me. GOD breaks my bones.

GOD wraps me up in bitterness. GOD corners me and loads me down with heavy chains.

GOD shuts out my prayers. GOD sets me on a crooked path. GOD tears me to pieces.

GOD leaves me desolate. GOD hits me right in the gut. GOD ignores it when they laugh at me.

GOD rubs my face in the dirt. GOD watches me cower in fear.

Its an interesting thing.

We thank God for the many blessings in our lives, but hesitate to cast blame when the rough patches appear.

Some of us will even go toward great theological gymnastics to let God off the hook.

We don't want God to look bad.

People might not want to join our organization if it means wrestling with a God who could *either* bless us OR curse us.

The "blessings only" God is far more popular with the "in crowd" and gets brought to *way* more parties.

But I don't think it's fair to only look at this text from its mid-point and say we know God.

Technically, the designated lectionary reading would start with what I read, not with what Jay read.

We would get a little hunch that things hadn't been going well for our author who has been obsessing on the difficulties in life – afflictions, feeling homeless, being weighed down.

But, never fear, the turning point is going to come quite quickly –

BUT, BUT all hope is not lost.

I'll remember God's steadfast love and have hope.

Wait, what?

Just a few verses ago, the author had only God to blame for everything that was going wrong, right?

And now the author is leaning on God's steadfast love, whose mercies are new every morning?

This is a spiritual paradox that typically begs for doctrinal answers.

What kind of God do we have here that can destroy us in every way imaginable?

Can this still be the kind of God we turn to for love, and mercy and support?

We want to know if God is wrathful or merciful.

The Bible answers yes – to both.

God is not limited by the limits we might want God to have.

This is one of those times I really don't want to have to explain what I mean by that.

The answers aren't neat, and I can't get them in any one categorical box.

What I do know is this:

In our darkest night, in our bleakest hour...

God can handle every last curse we can throw at the Almighty.

And just when we think we've gone over the edge, perhaps we'll get that glimpse of the love that never ends, never goes away, and never runs dry.

In one time in my life I can believe that happiness is gone forever.

And at another point in my life I can trust that the grief I know will be handled with God's compassion.

Easier said than done – I know.

Depression doesn't just go away.

Feeling relentlessly pursued by God, and pushed further down with every step can be a very real thing.

God is with us in our depression, but knowing God can't always solve it or cure it or make it go away.

That's why there's a difference between the "Dark night of the soul" as St. John of the Cross described it,

And the understanding of the condition of depression that affects so many.

There are professional circumstances, and conditions of life, and afflictions in our world that wound us deeply, and along with our brain chemistry can lead to despair and hopelessness.

That's depression – both situational depression and clinical depression.

And it cuts like a knife.

We may need counsel, or friendship, or medication to stave off its wrath.

In the spiritual life, there may be times of darkness and deep resentment at God,

Times when God seems conspicuously absent or to blame for all our life circumstances.

In those times, directing our anger to God can be productive, cathartic, and may be exactly the thing that opens the door to hope and recognition that God's love is always there – even when we cannot make sense of it in our own daily routines.

Lament is a powerful spiritual tool – and in many ways we've forgotten how to use it.

It is a great paradox to begin to know that anger, grief, and lament give us spiritual release -

When all we've typically learned at church is love and joy, praise and peace.

All too often, when someone is feeling out of sorts with themselves or God – they leave the church.

I get it. We have been taught to feel like church is the place for the saints, not the sinners.

We are taught that the strength of our belief is what matters most.

And doubt removes us from the center of the congregation to the fringes.

But that's not the story.

That's not what we bring to the table that Christ has prepared.

At this table, a body is broken.

At this table, wine is poured out like blood.

At this table, sinners and doubters sit together, and are made whole again through sacrifice.

This is the Last Supper of Jesus – the one he gives us knowing that death is stalking him.

There is one worship occasion where the lament text Jay read is the suggested text of the day.

It's the one where God is to blame – completely, fully and utterly responsible for human pain.

That text is read on Holy Saturday, the dark intermission between Good Friday when Jesus died on the cross and Sunday morning when the stone has been rolled away.

I only know that because of lectionary services online.

I've never preached that text before, but I know it now.

Where was Jesus then?

We can only speculate; we don't know in this life.

When we read the old version of the Apostles' Creed, he descended into hell that day.

That I can believe.

Hell can be right here on earth in the form of human anguish.

It's not unknown to us, and therefore it cannot be unknown to Jesus either.

Jesus went to hell, he went through hell, so that it could be vanquished.

That doesn't mean we are immune from pain, but it does allow us to make the turn.

To say, nevertheless, GOD'S MERCIES are new every morning.

The Lord will not reject forever.

The Lord is my portion – says my soul – therefore I have hope.

This kind of hope is not a naïve hope, but a hope that holds in time of crisis or chaos.

May this be your hope, may this be my hope:

not that pain doesn't exist, but that God's faithfulness is a sure promise.

Amen.