

Breaking down

It was in my first year of my seminary church that life was overwhelmed by a consuming wildfire of grief.



Michael Olmsted

The Smith's handsome young son, who had been our music leader, married and moved away. He and his wife were killed in an automobile accident within the year. I came home from Fort Worth to find a dad struck silent by grief and a mother shrieking uncontrollably. It took nearly a half hour to get the mother calmed down so I could understand what had happened and begin helping with travel and funeral plans. Tragedy is not always explainable and may leave permanent scars on the human heart, even for those who desperately want to feel the presence of God.

Sometimes life is a song of joy, a melody of love, a symphony of beauty, but there are days when life is a dark lament of unrelenting pain. In 587 BC, the army of Babylon overcame Jerusalem, the Temple was destroyed, women and children were killed in the streets, men were slaughtered or forced into slavery, and the "chosen people" cried out "Where is God?"

Perhaps we can identify with those tragic days when we hear current reports about the violence and cruelty of ISIS in our world. The Hebrew title of Lamentations is Ekhah, often translated as "how," a word reflecting a sort of plea, or "How could this tragic experience follow a time of hope and promise?"

Lamentations is dark. It is the wailing of a mother who has lost her son to a senseless accident, the loss of hope because the cancer is too far advanced for treatment, the broken heart of a husband or wife whose spouse is unfaithful or a police officer's wife who has just been told her husband is the victim of random shooting.

This is a dark text that offers no easy or simple answers. We can read it and easily pronounce that Judah got what it deserved! What did they expect? We can flippantly say that all those people needed to do was confess their sins and God would step in and make it all right. Is it really that easy? What do you do with the death of those you love,

the destruction of part of your world, the scars that remain? Do you put on a happy face, erase the past and go on like nothing ever happened?

Lament is a part of healing. Facing the painful truth is necessary to experiencing a new beginning. Life is not a simplistic fairy tale that ends with "They all lived happily ever after." Real life, based on faith, ends, "And they found joy in the unfolding grace and constant presence of God."

Our text is in poetic form, a mourning for what has been lost. Three of the five chapters of Lamentations begin with the exclamation "Oh no!" in the Contemporary English Bible. Jerusalem is personified as a grieving widow who has lost everyone and everything. There is only darkness and no one to hear her sobs.

Chapters 1-4 are structured as an acrostic of the Hebrew alphabet, perhaps to emphasize the totality of the destruction or to demonstrate a progression or plan hinting at a restoration some day.

I attended the funeral of a college classmate where the keening (wailing in grief) of his mother was so intense that the service had to be stopped until she could contain her grief. We simply could not hear the pastor read Scripture or share words of comfort. This passage is similar in its consuming catalog of grief, a litany of overwhelming tragedy that blocks any idea of hope.

A careful read of this text answers some of the "why" and "who" questions. The destruction is not attributed to the Babylonians but to God: "Zion spreads out the hands; she has no comforter. The Lord commanded Jacob's enemies to surround him. Jerusalem is just a piece of garbage to them" (v. 17). In verses 18-22 God's judgment is affirmed, but the "grieving widow" struggles with the great tragedy. We tend to think this is a very unhealthy concept of God as a harsh judge. But the people viewed this destruction not as God's failure or unjustified punishment, but as evidence of God's just character and righteousness, while not denying God's ability to forgive and restore.

This text is focused on Judah's systematic failure to love God and serve God, which led to judgment as the people

Formations

August 14, 2016

Scripture: Lamentations 1:1-4, 12-22

themselves admit. We are reading a significant expression of working through the grief process or recovering from an addiction. As is typical, the people are not denying they deserve God's judgment but perhaps the punishment or results are too severe. So their lament to God is a form of taking responsibility for their actions as well as seeking forgiveness and restoration. In all the darkness there is a glimmer of hope.

Because we are human, we seek answers, want to know who and why and how to solve the problem. We are a lot like Sally Field, weeping over the coffin of her daughter in "Steel Magnolias" and shouting, "Why? I just want to know why." Grief is the process of facing and getting beyond our pain. Biblical faith does not demand that we be impervious to loss and pain. It points us to God, who sent his Son to live and die for us. God knows all about pain and injustice and that is why we can know God is with us through all things.

When we experience tragedy and grief our response should be like that of Jerusalem's "widow," to express our pain and to face our choices and failures. Suffering can build a wall between us and God, or it can urge us to examine our beliefs and approach to life. All the answers will not be known in this world, but some will, and God is faithful to us as he was to Israel. We can recite all the trite phrases about staying strong and moving ahead, but our bedrock is God's unflinching love and grace.

Grief is never finished. Tragedy leaves us marked in some way but isn't it interesting how some people become stronger, more gracious and sensitive to others as a result of loss? We all heal at our own pace and in our own way. Lamentations cries out in loss and despair but those dark words are uttered to a God who loves and forgives no matter where his children are, no matter their mistakes. There is healing in God's grace when we are honest with ourselves and honest with God who sent his own son to be one with us.

Retired after 46 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.