PENTECOST 17

Proper 22 - Year C

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Lamentations 1:1-6

1 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 subject to forced labor.
2 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.
3 Judah has gone into exile with suffering
and hard servitude;
she lives now among the nations;
she finds no resting place;
her pursuers have all overtaken her
in the midst of her distress.
4 The 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.
5 Her 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.
6 From daughter Zion has departed
all her majesty.
Her princes have become like stags
that find no pasture;
they fled without strength
before the pursuer.

Commentary from Molly Cooke

Lamentations are songs of sadness. Here, at the beginning of the book, we get notes of loneliness and homesickness in the context of the Babylonian Exile. The visceral imagery, along with the litany of constituents who are grieving, demonstrate how even in our loneliest moments, when we might feel like there's "no one to comfort" us and all of our "friends have dealt treacherously" with us, it can be helpful to remember that we are not the only ones who are or who have ever felt the way we are feeling, even if that feeling is one of immense guilt. Anyone who's listened to a song and experienced catharsis could tell you this, and that is precisely what the Book of Lamentations is for.

In verse 5, we also see a common approach to making sense of unimaginable grief. The logic goes something like this: God is all good and all powerful, but bad things are happening, so it must be because we did something to deserve the bad things. While ancient Israel did have a lot to repent for, this logic isn't ironclad when you take a long view. Jesus certainly took issue when it was applied to a blind man (John 9:1-12), and we're assured that "all things work together for good" for God's people (Romans 8:28).

Discussion Questions

What are your favorite ways to bring on catharsis (the release of—and subsequent relief from—difficult emotions)? Why do you think those ways are effective?

How do you make sense of it when bad things happen? What are ways God might have used difficult experiences in your past for a good end?

Psalm 137

[1] By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, *
when we remembered you, O Zion.
[2] As for our harps, we hung them up *
on the trees in the midst of that land.
[3] For those who led us away captive asked us for a song,
and our oppressors called for mirth: *
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion."
[4] How shall we sing the Lord'S song *
upon an alien soil.
[5] If I forget you, O Jerusalem, *
let my right hand forget its skill.
[6] Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you, *
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.
[7] Remember the day of Jerusalem, O Lord,
against the people of Edom, *
who said, "Down with it! down with it!
even to the ground!"
[8] O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, *
happy the one who pays you back
for what you have done to us!
[9] Happy shall he be who takes your little ones, *
and dashes them against the rock!

Commentary from Molly Cooke

Fans of the musical *Godspell* will recognize the first four verses of Psalm 137 as the source text for the song, "On the Willows There," which is performed as a cathartic lament when Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane shortly before his crucifixion. Originally, like Lamentations, it was a song of the Babylonian Exile. In its entirety, we see in real-time how quickly sadness can be corrupted with anger.

As the Psalm progresses, the imagery for feeling powerless in the face of grief transforms and takes a violent turn. It moves from the unused instrument hung on a tree to the Psalmist's body parts becoming painfully unusable in verses 5-6 and concludes with a terrible desire in verses 7-9 for those responsible for the present pain to feel the same pain, if not worse, in the future. This is what happens when we sit too long in negative feelings, feeling helpless to change them in positive ways: we develop fantasies for how to change them at all costs, even if that involves perpetuating a cycle of harm.

Discussion Questions

The Psalmist feels unable to worship God with music because they are so sad, but they still wrote this song. Have you ever felt so discouraged that you felt unable to do something you loved, but found the strength to do it anyway? How did that feel?

Think of a time when you hurt someone else because they hurt you first. What got you to that point, and how could you have avoided hurting them?

2 Timothy 1:1-14

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ
Jesus,

[2] To Timothy, my beloved child:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and
Christ Jesus our Lord.

[3] I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear
conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember
you constantly in my prayers night and day. [4] Recalling
your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled
with joy. [5] I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith
that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your
mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. [6] For
this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God
that is within you through the laying on of my
hands, [7] for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice
but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-
discipline.

[8] Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about
our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in
suffering for the gospel, in the power of God, [9] who
saved us and called us with a holy calling, not
according to our works but according to his own
purpose and grace, and this grace was given to us in
Christ Jesus before the ages began, [10] but it has now
been revealed through the appearing of our Savior
Jesus Christ, who abolished death and brought life
and immortality to light through the gospel. [11] For this
gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a
teacher, [12] 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 the deposit I have entrusted to
him. [13] Hold to the standard of sound teaching that
you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are
in Christ Jesus. [14] Guard the good deposit entrusted to
you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

Commentary from Molly Cooke

The opening of Paul's second letter to Timothy also centers on suffering. Recalling Timothy's tears, he encourages his "beloved child" to join with him in "suffering for the gospel." We've already discussed how not suffering alone can lighten our burdens, and how sometimes we find ourselves wishing suffering on our enemies, but it seems peculiar for Paul to wish suffering on someone else he claims to love. In the rest of the epistle, we see evidence that Paul is imprisoned and believes he will be executed soon. He is gearing up to ask Timothy to visit him a final time, and so the mention of suffering is a conscious acknowledgement that this carries a risk for Timothy to be arrested, too. It's bold, but Paul understands that, because of their mutual love and trust, he can ask Timothy for what he really needs and Timothy will oblige.

Having suffered so far himself, Paul does have some wisdom and insight when it comes to the subject. The clause following this bid to "join" in suffering for the Good News in verse 8, relying on "the power of God," could be interpreted either as *how* one goes about suffering for the gospel or *the result* of that suffering.

Discussion Questions

Are you comfortable asking for help when you really need it, even when it might be a burden to your loved ones? Why or why not?

What is the advantage of each interpretation of verse 8? Which do you prefer?

Luke 17:5-10

[5] The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our
faith!" [6] The Lord replied, "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.

[7] "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'? [8] 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'? [9] Do you
thank the slave for doing what was commanded? [10] 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!' "

Commentary from Molly Cooke

The Gospel text is perhaps the most difficult of this week's readings, with Jesus matter-of-factly describing harsh treatment of enslaved people in response to his apostles (a synonym for disciples, here) asking him to "increase" their faith. Noting that this is his audience, Jesus' rhetorical questions are even more disquieting. There's no getting around the fact that this dialogue indicates that Jesus' followers enslaved people in his own time, not to mention the regrettable number of Christians who did so throughout history. Slavery was a structural sin, one that was normalized by socioeconomic institutions in various cultures across time, so that it seemed essential to daily life.

In the context of the psalm and its images of uselessness, the word "worthless" stands out in the concluding verse of the Gospel passage. Keeping in mind that enslaved people were led to believe they were worthless for doing "only" what they were told to do, under conditions in which they could only do so much, we can interpret Jesus as saying that his disciples are similarly mistaken about their faithlessness when they ask for their faith to be increased, as they had already been faithfully obeying the call to follow him.

Discussion Questions

What structural sins are we party to today? Hint: Enriching Our Worship 1 gives us a confession that articulates repentance for "the evil done on our behalf."

We all have moments when we feel not _____ enough. What is usually in that blank for you? How do you remember that you are a wonderfully made child of God?

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