

Journeying with Jeremiah, Part VII: The End
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for October 2nd 2016 (20th after Pentecost/World Communion Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Lamentations 1: 1-6

To the extent that we have been paying attention...paying attention to the trajectory of the journey upon which we embarked six weeks ago...

...to the extent that we have been paying attention as we have journeyed with Jeremiah, there could be little doubt but that this journey would not end well. Of that much Jeremiah was certain. While he did his very best to warn the people of Judea—especially its leaders—of the futility of their continued defiance of Babylon, these leaders ignored the prophet and continued on a course that inevitably led to the city's destruction. While modern scholarship hesitates to affirm the traditional attribution of Lamentations to Jeremiah himself, scholars continue to affirm that the book—regardless of who wrote it—was most certainly written in response to the horrific events of 586 B.C. Jerusalem's destruction! The slaughter and exile of its leading citizens! Abject want and desolation for those left behind! It was the end...an end no one—least of all Jeremiah—desired. But it was the end that did, in fact, take place.

And it is important to acknowledge—think of this as the elephant that has been hiding in plain view throughout the time we have spent with Jeremiah...

...important to acknowledge with complete frankness, that Jeremiah himself—and much of the book Lamentations—exemplify the belief that it is ultimately God who brought this disaster upon Jerusalem. The prophet Jeremiah, whatever else can be said of him, was a proponent—and may well have been one of the key shapers—of what can rightly be regarded as the mainstream perspective that came to shape ancient Israel's understanding of why it is that such profound suffering came upon them. Often described in relation to the Bible's fifth book, Deuteronomy, that mainstream perspective essentially holds that the people Israel will flourish when faithful to God, will be afflicted when abandoning its God. Furthermore: that same perspective, in a more domesticated form, also informs much of the Bible's wisdom literature, especially the book Proverbs. Just as Deuteronomy—and just as a prophet such as Jeremiah—knows that the nation as a whole will pay the price for its unfaithfulness, Proverbs insists that those individuals who follow the way of wisdom will be blessed, while those who embrace folly will eventually pay the price. And, to be fair, experience teaches us that there is truth in those convictions. That's how life tends to work. That's how the world appears to be structured. Which is why Jeremiah—in a very real sense—has no choice but to recognize in the destruction of 586, the hand of God: at the very least, to recognize God has having permitted the enemies of the Judean people to have their way with them, unleashing an obscene wave of chaos and destruction upon Jeremiah's beloved city! In a very real sense, Judea had asked for this. In a

very real sense: all of this was the inevitable outcome of opportunities squandered and God's patience tested over a period of hundreds of years. What other choice did God have? What else could God have done??

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Well: as I said at the outset: that's the elephant in the room. That's the aspect of Jeremiah that has so far gone unnamed in this journey with Jeremiah. And frankly: it's the aspect of Jeremiah that is most likely to make us uneasy. And so it is important, I think, that this particular elephant be explicitly named and—perhaps more importantly—that we recall that on this as on so many other issues, the Bible does not speak to us in a monotone! Whatever else we need to notice about our scriptures, we certainly must recall that they speak to us in a wide range of voices and accents, and with a formidable array of philosophies and theologies. And yes: while it's fair to maintain that certain perspectives can be considered the “mainstream” Biblical understanding of particular issues, dissenting voices are most definitely permitted. That is certainly true when it comes to the question of suffering: why it happens, whence it comes. And it is worth our time, this morning, to ponder a small handful of those alternative Biblical voices: those that present suffering in a somewhat different key.

One such voice comes to us in the book sometimes known as the book of the Preacher...more commonly known as Ecclesiastes. Those of you familiar with the book will know that it is no exaggeration to claim it not only the most cynical, world-weary book in the Bible...but frankly one of the most cynical, world-weary books you will ever encounter: anytime, anyplace! And don't be deceived...don't be deceived...by that lyrical musical setting of the book's most well-known passage: the one Pete Seeger created that was then made famous by the rock-band the Byrds. It's a stunning piece of music...and yes, it became a stirring anthem for the 60s peace-movement. But if you really think about the words in that song, it typifies the perspective of Ecclesiastes, according to which there is a time for everything: a time to be born, a time to die; a time to build, a time to tear down; a time for peace...but also a time for war. To put the book's philosophy in a nutshell: life is one damned thing after another; take your pleasure where you find it, because you won't be here for long, and suffering will eventually knock on your door! Truly shocking...truly shocking that such a book actually made it into our Bibles! But I believe we are much the richer for having within scripture a book that is less earnest, less passionate, and more resigned to life's odd rhythms: joy and sorrow, suffering and triumph so often appearing when we least expect them and yes...when we least deserve them!

A second voice...a second voice that needs to be heard side by side with the voice of Jeremiah...is the voice that speaks to us from the book Job. And here I would be lying to you, were I to pretend that the book Job is easily interpreted. Line up ten Biblical scholars, ask them to tell you what Job is all about, and I suspect you'll be handed at least 11 explanations. And yet it is hard

to deny that Job, whatever its ultimate meaning, is designed precisely to challenge the mainstream Old Testament interpretation of suffering. Remember the plot-line! Job, a man God deems worthy in every particular, is “punished” not because he has done anything wrong, but because God has made a wager with “the Tempter”. Predictably, when Job’s friends show up—and hear him protest his innocence—they do what they believe themselves obliged to do: defend God by insisting that Job **must** have committed some kind of trespass; otherwise God would not have brought such suffering upon him. As readers of the book, however, we have inside information. We have been told in advance that Job did nothing wrong; in effect he’s part of a highly structured lab experiment God has permitted to take place. And so the more we listen to the mainstream theology coming out of the lips of Job’s friends...the more frustrated with that theology we become. And yes: there is good reason to believe that the book Job, as we now have it, took its final form in the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem in 586, and may well comprise a subtle response to those who argued that ancient Israel deserved everything it got in that dreadful year. If true, the answer Job provides to the question of human suffering may simply amount to a call for humility: humility and the simple honesty to acknowledge that sometimes we don’t know why bad things happen to good people.

The final...the final alternative perspective that needs to be named, this morning, is the perspective afforded by the book from which we earlier read: the book Lamentations. It needs to be acknowledged that Lamentations shares the essential perspective of Jeremiah and other mainstream voices; Lamentations never doubts that it was Israel’s God who gave the Babylonians the power to destroy Jerusalem. Honesty demands that acknowledgment. And yet! Lamentations exemplifies all of the strengths that are part and parcel of the numerous laments that fill the Bible. Indeed, of the 150 psalms found in the book bearing that name, there are more laments than any other genre of psalm. Whatever else we may wish to say of the Old Testament, it embodies a tradition unembarrassed to weep and to mourn, unembarrassed to come before God to offer heartfelt lament when life takes an ugly turn, laments—which in the case of the book Lamentations—subtly suggest that God permitted Jerusalem and its inhabitants to suffer far more horror than they could possibly have deserved.

And you know: I can still recall the last time I designated a reading from Lamentations as the primary reading for a Sunday. I can give you the precise date. It was September 16th 2001: a mere five days after the day we still refer to as September 11th...**the** September 11th. As Ron Klusmeier and I planned worship for that morning, we both sensed that it was not a morning upon which we needed to hear explanations let alone recriminations. On the contrary: we needed to weep, to mourn, to lament. And the poetry of this wonderful, heart-breaking book provided the means for us to lament rightly and well: with no need to make sense out of that which seemed at the time (and in many ways still seems) to be utterly senseless. No need to make sense: only need to share our heartbreak, our desolation, our anguish, our fears, and our tears. As

Lamentations reminds us, in the face of horror, explanations fall flat; our tears speak far more powerfully than even our most eloquent words.

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Permit me two final thoughts. The first of those thoughts takes the form of a confession: namely the confession that, when push comes to shove, I am something of a Calvinist. Mind you, a highly unorthodox Calvinist, but a Calvinist just the same. In other words: I believe in the sovereignty of God, which means, at the end of the day, that I share the core perspective of what I have been describing as the mainstream theology of the Old Testament. Nothing happens in our world, or so I believe, without God either causing it or permitting it. And so, at the end of the day, I am quite convinced that the world as we know it, as we experience it, is the world for which God continues to take full responsibility, even though it would be wrong to “blame” God for everything that goes wrong. And yes: plenty does go wrong in this world of us, and God takes responsibility for every ounce of it: the good, the bad and the ugly. I believe that to be true; in that regard I stand in perfect solidarity with Jeremiah. That’s my somewhat embarrassing confession.

My other thought takes the form of an invitation: an invitation to this table. Just as all of our rationales and explanations will ultimately fail to provide a satisfactory account of the immense suffering woven into the fabric of each and every one of our lives, it is also the case that all of our philosophies and theologies will ultimately fail to do justice to the mystery that unfolds each and every time we approach this table. This much we do know, however.

On the night before his horrific death...and yes, the combination of severe beating and scourging followed by crucifixion is as obscene a death as anyone might wish to imagine...

...on the night before his death, Christ shared a meal with his closest friends, and placed that meal at the very centre of the life they would henceforth lead. Through that meal, they and we are called to remember all that was joyous and life-giving in Christ’s life with them...but also to remember the almost unbearably painful events they were soon to witness: as their stripped and beaten teacher hung from a Cross, enduring (in Job-like fashion) the taunts of passersby convinced he must have done something—something truly heinous—to have earned his fate. And yet: unbeknownst to those doing the taunting, he was on that Cross for them...on that Cross, for us...

...not to explain the world’s travails, but to participate in them...to enter into our suffering and thereby transfigure them! That we might come to know that God’s ultimate word to us is Yes: that God summons us to a day of reckoning on which all of our joys and even all of our sorrows, will have been woven into a fabric of perfection so sublime, that with no prompting from without, we will be left with no choice but to give God the glory! Through Christ! Amen!