

Healing Tears
Lamentations 1:1-5
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational Church
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Finally in 586 Before the Common Era, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had had enough of the Kingdom of Judah and its repeated rebellions, so he sent an army to destroy the city. And from that catastrophe we receive this little book of poems, five lamentations. Hear now the word of the Lord:

Lamentations 1:1-5

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.
Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude;
she lives now among the nations, and finds no resting place;
her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress.
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.
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.

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

Walter Brueggemann writes that without grief “there is no newness.” Only grieving breaks the numbness of denial and deception. He writes, “the riddle and insight of biblical faith is the awareness that only anguish leads to life, only grieving leads to joy, and only embraced endings permit new beginnings.”

Preparing for this series, I read a number of good books on the nexus between trauma studies and religion. The best one was *Trauma and Grace* by Serene Jones, who is the President at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

She writes that one of the issues faced by victims of trauma is the end to an expected future. Many of us, particularly comfortable North Americans, have come to expect that life will have its ups and downs but generally will go well for us and that we won't be seriously uncomfortable. Experiences of grief, of course, shatter this illusion.

One sees something similar in the poems contained in the book of Lamentations. These poems voice the laments of Daughter Zion. The world she had known has now come to an end. The future she anticipated will not be. She continues to live, but something has died. The life she desired and dreamed of has died. And she now carries that death within her.

According to Serene Jones, the best example of this type of grief is the mother who has experienced reproductive loss. This is, sadly, a very common experience, even in our age of advanced medicine and fertility treatments. Women continue to struggle to become pregnant, to carry children to term, to birth healthy children.

Serene Jones writes of what happens when a mother who wants a child discovers she is pregnant:

She does not imagine it as just any life; she views it as a particular life, the life of her potential child. She immediately envisions it as a person with a smile like her father's, or thick black hair like her sister's. She also begins to measure her own future in terms of this imagined child's development. She imagines where he, her son, will sleep or what she, her daughter, will wear. She envisions him at school or her learning to drive. She conjures up the many possible tones of his voice or the shape of her feet, at birth and then at fifty. The woman's body begins to anticipate holding the child; she can smell her daughter's birthday cake; she can hear her son singing in his high school years. Her whole being, it seems, stretches itself into this child's future, and this future becomes the space of her own becoming.

So, when she experiences reproductive loss, she "grieves not only an immediate loss, but also the loss of an entire lifetime, a lifetime lived vividly in the drama of her hoping." A "passionately imagined future."

Serene Jones reminds us that even in this loss, God is with us. For at the crucifixion God's child died. At that moment God "[took] death into Godself." The living God "hold[s] death within it." God forever carries this loss inside. Serene Jones ponders this image of the Trinity as the "miscarrying, stillbirthing, barren-wombed God," who joins women in solidarity with their most painful loss.

But she is very clear that our deepest losses aren't actually healed, nor would we want them to be. She writes, "wounds are not magically healed but are borne." Borne with an e. We learn how to carry them and carry ourselves. We learn how to continue living. This is holy resilience.

And so Serene Jones recommends two spiritual practices—mourning and wonder. She writes, “To mourn and to wonder, that is what the spirit yearns for when it stands in the midst of trauma and breathes in the truth of grace.” She writes that neither mourning nor wonder will answer all of our questions, but they will “open us to the experience of God’s coming into torn flesh, and to love’s arrival amid violent ruptures.”

While these practices speak specifically to reproductive loss, she recommends them as practices for anyone who has experienced any type of trauma or grief.

So, what is mourning? I’m going to quote her at length, because what she writes is so good.

[Mourning is] a disposition in which your heart and mind give in to the loss and consent to dwell in the trauma with as much attention as can be mustered. It requires acknowledging how much was lost, how deeply it matters, how unstable the world has become in the aftermath, and how difficult it feels to be ever moving forward. . . . Grief is hard, actually the hardest of all emotions and perhaps the most intolerable because its demand are so excruciating. It requires a willingness to bear the unbearable. . . . The gift of mourning is that fully awakening to the depth of loss enables you to at least learn, perhaps for the first time, that you can hold the loss: you can bear terrors of heart and body and still see your way forward with eyes open.

Through authentic mourning, then, we open ourselves and become vulnerable and experience the deep pain of loss. And through that experience we begin to see other things too. Jones writes that this is when wonder “appears.”

Wondering is the simple capacity to behold the world around you (and within you), to be awed by its mystery, to be made curious by its difference, and to marvel at its compelling form. . . . Wonder is the complete opposite of the truncated, shut-down systems of perception that traumatic violence breeds in its victims.

Serene Jones does not mean that we are to get lost in the world’s beauty. It’s not that simple. For the world is not simply beautiful, it is also dangerous and mysterious. What she advocates is a wondering at all of this. And here I think of the poet and essayist Mary Oliver who also writes of how standing within the beauty and mystery of the world “can re-dignify the worst-stung heart.”

Again, what Jones is grasping for is not the removal of the wound, but the power to bear it, to continue living.

And we gain that power from the grace of God. She concludes her book by writing that salvation is “to be awakened” and “to stand courageously on the promise that grace is sturdy enough to hold it all—you, and me, and every broken, trauma-ridden soul that wanders through our history. To us all, love comes.”