



Lent reflection for March 26, 2024

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Lamentations 1:17-22

Zion stretches out her hands,
but there is no one to comfort her;
the Lord has commanded against Jacob
that his neighbors should become his foes;
Jerusalem has become
a filthy thing among them.

The Lord is in the right,
for I have rebelled against his word;
but hear, all you peoples,
and behold my suffering;
my young women and young men
have gone into captivity.

I called to my lovers,
but they deceived me;
my priests and elders
perished in the city
while seeking food
to revive their lives.

Look, O Lord, at how distressed I am;
my stomach churns;
my heart is wrung within me
because I have been very rebellious.
In the street the sword bereaves;

in the house it is like death.

They heard how I was groaning,
with no one to comfort me.
All my enemies heard of my trouble;
they are glad that you have done it.
Bring on the day that you have announced,
and let them be as I am.

Let all their evildoing come before you,
and deal with them
as you have dealt with me
because of all my transgressions;
for my groans are many,
and my heart is faint.

Today's Reflection is by Kate Newlin

Perhaps we can all be excused a dislike bordering on impatience with Lamentations. For me it's right up there with the challenge of reading Job. We may imagine the God of Lamentations dealing with us based on our endless falling short ('we/I deserved it'), but in Job we encounter a God willing to let Satan have at Job for no reason other than Job's righteousness. I am left with the appalling understanding that devastating tribulations await whether we behave badly or well. It's one thing to know we are not saved by works. It's quite another to confront the inescapability of tragedy. And why, for Heaven's sake, is Lamentations timed for the run-up to Easter? Are we meant to give up Joy too during Lent? How do we get from the lamentable here to hope filled there?

When I read and say the prayers that highlight Ash Wednesday services and indeed most Sunday services I am constantly struck by the fact that centuries – in some cases millennia – do nothing to separate modern day us from our historic head-bowed forebears. We, like they, acknowledge the ways in which we have fallen short – “not loved you with our whole heart and soul and strength, or our neighbors as ourselves,” to point out one glowing constant. We repent. We ask forgiveness. We go on to the next admission of guilt. Sunday after Sunday, year after year, generation after generation. Wash, rinse, repeat. In nearly every aspect of our lives – technologically, emotionally, relationally, educationally, career, family – there are sign points we confidently call progress. Year over year, decade after decade, century after century. But in our moral development – as individuals, culture, civilization – we stagnate. There is much to lament in the human condition. Even in the Christian condition. So much for Darwin: We have not morally evolved. At all.

At the Martin Luther King service this January, the sermon included a reference to King himself noting this phenomenon, this dissonance between human and moral progress. Yet it was his

assertion in the 'I Have A Dream' speech that the 'arc of the moral universe bends toward justice.' A thrilling contention, but we must ask, based on what evidence? Perhaps the arc doesn't bend towards anything. It's rather more an optical illusion, such as one might see looking down the train tracks and believing one sees the two parallel lines converging at some distant point on the horizon. Perhaps the moral universe exists on one plane and the human world simply runs parallel, clattering and chattering along. God's in his heaven, but not all is right with the world. For sure.

That's my take-away from Lamentations. We come by our lament honestly. Sometimes, like Job's friends, we're meant to sit with it. Not turn away from it. Look it in the eye: We know how we're meant to behave. We constantly fall short. In big and small ways. God won't avert his gaze. I suppose if we're to hope for meaning, we must look for it in the struggle. As the poet Arthur Hugh Clough wrote,

'Say not, the struggle naught availeth.'
The labor and the wounds are vain,
The enemy faints not, nor faileth,
And as things have been they remain.

'The struggle' then, perhaps, is to reacquaint ourselves with faith at such times. But not blind faith. We're not meant to avert our gaze either. No. It appears we need a faith in which we persist even when we know we travel an infinite track stretching forward and back to more of the same. Confident only that a change of scenery is in store.

There will be Spring flowers along the route. Bunnies will hop again near the rails. Eggs crammed with candies will be found by charming wee ones. And we will emerge from the dark and dingy tunnel of lamentations to the promise of a gorgeous and distracting vista, still well out of reach, but just there within the bounds of hope.



Kate Newlin is a business strategist and writer who lives with her 24-year-old daughter Mattie in Kensington. They are recent arrivals, having lived in Manhattan forever. Kate became a Christian and Episcopalian as part of a midlife crisis-driven journey which took her from Tim Keller's Redeemer Presbyterian Church to St. James to St. Luke's in East Hampton and then to St. Luke's in the West Village and back to St. James. She stumbled upon Holy Apostles at roughly the same time the last packing box was emptied.