

When the Heart is Surprised by Hope

Lamentations 3:20f

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Prepared text of the sermon

The Psalm to which I direct your attention this morning is actually not in the Psalter but in a writing called *Lamentations*. To lament is a frequent poetic utterance in the Hebrew Scriptures. There are many Psalms of lament in the Psalter but *Lamentations*, which you find immediately after *Jeremiah*, is a writing consisting of five poems – all laments – thus the title *Lamentations*. Following *Jeremiah* and because *Jeremiah* is often called the Weeping Prophet, *Lamentations* is traditionally attributed to him. However, we really don't now who the author was. This we know – his is perhaps the most eloquent outpouring of grief ever recorded. And if we are not sure who the author was, we can be certain of the historical situation that called it forth. In the year 587 BCE the Babylonian Imperial Forces successfully moved into Jerusalem, destroying the Royal Residence, the Temple, the city walls and took all but the poor and elderly into captivity to Babylon for what we speak of as the Exile.

That event is briefly recorded in II Kings 25:8-12:

In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month, in the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon – Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, an official of the king of Babylon, entered Jerusalem. He burned down the house of Yahweh, and the King's house; and all the houses in Jerusalem, including every great man's house, he set on fire and burned. The whole army of the Chaldeans tore down the walls of Jerusalem, all around ... The rest of the people who were left in the city, and those who had deserted to the King of Babylon, and the rest of the populace, Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, took to Babylon as prisoners. The captain of the guard left only some of the poorest in the country to tend the vines and farm the land.

A commentator on *Lamentations* describes the tragedy and its implications for Israel thus.

It is first of all a recital of the horrors and atrocities that came during the long siege and its aftermath, but beyond the tale of physical suffering it tells of the spiritual significance of the fall of the city. For the ancient

people chosen by Yahweh it meant the destruction of every cherished symbol of their election by God. In line after line the poet recalls all the precious, sacred things which had been lost or shattered: the city itself, once “the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth;” the city walls and towers, once the outward sign that “God is in the midst of her;” the King, “the anointed of Yahweh, the breath of our nostrils;” the priests, and with them all festive and solemn worship; the prophets, and with them all visions and the living word of God; the land itself, Israel’s “inheritance” from Yahweh, now turned over to strangers; the people – dead, exiled, or slaves in their own land. Every sign that had once provided assurance and confidence in God was gone. (Anchor Bible, *Lamentations*, p. xv)

The outpouring of grief and pain and human disaster is brought to expression in the five poems found in the *Lamentations*. My title today is “When the Heart is Surprised by Hope”. Does it strike you as strange that I should attempt such a subject from a writing called *Lamentations*?

Well, if you have wondered about it, you are prepared to hear the most important thing I want to say this morning – namely – *that hurt is the home of hope*. My intention from the text is to suggest that one of the fascinating aspects of human experience is that it is often when the darkness seems to swallow us up that light breaks through. I wonder why that is the case. I wonder if there is some aspect of the vast cosmic dance and our emerging human experience that points to a source of Grace beyond us that is not at our disposal but yet dawns upon us betimes and is a pointer to a healing dimension in our human journey; might there be a bias for life and healing?

The author of *Lamentations* was wrestling with the human condition marked by intense suffering, spiritual desolation and tragedy. The writer is dismayed – If God is responsible for everything that happens then how could God allow this tragedy to fall upon Jerusalem?

Does God not see? Is God absent?

But this is not satisfactory given the conception of God he holds. Is it then Israel’s sins? Rebellion? Failing to follow the way of holiness and righteousness? Yes – certainly that was true – but was such total devastation not overkill?

And there was not only the conviction that God is in total control but there was also Israel’s conception of God as merciful. Certainly God does not willingly grieve or afflict anyone. This suffering poet cannot understand – We see the clash of deeply held convictions.

To read through these five poems is to realize the intimacy of Israel’s relationship to God and one could read it and write it off as hopelessly naïve, primitive. God’s direct control of historical events, God’s intervention governing all the

occurrences on the human historical scene is no longer possible for us who have come to some understanding of the cosmos, of nature in its unfolding, of natural causation – natural disasters bring grief, suffering, earthquakes, tsunamis, fire, flood – and then tragedy brought on by human pride, arrogance, greed and brutality and more.

With the dawning of the modern period, questions of God's involvement in history and human affairs became a major discussion. The great German thinker Leibnitz wrestled with the problems caused by the evolving of human understanding – the Enlightenment period. He reasoned his way to a conception of “the best of all possible worlds”. Theodicy is the endeavor to justify the ways of God in the world – from our perspective, a rather arrogant human undertaking; yet, at the time, a serious matter with great existential implications.

But then a disaster struck – the Lisbon earthquake in 1755. It is described in a Wikipedia piece:

The 1755 Lisbon earthquake, also known as the Great Lisbon Earthquake, took place on November 1, 1755 at around 9:40 in the morning. The earthquake was followed by a tsunami and fire, which caused near-total destruction of Lisbon, Portugal and adjoining areas. Geologists today estimate the Lisbon earthquake approached magnitude 9 on the Richter scale, with an epicenter in the Atlantic Ocean about 200 km (120 mi) west-southwest of Cape St. Vincent. Estimates place the death toll between 60,000 to 100,000 people, making it one of the most destructive earthquakes in history.

Effect on society and philosophy

The earthquake had wide-ranging effects on the lives of the populace and intelligentsia. The earthquake had struck on an important Catholic holiday and had destroyed almost every important church in the city, causing anxiety and confusion amongst the citizens of a staunch and devout Catholic city and country, which had been a major patron of the Church. Theologians and philosophers would focus and speculate on the religious cause and message, seeing the earthquake as a manifestation of the anger of God.

The earthquake and its fallout strongly influenced the intelligentsia of the European Age of Enlightenment. The noted writer-philosopher Voltaire used the Earthquake in *Candide* and in his *Poeme sur le desastre de Lisbonne* (“Poem on the Lisbon disaster”). Voltaire's *Candide* attacks the notion that all is for the best in this, “the best of all possible worlds”, a world closely supervised by a benevolent deity.

The Lisbon disaster provided a salutary counterexample. As Theodor Adorno wrote, “the earthquake of Lisbon sufficed to cure Voltaire of the

theodicy of Leibnitz” (*Negative Dialectics* 361). In the later twentieth century following Adorno, the 1755 earthquake has sometimes been compared to the Holocaust as a catastrophe that transformed European culture and philosophy. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was also influenced by the devastation following the earthquake, whose severity he believed was due to too many people living within the close quarters of the city. Rousseau used the earthquake as an argument against cities as part of his desire for a more naturalistic way of life.

So 1755 was a pivot point in the understanding of God’s direct involvement in natural disasters, historical movements and human affairs generally. It was no longer possible to engage with the poet of Lamentations in his dialogue with the Deity. Granted that. Granted that it was no longer possible to understand God pushing the buttons and pulling the levers of the universe.

Nonetheless, the issue with which the author was wrestling was real. And the point I am interested in lifting up this morning is the unexpected, amazing breakthrough of hope in the midst of the darkness. The poet is bereft of any solution to his anguish. But then suddenly, unexpectedly, we hear him say:

My soul continually thinks of it
And is bowed down within me.
But this I call to mind,
And therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
God’s mercies never come to an end;
They are new every morning;
Great is Thy faithfulness –

From which there comes a beautiful old familiar hymn by that name. And he goes on:

The Lord is good to those who wait for Him,
To the soul that seeks him.
It is good that one should wait quietly
For the salvation of the Lord.

There you have it – to wait is to wait in expectation – to hope – the surprise of Grace – *Sometimes the heart is surprised by hope.*

But this beautiful witness to hope, to the steadfast love of God, to a God of infinite mercy comes from one whose conception of God was quite different from ours – Can we reject his conception of God and divine action and still hold to his witness to the Surprise of Grace?

That is really the issue this morning; that is the question I invite you to reflect on with me. I suggest that *hope is grounded in the reality of our universe* and thus

we are surprised by hope and hope manifests itself most often in times of deep distress and hurt. In fact, as I claim above, *Hurt is Hope's Home*. That is a suggestion of the Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann – Hurt is Hope's Home.

As I was reflecting on this I was reminded of Scott Peck's *The Road Less Travelled*. It was 30 years ago that the book was published and for at least two decades it remained on the Best Seller List – which I suspect is an indication that there is a great hunger for hope and Peck addressed a deeply felt need in our human experience.

And *experience* is what he based his claim that there is a Grace that comes to us from beyond ourselves. Out of his psychiatric practice he discovered again and again the amazement of Grace operating in the human being. He writes:

“The fact that there exists beyond ourselves and our conscious will a powerful force that nurtures our growth and evolution is enough to turn our notions of self-insignificance topsy-turvy. For the existence of this force (once we perceive it) indicates with incontrovertible certainty that our human spiritual growth is of the utmost importance to something greater than ourselves. This something we call God. The existence of grace is *prima facie* evidence not only of the reality of God but also of the reality that God's will is devoted to the growth of the individual human spirit. What once seemed to be a fairy tale turns out to be the reality.” (p. 311)

William Styron, the author of *Sophie's Choice* who died recently, wrote his own story of suffering deep depression. He called it *darkness visible*. With the literary gift he possessed he wrote a moving chronicle of his experience with depression and, although he did not relate his experience to our question this morning, he witnessed to Peck's claim precisely. He said to those battling deep depression – “I can only tell you – one day the cloud lifted.” Peck would say – “the amazement of Grace.”

One can simply leave it there, or one can name that reality as does Peck and call it the miracle of Grace – that hope dawns in the midst of our darkness – and point to a truth of our cosmic reality – and name it God.

My intention this morning is to celebrate the surprising claim that though Hurt is Hope's Home, *Hope Happens and Hope Heals*.

I am reminded of a close friend of mine from College and Seminary and years together in the Reformed Church. He went on to become General Secretary of the RCA, Deputy Secretary of the World Council of Churches in Geneva and then General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in the U.S. In his mid-fifties he decided to return to the pastorate but then was diagnosed with cancer. I visited him shortly before he died. He was remarkably at peace. He shared some

of his journal writings, now published as “Overcoming the Threat of Death: A Journal of One Christian’s Encounter with Cancer.”

He tells about how he was about to edit his favorite sermon on his favorite text, a favorite of mine as well. A sermon called “Faith in Spite of Everything,” and it is based on those wonderful words from Habakkuk, “Though there be no grapes on the vine and no cattle in the stall, and all will be lost, nonetheless I will exalt in God my Saviour.” Arie says that up and down the land he preached that sermon on that text “Faith in Spite of Everything,” and then, in his encounter with cancer, he began to see that there was something even beyond faith for him. Growth in grace was represented by an experience of hope. He says,

“These days I hold out little hope for my cancer to be cured. I haven’t given up, but the statistics steadily weigh ever more heavily against it. In spite of that I find my feelings of hope undiminished. How do I explain this even within the household of faith, to say nothing of a skeptical world? How do I keep people from feeling as they read this that I am clutching at a straw, deceiving myself, using hope as a form of escapism from the harsh reality of terminal illness and death? How do I communicate that in truth we do not sorrow as those who do not have hope? What is this hope that abides in spite of everything? What form does it take? To me this experience of ‘Hope in Spite of Everything’ is even more important than the experience of faith, *in spite of everything*. I don’t know how to explain that.”

Arie Brower was a thoughtful enough Christian to know that there was no way in the world he could prove to anyone that his hope was not simply illusion. But he witnessed to an indomitable hope so that, as he says in another place, “I hope you understand that I’ve been healed of cancer,” even though cancer took his life.

Hurt is Hope’s Home
Hope Happens.
And from widespread testimony –
Hope Heals.

This was the center of biblical faith. It has been affirmed in modern clinical experience. It is widely witnessed to in many ways. Hope is not a denial of the darkness nor downplaying of the pain. Scott Peck begins his book with the simple statement:

“*Life is difficult*”,
and it is.

There is enough pain to go around. But the counsel of our writer this morning is *to wait – wait as in expectation*.

With every sunrise I love to remember those marvelous words and the image

His mercies are new every morning.

The English poet William Cowper, 1731-1800, was a fragile youth who suffered and spent 18 months in an insane asylum. He had a spiritual experience. He was invited by John Newton to come to his parish in Olney, England. He was England's most honored poet between Pope and Shelley. With Newton he gathered 349 hymns for the Olney Hymnal. Out of this deep experience of darkness and light he wrote:

“Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings;
It is the Lord, who rises with healing in His wings:
When comforts are declining, He grants the soul again
A season of clear shining to cheer it after rain.

And in “God Moves In a Mysterious Way”:
Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Such eloquent testimony tells the story:

Hurt is Hope's Home
But Hope Happens
And Hope Heals

Because we who are hard-wired for God live in a universe which has a
Bias for Life.

References:

M. Scott Peck. *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*. Touchstone, 25th Anniversary edition, 2003.