

Lam 1:8-22; 2:10-22

In 2014, in the aftermath of the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson MO, a photo went viral that showed a tearful 12 year-old black boy, Davonte Hart, hugging a policeman. It was interpreted as a gesture of kindness from the officer and of trust from the child, and it made a powerful impact amidst the discomfort of the assertions that police were habitually abusive to people of color. The officer *was* being kind. But the back story is far more tragic.

Davonte was one of six children adopted by two white women, Jen and Sara Hart. While their social media posts portrayed a happy, politically progressive family, the reality was horrendous. The children were abused at home, and when teachers became concerned, they were pulled out of school. Eventually their mothers packed them all into a car and drove off a cliff, killing everyone.

Davonte had been photographed before holding a sign that said “Free hugs.” When he was seven, he’d showed up with such a sign in a yoga class his mothers were attending, and hugged the teacher for so long that everybody became uncomfortable. In the photo with the officer, he had been holding that sign. Perhaps he’d figured out that a “free hugs” sign was the only way he could get affection from adults. The details of his and his siblings’ lives are absolutely heartbreaking.

I take the story of Davonte Hart as a salutary reminder not to be too quick to apply my own constructs to other people’s stories. Given the particular array of my personal white lady experiences, I was primed to look at that picture and see a parable of racial reconciliation. In fact it was a desperate child seeking relief from an available adult.

We see a similar process of meaning-making, then listening, then reframing, in the verses from Lamentations that Ron read. It's hard to disaggregate the two voices in this reading when you just hear it, so I'll do that now. The context is the aftermath of Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem in 586, and the book of Lamentations is traditionally read for Tisha B'av, a day of mourning for both Solomon's Temple and the Second Temple which the Romans would destroy in 70 CE. This was not some kind of antiseptic surgical strike; it took months and included starving the inhabitants. We usually think of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple as big theological blows, but they were first very existential blows, blows to people's bodies. Our reading opens with the voice of a funeral singer, someone who has seen the damage but has not experienced it himself. He says, "Jerusalem sinned grievously, so she has become a mockery; all who honored her despise her." This is just a conventional Deuteronomic interpretation: if bad things happen to you, you must have sinned to deserve them.

The narrator goes on to use really degrading, shaming images to depict Jerusalem: "they have seen her nakedness," "her uncleanness was in her skirts," "enemies have stretched out their hands over all her precious things." Boy, Jerusalem must have really asked for it. In verse 9 Jerusalem herself interrupts briefly, saying, "O Lord, look at my affliction," but then the funeral singer rolls on over her again. "All her people grown as they search for bread; they trade their treasures for food to revive their strength."

In verse 11, though, Jerusalem seizes the mic again. "Look, O Lord, and see how worthless I have become." Now she's going to speak for herself about what she's suffered. While the narrator's description emphasized the city's disgrace and shame, observing but not experiencing, the city describes herself as one overcome and crushed. "My transgressions were

bound into a yoke; . . . they weigh on my neck, sapping my strength . . . the Lord has trodden as in a wine press the virgin daughter Jerusalem.” Jerusalem is very clear that it’s God who has done these things to her. And she says “the Lord is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word,” but she also begins to name all the people who failed her when there was still time. “I called to my lovers but they deceived me; my priests and elders perished in the city while seeking food to revive their strength.” The people who should have helped her either wouldn’t or couldn’t, and so she came to this desperate pass. She asks that God deal as harshly with her enemies as he has with her, because her enemies are no paragons of virtue either.

When the funeral singer comes back in 2:13, he has changed his tone. He is far more empathetic. “What can I say for you, to what compare you, O daughter Jerusalem? To what can I liken you, that I may comfort you, O virgin daughter Zion? For vast as the sea is your ruin; who can heal you?” It’s as if, after hearing Zion’s own narration of her story he has suddenly realized the enormity of her suffering. Now he also acknowledges that his simple idea that suffering is punishment for sin is inadequate, because he also describes how badly Jerusalem’s prophets performed. He’s setting aside, rather than doubling down on, his Deuteronomic explanation for her situation. And for the first time he’s also realizing that he has absolutely no comfort to offer her—her ruin is “vast as the sea,” and nobody can heal her.

Now the narrator takes a new turn. He encourages Zion to cry out to God. “Arise, cry out in the night . . . ! Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord!” Name before God the fact that women are considering eating their own children to stay alive, and that dead bodies litter the streets, starved or mowed down by the sword. There is no “so that;” the narrator doesn’t suggest that God will respond or repent, but the narrator thinks that Zion

is justified in speaking her truth; she's not crazy, the situation is crazy. That's all he's got. But he listened to Zion, and he shifted *his* frame.

The funeral singer is a professional narrator. It's what he does. He finds out what's gone on, he puts it together in a coherent framework of meaning, and he reports it out. But he shuts up and gets out of the way when Jerusalem speaks for herself, and in fact he even encourages her to take it farther. There is such wisdom in his yielding. When we have coherent narratives, we often are so satisfied with them that we resist hearing alternative interpretations. And in fact, alternative interpretations can be really tricky to unravel. It's one thing to hear that police officers stop people of color on flimsy pretexts time and again; you can dismiss that narrative because you never see it happening, but if you listen to enough POC you can begin to see how credible *their* narrative is. But other stories are tricky. A couple weeks ago Adam Singer was telling us about some of the challenges of treating patients of color in the hospital because they may unreasonably and over-vehemently resist something perfectly legitimate like taking a rectal temperature. But when you realize the sheer weight and volume of white medical crimes against people of color, not just in yesteryear but recently too, as Adam showed us, you begin to acknowledge that their resistance is not unfounded.

Still other narrators present other challenges, like Ron's white neighbor who thinks that there's some kind of liberal plot to kill babies. I think we could unravel that one fairly easily; I'm just acknowledging that not every alternative narrative is legitimate.

The wisdom that the funeral singer models for us, though, is to listen well enough to people who are usually ignored, that we can set aside the frames that we find comforting and hear what is disturbing. When I look at that photo of Davonte Hart hugging the police officer

and crying, and think about the truth that was concealed by our sentimental assumptions, my heart breaks. How many stories do we fail to take in, because we think we know them already? Lamentations reminds us to step back when we're accustomed to speaking, and to step up if we've been accustomed to being silenced.

Let us pray: God, you have put eternity and justice into our minds, and we have to hold even you accountable. For children like Davonte, we pray for your deliverance. At the same time, we scarcely know what to screen out or what to attend to, to make sense of what's happening and be accountable, ourselves. Give us the wisdom to listen to others, to speak our truths, and to grow in the art of honest conversation. Amen.