

Lamentations 3:1-3, 17-33 and 5:1-3, 19-22

I'm sure everybody's heard the tale of how when the Baal Shem Tov had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire, and meditate in prayer. And then he was able to perform the task. A generation later, the Maggid of Mezrich was faced with the same task. So he went to the same place in the woods, but he had forgotten exactly how to light the fire as the Baal Shem Tov had done. He said, "I can no longer light the fire, but I can still speak the prayers." And so he prayed as the Baal Shem Tov had prayed, and he was able to complete the task. A generation later, Rabbi Moshe Lev had to perform this same task. He too went into the woods, but not only had he forgotten how to light the fire, he had forgotten the prayers as well. He said, I can no longer light the fire, nor do I know the secret meditations belonging to the prayers. But I do know the place in the woods to which it all belongs, and that must be sufficient. And sufficient it was. But when another generation had passed, Rabbi Israel Salanter was called upon to perform the task. He sat down in his golden chair in his castle and said, "I cannot light the fire. I cannot speak the prayers. I do not know the place in the forest. But we can tell the story of how it was once done, and that must be sufficient. And sufficient it was. That is the power of story, and of storytellers.

Last week we heard from two voices in the book of Lamentation, the book that speaks of the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon. The first voice was that of a professional funeral singer, who recounted the experiences of others. The second was that of the female personification of the city of Jerusalem, whose sense of violation and anguish was too great, finally, to be expressed adequately. And we saw that the funeral singer, when he returned, had lost his sense of distance from the catastrophe. He had no words to answer daughter Zion, but

simply urged her to cry out to God.

This week we hear two more voices, an individual voice and then the collective voice of the people. The individual is apparently called “the strong man,” and he opens with a report of his own personal suffering. Like a *bad* shepherd, God has driven him (“me alone”) into darkness. God has made *his* flesh and skin waste away, has besieged him with bitterness, and walled him about so he can’t escape. He sounds a lot like Job. Unlike Job, though, the strong man has made sense of his situation. “The Lord is good to those who wait for him, . . . it is good for one to bear the yoke in youth, to sit alone in silence when the Lord has imposed it, to put one’s mouth to the dust (there may yet be hope), to give one’s cheek to the smiter, and be filled with insults. For the Lord will not reject forever, . . . for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.”

The strong man’s take on this is that God is ontologically good. In this moment, God’s orientation toward him is not benevolent, but the nature of God is to be good. Therefore he will simply wait until God is done punishing him, and God will once again be kind and generous. I have two thoughts about this. First of all, this sounds way too much like the script for domestic abuse for me to be comfortable. The guy doesn’t know what he’s done wrong, but he’s just going to welcome the punishment and look forward to when God’s gotten it out of his system and turns nice again. I don’t know if that’s fair, but I hear it in there. The second thing I hear is the theology of many hard-living people who, in the midst of misfortune, choose to focus on the goodness of God and the assurance that God will make things better. Our hymn comes from this reading: 3:23 says, “. . . his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; *great is your faithfulness.*” Whether that focus is Pollyannaish or profound, I

sometimes don't know, but without question it is important to many people of faith who live with hardship.

So that's the strong man. He has suffered as deeply as daughter Zion, but unlike her, he believes that his suffering is justified, and he believes that because God is good, the suffering will end.

Finally, chapter 5, which is the last chapter of Lamentations, gives us the voice of the community, speaking directly to God. "Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us; look, and see our disgrace!" They speak of the violation of being evicted from their homes and seeing strangers living there, and of the breakdown of their families. In one verse that wasn't in our reading, they speak of having to pay for water and wood, which are basic necessities—it has an oddly modern ring to it, as the moratorium on rents and water bills ends this week. The book closes with this profoundly ambiguous set of verses: "But you, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations." The community uses this metaphor of God as king, but where *was* God's throne? Oh, it was in the Temple. What's happened to the Temple? It's been destroyed, as has the city that housed it. If God's throne endures to all generations, where is God living now? Apparently not in Jerusalem.

And then, more ambiguity: "Restore us to yourself, O Lord, . . . renew our days as of old—*unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure.*" They can remember the days of old, not so long ago, and they can imagine being restored. So surely God would do that, eventually. In fact, these words remind us of the episode in Exodus when in Moses' absence the people made a golden calf and worshiped it, and God was this close to just walking away from them once and for all, but gave them a way to atone and they atoned and

got back to normal. “Restore us to yourself, renew our days as of old.” That’s what God has always done. Up until now.

“Unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure.” This can also be translated, “Unless you have gone too far,” which suggests a point of no return. Maybe God will restore us to Godself, AND maybe God has walked away once and for all. We don’t know.

And that’s how Lamentations ends. One response to trauma can be protest, not necessarily with any hope of change, but just a full-throated NO to what is happening. That’s what daughter Zion does. Another response to trauma is to hold out hope, and that’s what the strong man articulates. The community that speaks in the last chapter of the book does not choose one over the other. It doesn’t build a conceptual bridge from one to the other; it doesn’t try to reconcile them or make them mutually coherent. The community voice has decided it’s more important to keep all the speakers’ voices than to achieve theological unity or coherence.

There is never a time when we all really know what’s going on, and it’s particularly terrifying when it seems plausible that God is *not* good, or has walked away once and for all. But coherence is a luxury that we get only in retrospect, and even then it’s questionable. The poet of Lamentations has chosen not to simplify or edify or instruct, but to honor the variety of stories about the catastrophe through which community members suffered. Hearing others’ stories is how we connect; it’s how we come to be community. The writer of Lamentations is not going for a coherent account of what the destruction of Jerusalem meant, or where God was in the midst of the catastrophe. He was going for connecting the survivors to one another,

telling and hearing stories so that they recognized each other as members of each other.

Connection could be the beginning of hope.

Let us pray.

Holy One, in dark times and in happy times, may we find the stories to tell that will get us to the next place. May we hear the stories that we need to hear. And may we eventually become so filled with stories that we always know how to find your gracious Spirit in and among us. Amen.