

Prayer of the Week:

Heavenly Father, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you: Look with compassion upon the heartfelt desires of your servants, and purify our disordered affections, that we may behold your eternal glory in the face of Christ Jesus; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

(Source: Book of Common Prayer 2019, Collects of the Christian Year, The Third Sunday in Lent)

Prayer of Thanksgiving:

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all whom you have made.

We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.

And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory throughout all ages. Amen.

**The Second Poem**

Lamentations 2:1-9 (NLT)

March 7th

Intro

We are discovering that Lamentations has a lot to teach us about what it means to be people of faith through the whole human experience.

Last week, we learned that in the first poem, the city of Jerusalem is personified as a widow. This widow attributes her suffering to her own sin while also feeling shame from that sin. We learned that the redemptive purposes of God are intended to release us from the guilt of personal sin AND rescue us from the shame of sin.

This week, we explore the second poem.

The Second Poem

In the first poem, the widow saw her sin as the primary cause of suffering. In this poem, God is portrayed as angry, retributive, and clearly to blame for the suffering of Jerusalem.

How are we to understand passages in the Bible like this? Are we to take our cues about the character of God from passages like this? Are we to understand that God is actually angry and retributive? Does God punish us for sin in order to teach us a lesson? These are important interpretive questions. How do you square these passages

with passages that speak of God's love, patience, mercy, and forgiveness?

We need an interpretive center of the Bible to help us make sense of things. The Bible itself points to Jesus as that interpretive center.

Hebrews 1:3 says that Jesus is the "radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's being." Jesus reveals the character and nature of God to us. If that is the case (and it is), then what do passages like this show us?

This poem shows us that to express anger at God is not blasphemous or unfitting for prayer. In fact, it shows us that anger, in times of suffering, can be a sign of fidelity to God! In fact, to be angry with God and lament is to have faith that God is a God of justice and will act to make things right and bring redemption to the situation.

Let that sink in: To lament is to have faith that God will act to make things right.

The Bible is not a book that reflects perfect life and tidy doctrine. It is a book that reflects the grittiness of life.

Exceptionalism

The language in Lamentations 2 reveals a bit about how Jerusalem saw itself. Look at vss. 1 & 3:

"...thrown down from the heights of heaven" (vs. 1)

"All the strength of Israel vanishes..." (vs. 3)

Jerusalem saw itself as exceptional. Who could blame them? They were the nation chosen by God to carry the message of hope and salvation to the world. And yet, they found themselves experiencing unimaginable loss.

The American Evangelical Church has been caught in a narrative of exceptionalism. We have come to believe that we are the standard-bearers for what it means to be Christian.

Idolizing narratives of success from our "brand" of Christianity runs the risk of considering evangelicalism over and above all other forms of Christianity.

"Non-Western expressions of Christianity can be portrayed as inferior to the successful formula for ministry put forth by many white evangelicals in mainstream Christian culture."

-Soong-Chan Rah, Prophetic Lament, pg. 96

Lament helps keep us from these attitudes of exceptionalism because it requires humility. Lament calls us into a proper view of ourselves. May we, who might think ourselves exceptional by any standard, see ourselves simply as recipients of God's grace.

May we not lose sight that the God we serve and the Christianity we practice is part of a great tradition that we have received. It has a multitude of expressions all around the world and across time. There is nothing wrong with knowing - and celebrating the particularities of your tribe, but may we be protected from exceptionalism through regular practice of lament.