

Guilt and Rage

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
Lamentations 1:1-6, Psalm 137, 2 Timothy 1:1-14, Luke 17:5-10
St. David's Episcopal Church, Bean Blossom, Indiana
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Timothy R. Fleck

Lamentations 1:1-6

How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the provinces
has become a vassal.
She weeps bitterly in the night,
with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers
she has no one to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her,
they have become her enemies.
Judah has gone into exile with suffering
and hard servitude;
she lives now among the nations,
and finds no resting place;
her pursuers have all overtaken her
in the midst of her distress.
The roads to Zion mourn,
for no one comes to the festivals;
all her gates are desolate,
her priests groan;
her young girls grieve,
and her lot is bitter.
Her foes have become the masters,
her enemies prosper,
because the LORD has made her suffer
for the multitude of her transgressions;
her children have gone away,
captives before the foe.

From daughter Zion has departed
all her majesty.
Her princes have become like stags
that find no pasture;
they fled without strength
before the pursuer.

Psalm 137: Page 792, BCP

By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, *
when we remembered you, O Zion.
As for our harps, we hung them up *
on the trees in the midst of that land.
For those who led us away captive asked us for a song,
and our oppressors called for mirth: *
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion."
How shall we sing the LORD'S song *
upon an alien soil.
If I forget you, O Jerusalem, *
let my right hand forget its skill.
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you, *
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.
Remember the day of Jerusalem, O LORD,
against the people of Edom, *
who said, "Down with it! down with it!
even to the ground!"
O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, *
happy the one who pays you back
for what you have done to us!
Happy shall he be who takes your little ones, *
and dashes them against the rock!

This week's readings from the Hebrew Bible are sort of a sequel to last week's. Last week we heard Jonathan preach from the prophetic words of Amos, crying out against the folly of those who were "at ease in Zion," those who slept on beds of ivory and dined daily on sumptuous feasts and fine wines. Amos told us that these folks who used their wealth selfishly would be among the first to go into exile when Judah fell.

Well, this week, the shoe has dropped, and what Amos prophesied is exactly what has happened. The writer of the first chapter of Lamentations grieves over a lonely city of Jerusalem that has been destroyed – A city from which the wealthy and powerful lords and ladies have been exiled: exactly those folks who had been sleeping on ivory and dining on lamb. The Temple has been razed to the ground, and the royal family and members of the ruling and commercial classes have been shipped off to Babylon. The poet sings a litany of all that Judah has lost: her power, her friends, her home in Jerusalem, her religious festivals, her princes and princesses.

But in the midst of the expression of Jerusalem's grief, there is a line that may have slipped past us. It's in the middle of verse 5, and if we are too caught up in the Bible language it may not have registered: Jerusalem is suffering and grieving "because Yahweh has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions." Even though it's the Babylonians who have sacked Jerusalem, it seems that the poet sees the cause of Judah's suffering in their relationship with their God.

Do we really believe that God would cause or allow a city to be destroyed because of the sins of its people? Or is that just Old Covenant stuff that doesn't really apply any more? A few years ago some evangelical preachers suggested that God was sending hurricanes to destroy New Orleans because of the excesses of Bourbon Street, or that the attacks of 9-11 were somehow caused by America's tolerance of abortion and homosexuality. They were criticized for being superstitious and bigoted, but the Bible seems to be full of examples of God doing just that. Is that really the way God works?

In the Psalm that follows, the Psalmist writes of the grief and sense of dislocation of the exiles in Babylon – separated not only from their homes, but from the physical center of their faith. They have lost the Temple where Yahweh was believed to dwell, and where the people could get in touch with Yahweh in a very special way. How could they maintain their relationship with Yahweh without the regular worship in the Temple? How could they sing and pray to Yahweh from a land of other gods?

The tone is mournful and nostalgic, but then in the last couple verses of the Psalm we suddenly hear something that, at least for me, makes the blood run cold: "O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy the one who pays you back for what you have done to us! Happy shall he be who takes your little ones, and dashes them against the rock!"

The Psalms have a lot of vivid imagery, but even by that standard this is pretty strong stuff. How many of us were caught aback when we heard ourselves reading these lines aloud this morning?

So what are we to make of this? Aren't we supposed to love our enemies and pray for them? How can we love our enemies and pray for the murder of their children? Is this really the way God works?

We're not comfortable with strong negative emotions – with grief and hopelessness and guilt and rage and vengeance. We fear them and we fear their power over us. We may acknowledge them, but only in the context of trying to get past them, to neutralize them. If we express guilt or rage, we may even feel compelled to apologize for them, as something not appropriate in public – something impolite. We certainly don't feel comfortable expressing our anger and frustration in church! We're Episcopalians, after all!

If we're honest, we're probably not real comfortable with the idea of a God who punishes, either. Yes, of course we know we are sinners, and we confess

our sins every week, but it seems as though we've all seen too many examples of the innocent suffering and the wicked prospering. It all makes it a little hard to believe that there is any sort of system of rewards and punishments in this world that has anything to do with our own actions.

It's probably significant that this may be the first time many of us have heard either of these difficult scriptures used in Sunday worship: Neither of these scriptures is included in the Episcopal Sunday lectionary that is part of the 1979 Prayer Book. Psalm 137 is included in the Daily Office lectionary only with the last two vengeance verses marked as "optional." It's not hard to imagine that someone considered these readings too uncomfortable, too disconcerting for use in regular worship. We are only hearing them now as we transition to the use of the Revised Common Lectionary used by most other Protestant churches.

But the worshippers who wrote and sang the Psalms and the poetry of the book of Lamentations don't seem to have these hang-ups. They bring their lives before their god Yahweh in all their pain and fear and anger and loss. The God who has chosen to be in covenant with them has promised to be their god no matter what – never failing, never flinching, always forgiving. The relationship they have with their god is so intimate that they cannot imagine trying to hide anything from Yahweh; what would be the point? Perhaps most amazing of all, they continue to pray even when they feel estranged from Yahweh, or believe that Yahweh is punishing them. They continue to stay in conversation and relationship with their faithful god, even when the conversation gets heated.

They come to God with their grief and anger and rage. They acknowledge that their suffering may have its roots in their own transgressions, but they still feel justified in complaining to God about that suffering and asking God to share it. They may explain their defeat by the Babylonians in terms of God's action in history, but they still feel free to express their rage against the same Babylonians and pray that God punish them as well.

The writers of the Psalms and Lamentations may live with a different understanding of how the world works than we do, but that doesn't mean that their honest expressions of frustration, guilt, and anger cannot have a place in our worship or our theology.

For example, I find it difficult to believe in a one-to-one correspondence between one's suffering and one's own sins – there is just too much irrational pain, and it is too cruel to believe that a starving child is responsible for her own suffering while the wealthy and powerful are somehow more deserving of God's favor. On the other hand, it is not difficult to see how the structures of society can be twisted by sin, how a culture's idolatry of consumption and greed can produce suffering among those without access to money and power, and how this avarice can sicken an entire civilization. Sin causes suffering, even if it is not always the sinner who suffers. We may choose to understand last week's parable of Lazarus in heaven and the rich man in hell as allegory, but we still

need to heed Amos' warning that a civilization that is focused on luxury for the few at the expense of the many cannot long survive.

I also struggle with the language of violence and curse in the Bible, especially in the Psalms, where we are compelled to speak them as our own prayer week after week. I know that God cannot be shocked by anything that is in our hearts, but I still sort of feel that it would be more comfortable if we could just pray for nice things like peace and reconciliation and sunshine. But rage is human, and furthermore, rage is an appropriate response to the injustices of a broken, sinful world. How better to express our anger than to share it with God? And I have to believe that in such situations, God feels something like rage, too.

As much as rage can be destructive, suppressing rage may well be a luxury that can only be afforded by those who are not themselves suffering from injustice. Who are we, at ease in Zion, to squelch the anger of a refugee who has lost her home and everything she holds dear? Who are we to tell the oppressed that rage is impolite? For one who has lost everything, raging at the loss may be all she has left.

Just maybe, if it focuses our attention and the attention of our culture on the relationship between our own avarice and the oppression of others, a righteous rage can move us toward something closer to the community of blessing that the Hebrew Bible calls Torah and the Gospels call the Kingdom of God. Just maybe, if we express to God our frustration and guilt about how badly we have broken the world that God created, we will be moved to do something to repair some of the damage, or at least to stop making it worse.

By itself, rage can be frightening and destructive. By itself, guilt can be depressing and debilitating. To surrender to these violent emotions can be dangerous; to suppress them is dishonest and ultimately dangerous as well. But when we share these dark passions honestly in prayer, God can turn them toward God's own purposes. The most important thing is to remain in open conversation with the One who has called us to be God's people, and who promises always to be our God: Never failing, never flinching, always ready to forgive, no matter what. With God as our confidante and confessor, there is nothing human we cannot share; nothing in our hearts we need to hide.