

“Lament and Good News”
September 27, 2020

Lamentations 1:1a, 3:31-40
Mark 2:1-12

As a congregation we are responding to the pandemic and the many crises of these days in many different ways.

We are giving extra financial support to local efforts to feed people and we are providing financial relief to refugees and immigrants who are not eligible for government assistance.

We continue our hands-on involvement with the Free Lunch Program and Table to Table.

We are a major part of the local effort to encourage all people to be counted in the census and to get as many eligible people as possible to register and vote.

We keep in contact with each other.

We worship together in this way even while we are apart.

And we turn to scripture.

In August and September we opened the daunting book of Lamentations and together looked for hope while surrounded by destruction and despair.

Starting this coming Wednesday we will take eight weeks to look at the Gospel according to Mark, joining together to seek what a “gospel” promises to be: “good news.”

In ways that I did not imagine, these two books fit together.

In reading them we discover loneliness and community, lament and good news.

Sometime during our second session on Lamentations, the conversation turned to isolation: the ways in which we have experienced the loneliness of the months since March and the ways in which the book of Lamentations gives voice to a people cut off and separated from one another.

Suddenly it occurred to me—it came as revelation, an *epiphany*—that Lamentations begins with loneliness.

“How lonely!” the author cries out. “How lonely sits the city that once was full of people.” The city—once a center of commerce and conversation, once a place of craft and creativity, once the locus of community and concern—is desolate, empty.

Among many other things, this is a book about the crushing sense of loneliness and isolation. As such it speaks to us as the pandemic continues.

For six months now we have known isolation and the monotonous sameness that it brings with it. Yes, some have been more cut off than others, and at times the loneliness has lifted. Some have traveled. Some have ventured to restaurants. But there is a wariness and a weariness that always follows us. We return to our houses, our apartments, and our dorm rooms, where we are left with ourselves alone or with roommates or our families, for better or worse.

In cities in general—and in Iowa City in particular—we sense the loneliness that has come over us. Yes, with students now back there are more people downtown than in the spring or summer. But still we see the distance between people as masked figures keep their distance on the sidewalks. In recent weeks when I go to the grocery store, I find a new quietness, a new avoidance among the shoppers. And, yes, there are still a lot of empty parking spaces—unknown in a “normal” September.

How lonely sits the city!” One Old Testament scholar calls these opening words “an exclamation of surprise and perhaps pity.”

In our loneliness we are confronted by all that is out of order in our city, in our nation, and in our world:

Our health and well-being continue to be at risk: Covid-19 cases in Iowa continue to rise as the pandemic has taken over 200,000 lives in our nation—a death toll that has been ignored by our president and his administration as they seek to eliminate the Affordable Care Act.

Our very democracy is at risk: The president last week declined to commit to a peaceful transition of power should he lose the election in November. This was met with little resistance from members of his own party.

The poor and the hungry and the homeless are at risk: The social safety net is not holding. In our own community, Shelter House and the CommUnity Crisis Center are pushed to their limits as pandemic related unemployment continues.

Racial justice is still absent as demonstrated by the case of Breonna Taylor. The lonely city finds the streets crowded and erupting in violence again.

We lament. Following the example of the author of Lamentations, we raise a cry of anguish to God, even if we are not sure that God is listening. We do so, not in order to correct the situation, but to give a voice to our broken lives and our broken world. In this way we prepare for the healing that might yet come into our world.

To be alive is to face times of lamentation. You have known times of lament before: Times when you prayed and found no answer. Times when you were numbed by tragedies great and small. Such times do not have a set limit at which they are simply over and done. Lament, especially lonely lament, can endure.

The disturbing book of Lamentations seeks hope in the midst of despair. It looks for a reason to trust the future when the past and the present are so filled with devastation. When some glimmer of hope *is* found, however, it does not remain long.

But I noticed something as we read through this book together, however. Standing alone in the lonely city, suddenly “I” becomes “We.” Individual lament is answered, not by God, but by others, by a united voice that urges: “Let *us* test and examine our ways and return to the Lord. Let *us* lift up our hearts as well as our hands to God in heaven.”

When we lament, we find good news in the presence of each other.

I invite you, then, to look once more at what happens when Jesus returns to Capernaum.

So many men and women show up that they pour out of house, blocking the doorway.

In their excitement, they don’t even notice four people coming up to the house carrying a paralyzed man.

In spite of his limitations, this man has something that we all need. He has friends. And his friends do what friends do—they find a way.

With the door blocked, these friends go up the stairs and start digging through the hardened mud of the roof.

Bits of the ceiling start to drop around Jesus and the people crowded into the room. Then suddenly daylight comes streaming inside. And finally, a paralyzed man is lowered down in front of Jesus through this makeshift skylight.

I’ve heard people say that when God closes one door, God opens another.

Maybe.

But when that is not the case, some of us will just dig a hole in the roof. How good it is to have friends like that!

There is a word for the boldness and determination that these friends show. Jesus calls it “faith.” Faith is a way of living that sees beyond what is readily apparent and moves toward what might be. Faith strips away impediments; it digs deep.

We need one another.

Because of these friends and their faith, the new community and new possibility that is forgiveness comes into being. With friends, the hope of Lamentations, “God will have compassion according to the abundance of God’s steadfast love,” starts to become a reality.

We are led from lament to good news when, out of our loneliness, we find one another.

Let me say this again because it is vitally important in these days: We are led from lament to good news when, out of our loneliness, we find one another.

We are coming to the realization that, six months into this pandemic, it will be several more months before we are in any major way gathering together in person. Worship is online. Coffee hours are virtual. Christian education and Bible studies are on Zoom. Meetings are on Zoom as well.

As we move into the fall, usually a time of more people and more activity after the summer months, each one of you is needed. You are needed by other members here. You are needed by the larger community as well.

It is time for us to get up and be here for one another again—in whatever way possible—so that together we might face the challenges and opportunities that confront us now.

In the coming months, let us seek and find new ways to be in contact with one another so that we may encourage each other, support each other, bear one another's burdens, that in doing so we might together find hope and live in the faith that creates new possibilities.

It might be in simple ways—through phone calls or emails or letters to people you are missing. Be in touch.

It might be in creative ways—finding opportunities to meet outdoors with another person or in a small group.

It might be in service to others—helping with the Free Lunch Program or Table to Table or the Food Pantry, discovering ways to safely volunteer to meet the needs of others.

In each other, good news meets lamentation and we discover hope once more. We call this the hope of the resurrection—the new life that faith makes possible by the grace of God working in us and through us and among us. In that grace we recognize that even when we are alone, we are loved and valued by God; that when we are together—in whatever ways that might be—we are among others who still bear the image of God.