

17th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 10.5.25

Lamentations 1:1-6, 3:19-26

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....

The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.' The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. (287)

Last Sunday afternoon, I attended the WIT Literary Festival finale. WIT is an acronym for "Words, Ideas, Thinkers," naming the literary festival that's in its 4th year in the Berkshires and sponsored by the Authors Guild in New York. It always features people who indeed think deeply, take ideas seriously, and use words with power and care. Every conversation for each of the three-day festivals has struck me as one worth listening in on, though I haven't ever attended. That said, the big names seem to be held for the Sunday finale, the ones whose names you'd recognize, the ones that can draw a crowd.

This year, the finale featured three thinkers of a religious bent, even Christian bent. Marilynne Robinson headlined. A writer of novels and essays, she's deeply informed by her Protestant faith and her reading of the very unfashionable John Calvin, if she herself isn't strictly speaking a Calvinist. (She is, however, a member of her local congregation of the United Church of Christ.) Bishop Marian Budde of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington sat beside. She made a name for herself in leading worship at the National Cathedral on the day after the inauguration. There, she spoke directly to (newly and again) President Trump, spoke to him from the pulpit while he sat glowering in the front pew. Paul Elie would lead them in conversation, himself a communicant of the Catholic Church and writer of essays and biographies inflected with religious conviction.

It was a quiet, calm, respectful, even reverential conversation—and though it went long (which isn't to say too long) it didn't go that deep. These three weren't familiar with one another, to say nothing of being friends so as to have an easy exchange of ideas filtered through personality and interpersonal fondness.

It felt like they were all three sitting on their hands.

Doubtless, they're all deep thinkers. They were all, clearly, thinking there on stage. And there was a sort of desperation among the audience. I think that was the case: desperation that these three thinkers have something to say, something of significance to say, something to tell us that would help us get through all this. All this terrible undoing. All this cruel violence and humiliation running amuck in the world these days. All this mean-spirited argument and aggressive posturing in the wider world. How do we face all this? What are we to do? Tell us!

I don't know if these WIT conversations tend to call forth such forward-leaning audiences, such a sense of expectation if not downright need. Or if it's simply the moment we're now in. Or (and it's *this*, I suspect) if it's the fact that these are all religiously serious people, which provoked in the audience a religious yearning that usually doesn't make it through the ticketed entrance at such things.

I also don't know if the audience was made up of mostly irreligious people, but my guess is that it was. Of course, I saw several colleagues there. If anything was going to get a priest or preacher out on a Sunday afternoon, it's this slate of people—Marilynn, Mariann, Paul. On the whole, though, this crowd, I assumed, was less religious, was more our so-called cultured despisers. We were in a theater, after all, when perhaps what we needed was a church. A sanctuary.

And so: the cautious feel of the conversation on stage. We are amidst troubles on an historic scale. We're entangled in a politics that doesn't answer to reason. We're fellow countrymen and women with people who are operating under a decade-long deception, decade-long delusion. And people want to know what to call it, what to do about, how to understand it, and how to come back from it.

And the words by which these religious thinkers might articulate their understanding and their hope were practically forbidden. The touchstone stories with which these people, of practiced faith, are so familiar with, indeed with which they live with on a weekly basis and therefore by which they live: these stories: they make it clear (troublingly clear) that such phenomena of social destruction, political destruction, the sacking of cities and abandoning of people, terrible as it all

is, isn't news, isn't unheard of. We have been here before—this and far worse. We have done this before—this and far worse. We have *suffered* this before.

But this audience, for all its high literacy, wasn't (I assumed) *biblically* literate, which is a different thing, which the thinkers on stage seem to have assumed as well—that, not only were the few hundred gathered people probably not biblically literate, they weren't (most likely) even biblically curious, would indeed find such things alienating. I once got asked to lead the devotions at the beginning of a board meeting at an organization that had faintly Christian roots. Having done so, after the meeting, I faced a woman irritated with me that the poem I read mentioned Christ.

Religious words, talk of sin and salvation, talk of evil and redemption as comes of the Holy Spirit: these are not words many people want to hear. What's more, they're not words many *can* hear with any understanding. People think they know what this religious terminology means. People think they know our stories and what they mean. But, here's the thing: these stores don't *mean* or have meaning, as much as they *do*. These stories, which have so steadfastly stood the test of time, don't have a settled meaning. Rather they communicate an activating spirit, a spirit of dynamic truth.

This, while for those outside these practices, for those only familiar with the most aggressively heretical engagement with the language and stories of our faith, that of talk radio and Focus on the Family and Turning Point USA: what they know is largely wrong. We're shockingly uncritical in our engagement of all things "religious." Or, if among now those who don't practice a faith, there's a past of having done so, it left them with simplistic, pidgin versions of these things, a confirmation class level of it, religious education being something, if you do it at all, you're thought to have reached its peak at the age of thirteen, when you confirm your faith to the church and then you leave and never come back. You've graduated, after all. What more is there to do? What more is there to know?

So, there we were sitting in the Mahaiwe Theater on September 28th of the Year of Our Lord 2025. And the house is on fire. And we've got three powerful fire fighters here at the ready. And we really, really want them to put out the fire—but there's this insistence, if tacit, that they not use water.

There are some things in life that need strong medicine, as unfashionable and alienating as such medicine might be.

Funny thing: all the stories of our faith come to us from an historical moment of devastating crisis. Most of the Old Testament comes to us from the time, in the middle of the millennium, the 6th century, the 5th century, of Babylonian conquest and its ruining the city, ruining the Temple, taking prisoners into exile (the worthy ones, the young or beautiful or strong or skilled ones) while leaving many behind (the old and the very young, the sick and the weak and the ugly) to die amidst the rubble of the city that have been so long in its building up and so humiliatingly quick in its burning down. All of the New Testament comes to us from the sequel of this long ago event, this time Rome ruining the city, ruining the Temple, decimating the Jewish (and Jewish-Christian) population, scattering those to survive into the hills.

We spend a lot of time in this neighborhood, we do. We who practice our faith spend a lot of time at the crossroads of terror and destruction, if chiefly in our religious imaginations. This isn't news to us; this whole terrible turn, the fact that societies can indeed collapse, that politics can indeed fail: these things aren't news to us. That any nation or people who have enjoyed great power and privilege could be reduced, humiliated: we know. Why, we even have a whole book entitled Lamentations, a public performance of this thing that most people, at least in recent time, would refuse to allow in as a part of life: lament!

Lamentations: not exactly a beach-read, unless you mean the beaches of Normandy.

Which might be why we only hear from it once every three years. (That, plus it's short.) But in my preaching life that has meant hearing it the October after the attacks of 9/11, and later the October when Covid still had our public spaces emptied out, and now this October when Congress has gone home, the government is shut down, the President has twice recently taken the stage to show the whole world that America is losing its mind while his trollish administration remains busy online for the lols. "How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!"

This book, unsurprisingly, comes to us from the time of Babylonian threat and follow through. Joining with the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, Amos and Habakkuk, Lamentations hails from mid-6th century before Christ. Tradition has had it that Jeremiah composed the book, the prophet known as the weeping prophet. This, for his book of prophecy being full of his cries, full of lament.

We heard from it last week, when the prophet took a break from his own furious wailing to buy a war-torn vineyard from his cousin, for the right of redemption was his, though he was in prison and the land was falling to ruin, was worse than worthless. This absurd act—redeeming

something worthless—was dropped into a book otherwise overwhelming in lament. For this, Jeremiah is thought to have composed the Book of Lamentations as well. It just seems so like him.

More recent scholarly opinion, though, has it that this book comes to us from someone other than the prophet—or, more accurately, someones other. This is a book of five chapters, probably then five poems by five different poets, all affected by Jerusalem's terrible downfall. But if different poets, yet composing in a similar register.

And, as it happens, a familiar register. Lament over a ruined city was an established form, a long-established form. Sumerian literature from a thousand years earlier had laments over the fall of Ur, laments over the fall of Sumer. It's as if there was even a faint insistence that cities fall, even great cities fall. Because if their fall produces a whole genre of literature, then the destruction of societies can never have been far from consciousness. These things happen.

There is a difference here, for what it's worth. Where this Judean lament departs from the form is that the older examples speak from a time of restoration, when the cities had begun to be restored and the people had found their footing once again, had struck upon new purpose or renewed purpose. This lament, though, over Jerusalem, comes from prior to when the city had begun to be restored, when there was only yet exile or ruin, when there wasn't hope except for the hope of hope.

There's been a strange quality in a lot of social imaging lately, over I'd say the course of my lifetime. There's been an assumption, it seems to me, that the stability and prosperity we so enjoy as a society have been forgotten as things that could go away. There's been this attitude that we could kick our society, infuse it with dark cynicism, inject it with hostile policy-making, make it an expression of our own resentments, and have it yet stand if at least to our benefit.

I don't know if it was the introduction of the notion of the end of history that has us thinking so carelessly about this painstakingly crafted so-called American Experiment. The end of history: Francis Fukuyama's late 20th century hypothesis that democracies such as ours is where all history is headed and will find its end. This, of course, is more referred to than read (like now, as I'm doing, referring to it though not having read it) and therefore is likely simplified, if not downright misunderstood. But the inevitability of what we have as a constitutional democratic republic possibly has made us more resent it than appreciate it. If it's always gonna be here, if it's the best history has to offer, then what vigilance and serious-mindedness we once thought it required is apparently not needed at all. The hegemon is here.

And we hate it.

We hate for its inevitability and unresponsiveness. We hate for its making us suspect we are, in fact, not free. We hate it for its machine-like grinding on whether we like it or not. We hate it because its benefits come not just to ourselves but also to people we hate. So, screw it. Let's burn it down. Let's burn the whole thing down—but not before we defecate on its desk.

But, see, this whole thing can in fact go away. Not inevitable at all, this whole thing could actually come heavily down. We actually could destroy it, which is though a terrible expression of our freedom, and which turns out is a lot easier to do than creating whatever comes next, or even recreating that which we decided collectively to give up on.

How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!

This has happened before. We know this. This painful fact is indeed something of our homeland, we as people of faith.

And it's no wonder our neighbors who know so very little of this don't want to know, don't want to visit this terrible place where everything's come to ruin. It's no wonder we have to code-switch when we're out there in the world, tucking our wisdom away, translating our powerful language to weaker versions of itself while sitting on our hands that would better be put to the purpose of breaking the bread and pouring the cup. For this is the strong medicine we need right now. Resurrection hope. Life in defiance of death. Love resistant to resentment. Faithful calm in face of cruel accusation.

It's been said that nation-states today, the heavy-hitters on the world stage, are as machines made to turn grief into power, and with resentment as their fuel. This is a heresy at work in much of the American church as well, where if there's to be lamentation at all it's only to gin up the energy to get to back out there to get even.

But the humble gifts offered at this meager table won't make us battle-ready. It will merely put us in a spirit to share of them. So come and eat. You look hungry.

Thanks be to God.