

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Sermon 10.2.22

**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. 2 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. 3 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. 4 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. 5 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. 6 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)

There's an internet trend I'm recently aware of, images of liminal spaces. My kids brought it to my attention: liminal spaces. People who are "very online" know this term in reference to this aesthetic—though I'm not confident this is the right use of the term.

I learned the term liminal space in divinity school. It referenced any such place as was a threshold or a space in between. *Limen* being Latin for threshold, sanctuaries were an example of liminal spaces, built environments to place a person at a threshold between the ordinary world and a more transcendent plane. There were natural liminal spaces, too. Mountaintops, the geological monuments of the American West, any place where the ocean meets land—the Bay of Fundi, the Cape of Good Hope, the white cliffs of Dover: these tended to lift the human spirit, to move a person to awe.

Awe: for what it's worth, a person becomes vulnerable in such a state. The sublime, the sub-liminal: a person can become unstable amidst such an encounter with the sublime, when occupying, or falling under, a liminal space. Yes, you could be moved to worship all that is good in the world when in this state. But you could also hand yourself over to that which is but powerful—not good, but powerful, these two things that we have such difficulty telling apart.

Charismatic leaders know this. Lead people right out to the edge of the familiar, the very outer edge of the known and reliable, give them a little push, and then a rescuing hand—do this, and they're yours.

Charismatic leaders know this.

Turns out, out there's a fine line between awe and fear, awe and dread.

The liminal spaces of the internet trend crater more into fear and dread, not to mention the utterly mundane. Images of abandoned shopping malls crowd these lists, as do images of abandoned hospitals, schools and playgrounds at night, long-empty churches where nature has begun to fill what pews might be left, or office buildings whose industrial purpose are unclear. They're just hallways and doorways, without any clear point of entry or exit, and no pleasure in being here. It is the aesthetic of absurd drudgery, busy boredom. These don't lift the spirit but enervate.

These listicles, which my kids have shown me, gave the term its current meaning in the 2010s, a weird secularization of what used to suggest at least the possibility of transcendence. Now it's more about a place whose purpose has fallen away, a prepared place whose purpose has departed like a spirit, leaving just this lifeless remain. It continues to exist in the moment but has no purpose to propel it into the future.

Place without purpose: this is liminal...?

Turns out, this is an old genre, an old point of curiosity. The Book of Lamentations is old, probably hailing from mid-6<sup>th</sup> century before Christ, around the time of the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem or after the fact, voices from amidst the remain.

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 he bought 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. These were probably people left behind amidst the remain, amidst the smoldering Temple and the salted land.

If so, they were composing in 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.

But, 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, had found their footing, had struck upon new purpose or renewed purpose. This lament, though, over Jerusalem comes prior to when the city had begun to be restored. The people were still exiles in Babylon, while this once gleaming city was still but rubble.

In other words, unlike in the earlier Sumerian laments, in which there was some actual cause for hope, here, in the biblical book of Lamentations, there is only the hope of hope. Ruin had come. God's favor had failed to show up, had failed to triumph on behalf of the people. The people had apparently failed, God had departed, and their fate was in the hands of their enemies.

Unless.

Unless, God who was good in the past might be good again in the future...?

All they could do was hope in this distant hope.

I sometimes wonder if the fascination with abandoned spaces is a leaning into the question of hope, a desire to see what's out there beyond what we've made.

What, if anything, will come after everything we've built and are busy maintaining comes apart or comes to a stop?

Because, turns out, all this busyness is exhausting, especially since so much of what keeps out society busy doesn't seem all that important, and in any event isn't all that gratifying.

Turns out, too, we're kinda lonely.

Here's a poem I found appealing to me during our first COVID winter. A cyclist has come to an empty church, Philip Larkin's poem from 1954, "Church Going."

Once I am sure there's nothing going on  
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.  
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,  
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut  
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff  
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;  
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,

Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off  
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,

Move forward, run my hand around the font.  
From where I stand, the roof looks almost new-  
Cleaned or restored? Someone would know: I don't.  
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few  
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce  
"Here endeth" much more loudly than I'd meant.  
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door  
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,  
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,  
And always end much at a loss like this,  
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,  
When churches fall completely out of use  
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep  
A few cathedrals chronically on show,  
Their parchment, plate, and pyx in locked cases,  
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.  
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come  
To make their children touch a particular stone;  
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some  
Advised night see walking a dead one?  
Power of some sort or other will go on  
In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;  
But superstition, like belief, must die,  
And what remains when disbelief has gone?  
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

A shape less recognizable each week,  
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who  
Will be the last, the very last, to seek  
This place for what it was; one of the crew  
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?  
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,  
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff  
Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?  
Or will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt  
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground  
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt  
So long and equably what since is found  
Only in separation - marriage, and birth,  
And death, and thoughts of these - for whom was built  
This special shell? For, though I've no idea  
What this accoutered frowsty barn is worth,  
It pleases me to stand in silence here;  
A serious house on serious earth it is,  
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,  
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.  
And that much never can be obsolete,  
Since someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
And gravitating with it to this ground,  
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
If only that so many dead lie round.

See, the purpose of this churchly remain isn't so easily given up on.

I have heard from more than a few people these days that it sort of feels like things are falling apart. I've heard that as speaking to all manner of things, from the finest points of personal

effort and futility and failure, to the broadest points of international and ecological unraveling or washing away. And it's always hard to tease apart whether a certain mood is determining how facts come to seem like trends or whether trends are causing that certain melancholic mood.

Of course, there are irrefutable facts. Summer is over. The equinox behind us, there will be more hours of darkness each day than light—which always coincides with some of the most depressing passages from scripture laid out for us to hear. Autumn of Year C is always quite a downer. For what it's worth, it was Year C when the tower fell in New York. It was Year C when Lower Manhattan was literally so much rubble and the imaginings of all Americans were right where the Book of Lamentations would have us.

As for now, there's too much water in Florida and not enough in the Colorado River. There's way too much water in Pakistan, where not enough water was a more familiar struggle, and therefore I imagine a more welcome struggle. COVID is still making its rounds, and our social recovery from it has been marked by acrimony—and it's only hastened the once established habit of church going to trend toward churches going, going away.

Larkin's mid-century poem reveals him as a prophet. The liminal space of that empty church in "Church Going" presages the liminal spaces that haunt the internet these days, and the imaginings of people like my kids, fascinated by ruins made of people simply giving up on them as places with purpose. At least ancient Jerusalem was worthy of attack. That's at least something.

But I haven't given up, and I see that neither have you. I mean, you're here. We're here—bearing witness, *bearing* witness, because it's heavy sometimes, right?

But let me be clear, I'm not here performing the liturgy because I'm afraid of what will be revealed if instead I give up. I'm not here in order to avoid what might be revealed if I give up, if *we* give up, if we surrender. No, because this is what will be revealed: God. Truly, 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 God's faithfulness.

Beyond everything, the final step past this threshold, the first step into the absolute, there is this, not nothing but everything, utter being that is the Lord and self-giving love that is his son and the Holy Spirit of dynamic life that is his church, whether gathering in frowsty barns like this one or, really, anywhere there is a heart for love and a pouring forth of grace.

This being, the absolute that catches us when everything falls away: *of* this utter and eternal being, what can I say but what I always say when I come to the end?

Thanks be to God.