



First United Church of Oak Park

From A to Z

Lamentations 1: Selected Verses

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The Book of Lamentations. Just the thing to follow a joyous baptism, hmm? Verse after verse of bitter lament, exactly what one would want to hear after the words of God's grace flow over the brow of a child of God. But we're in the season of Lent; we are preaching about the prophets. And, in Biblical tradition, the Book of Lamentations is written by the prophet Jeremiah, it is the emotional pathos of the book of Jeremiah.

It's not easy to listen to, the Book of Lamentations. It's not easy to read. When I read these kinds of passages, that talk about God abandoning the people, bringing judgment, the people suffering loss after loss, what I want to do is skip ahead. I want to jump straight to grace, straight to good news, straight past the cross, straight out of the empty tomb into the dawn of hope. But that is just not what the Book of Lamentations is like. Lamentations is about grief. It goes on and on, verse after verse, chapter after chapter, unrelenting. And in a way, that's comforting, because that is what grief is like. In grief, loss is the first thought in the morning and the last thought at night, a constant companion through the day. The Book of Lamentations is true, meaning it is honest, it is real, it speaks without shielding the reader from the depths of grief. It's not easy to read, but it is true.

Lamentations isn't easy to translate, either. Sure, the words can be moved from Hebrew into English, but the poetry, not so much. The subtle poetic devices, not easily captured in translation. The first verse begins with the first letter of the alphabet, aleph. The second begins with the second letter of the alphabet, beit, the third with the third letter, the fourth with the fourth. If you forgive this deeply terrible poem of my own composition, it's like A is for apple that hangs on the tree, B is for blossom that grows sight unseen. It's called an acrostic, this poetic device. It marches on and on like this, through the alphabet, from A to Z. Or rather, from alef to tav, the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, from beginning to end. The very first word mirrors this structure, it's the word eikah. Just three letters. Aleph, kaf, tav. The word begins with aleph—the first letter, it ends with tav, the final letter of the alphabet, and kaf, the middle letter, is the 11th letter of the alphabet. The very middle of the 22-letter Hebrew alphabet. The first word of Lamentations is eikah, beginning, middle, end. Aleph kaf tav. From first to last. Just like the poem marches through the alphabet, so does the first word eikah march through the alphabet. It means alas.

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captured in translation. The overall effect is that of an inexorable march forward—A to B, to C to D, and it cannot stop until the whole of the alphabet is exhausted. There is no shortcut, it has to be marched through. And in a way that's comforting, because that is what grief is like. Grief cannot be jumped past, grief cannot be skipped over. If I try to push it down, it comes bursting out of my belly. If I try to run away from it, I find grief waiting for me when I have run myself to exhaustion. There is no shortcut through grief. But, just like the alphabet, it does have an ending. Grief must be given full expression, there are no shortcuts. Grief must be given full expression, but it does find full expression.

Lamentations isn't easy to read; it isn't easy to translate; it isn't easy to follow, either. It jumps all over the place—one vivid image suddenly shifts to a completely new location, a brand new perspective, a previously unspoken point of view. Here we are in the city of Jerusalem, next we are far from home in exile, then we are staring at the walls of the city, now we are up in heaven, then down in the pit. There is no linearity to the images. Lamentations' rigid alphabetic structure might go A, B, C, D, but the images are anything but. The images are a mess. The images are not A, B, C, D, the images are A, B, rainfall, wildfire, funeral, D, X, Y, A again. The images of Lamentations are a mess, and in a way that's comforting, because that is what grief is like. In grief, each moment is its own world, each day its own path. Grief swirls but not like a tornado, which is disciplined and terrible in its cycle; grief crashes like a boulder down a mountainside, where it will land, who knows. There is no logic or mathematics to grief. Grief is neither science nor art; it is a life like a box full to the brim suddenly crashing to the floor and scattered.

The Book of Lamentations is true, it is true, it is true, which is to say it is honest. It speaks truly of grief, which means it is not easy to listen to, not easy to read. When I read these kinds of passages, what I want to do is skip ahead. I want to jump straight to grace, straight to good news, straight past the cross, straight out of the empty tomb into the dawn of hope. But that is just not what the Book of Lamentations is like. That is not what grief is like.

This nation, it is in the midst of grief—and it's a mess. Grief over many things, spurred on by the COVID pandemic, but ultimately grief that the world has changed. What has come before is simply not the same. Will not ever be the same. That is what makes grief what it is. The certain bone-deep knowledge that that change, unwelcome though it is, is real. Grief, loss: this is the moment that our nation is in. This church is not exempt from that; we are not having some different experience than the rest of our nation. Things have changed. What came before will not be here again. And so there is grief. And we should take the lessons of Lamentations about grief. Grief stretches out and lasts as long as it lasts. Grief cannot be skipped over, but must be allowed full expression. Grief cannot be accounted for or fit into orderly rows; it will be a mess. It must be acknowledged and given a chance to have full expression.

Grief is necessary. A new thing, a new day, a new way of living, these things cannot come to be until what has passed away has been grieved and given full expression. Although it is not easy to read the Book of Lamentations, it is a gift to any who is grieving to read in there, the reality of what it means to grieve, to see that this human heart of ours, that though the world has changed in these thousands of years, the human heart is still yet the same.

So as we march through Lent, reflecting on the Prophets, seeking to know where this church is to go next, we must allow and give ourselves the room that we need to grieve. For grief, too, has been given to us by God, whose heart beats within us.

Amen.