

Problems, Pleas, and Promises
Sunday School Lesson
Lamentations 2:1-9, 18-22; Psalms 130:1-8

Oh, oh, oh . . .

How the Master has cut down Daughter Zion from the skies, dashed Israel's glorious city to earth, in his anger treated his favorite as throwaway junk.

The Master, without a second thought, took Israel in one gulp. Raging, he smashed Judah's defenses, ground her king and princes to a pulp.

His anger blazing, he knocked Israel flat, broke Israel's arm and turned his back just as the enemy approached, came on Jacob like a wildfire from every direction.

Like an enemy, he aimed his bow, bared his sword, and killed our young men, our pride and joy. His anger, like fire, burned down the homes in Zion.

The Master became the enemy. He had Israel for supper. He chewed up and spit out all the defenses. He left Daughter Judah moaning and groaning.

He plowed up his old trysting place, trashed his favorite rendezvous. God wiped out Zion's memories of feast days and Sabbaths, angrily sacked king and priest alike.

God abandoned his altar, walked away from his holy Temple and turned the fortifications over to the enemy. As they cheered in God's Temple, you'd have thought it was a feast day!

God drew up plans to tear down the walls of Daughter Zion. He assembled his crew, set to work and went at it. Total demolition! The stones wept!

Her city gates, iron bars and all, disappeared in the rubble: her kings and princes off to exile—no one left to instruct or lead; her prophets useless—they neither saw nor heard anything from God.

Give out heart-cries to the Master, dear repentant Zion. Let the tears roll like a river, day and night, and keep at it—no time-outs. Keep those tears flowing!

As each night watch begins, get up and cry out in prayer. Pour your heart out face-to-face with the Master. Lift high your hands. Beg for the lives of your children who are starving to death out on the streets.

"Look at us, God. Think it over. Have you ever treated anyone like this? Should women eat their own babies, the very children they raised? Should priests and prophets be murdered in the Master's own Sanctuary?"

"Boys and old men lie in the gutters of the streets, my young men and women killed in their prime. Angry, you killed them in cold blood, cut them down without mercy.

"You invited, like friends to a party, men to swoop down in attack so that on the big day of God's wrath no one would get away. The children I loved and reared—gone, gone, gone."

Lamentations 2:1-9, 18-22 *The Message* (interpreted by Eugene Peterson)

Purpose Statement: To explore how a prayer of lamentation may open a door for hope to enter.

Human losses are difficult to absorb. Wars, disease, weather extremes, famines have all shaped and reshaped our human history. On a more individual basis, we have watched people we love succumb to cancer, dementia, depression, and addiction and we wonder why God does not intervene. This lament is particular hard because those lamenting are blaming everything on God. That still happens. A beloved child dies and

we wonder why God took them when we were not ready to let them go. Your mother has a massive stroke and ends up living the rest of her days in a nursing home. Why? Has something ever happened to you where you blame God? If so, as you can see, you are not alone.

Theology of Providence

We as United Methodists believe in the sovereignty of God. Yes, God can do or not do whatever God desires but God has chosen to set aside God's sovereignty in order to give us agency or free will. We have choices. Israel had choices. Judah had choices. And sometimes we choose poorly and there are consequences to our bad choices. If God controlled every aspect of our lives, then we would merely be puppets acting out the divine will. What is the purpose of that? The prophets warned the people and warned the leaders and warned the kings. The time was coming when God would step back and allow God's own people to learn things the hard way. The author of Lamentations is telling us that God is doing this. No, it is the Assyrians and the Babylonians.

What Scripture does tell us is that God never abandons us. There is a larger plan of reconciliation and redemption but it is not yet time. It is good to lament. It is good to name your pain and name the consequences of that pain but the psalms never stop there. The psalms call for us to remember what God has done with the hope that God will act again in due time. This is the pattern you see in Scripture. God redeems God's people and things go well for a time. Then we get greedy and prideful – taking more than is necessary and taking credit for what God has done for us. This gets us in trouble that we cannot handle and we cry out to God for help. God answers but only in God's time. Then the whole cycle repeats itself again. Jesus changed the cycle for many of us but it still finds a way to repeat itself.

Lament Leads to Silence

It was my associate's turn to preach Sunday. On that Friday, we heard the news reports coming in – a gunman had entered Sandy Hook Elementary School and killed 26 people – twenty of them were six and seven-year-old children. The laments were loud and hard to hear and they could be heard around the world. The next morning, I called my associate to come to the office. A preacher will have very few Sundays in their ministry where people will come needing to hear a Word from the Lord. This was going to be one of them. That is hard for a twenty-year old to understand but he stood that Sunday morning and told the truth. He may have a fifty-year career but I doubt he will ever preach a better sermon. Tragedy to Lament to Silence to Truth to Hope. This is the pattern I have witnesses over and over in ministry.

Let us pray:

O Merciful God, we know you love us but there are times when our worlds are crushed and we feel abandoned. Thank you for giving us the space to cry out. Thank you for giving us the time needed before we are ready to face your truth. Lead us to hope by remembering you are with us always. Amen.