

*Grief and God's Hope*

This reflection comes from a week hearing the stories of people's pain. I was at a youth event for ages 14-18 and there was a surprising, courageous amount of sharing about life's daunting agony. I was inspired during this time and reflecting on Lamentations to think more about our faith and how we address suffering. No two experiences of pain are the same nor are they equal. The stories I share are inspired from both real as well as common experiences. What unifies the illustrations are their humanity and their reflections of resilient hope. There is a parallel to the book of lamentations and the selection for today.

The baby smiles as she scurries forward in her first steps. She moves with joy rapidly placing one foot in front of the other. The maiden voyage comes to a screeching halt as the toe catches and she flies face first into the carpet. Screaming comes with the failure and pain. Mom swoops in to offer comfort. Unable to take the pain away mom rocks the baby back and forth.

The worship service for teenagers was a genuine yearning. The opening words named the daily fear of bullying, and 40 hours a week trying to overcome constant degradation. Prayer time spoke of the confusion and terror of school shootings and the daily question, "Is my school next?" A bewilderment compounded with the inability of adult leaders to change or to even attempt a new approach. The next adolescent voice cried about the struggles of mental health and the feelings of the body and mind turning against the soul. The anguish to find a home in one's own skin. A choked up throat bemoaned a follow up to speak of suicide. I thought of the 17-year-old who tore my school's heart out when she made a deadly pact with her boyfriend. I wondered, "Do I have the courage of a teenager? God, I pray I would."

The silence of the room is only occasionally broken with the unleashed whimper and snuffle. The center piece is a bed with a body of lost love. A life fully lived has completed its run, and even though it was a long, good life it still feels too soon. A wrinkled hand squeezes tight never wanting to let go. A greying head stands nearby feeling like the baby they always had been to the one who now rests in Divine peace. Nothing makes it easy. The most one can think to do is pray and be with others. They feel more than ever how her love defined, empowered, and united them.

The book of lamentations is our ancestors telling us we are not alone. Its profoundness lies in its ancient compassion of telling us it's okay. It's okay to be human, it's okay to question, it's okay to grieve, to be angry, to demand answers, to proclaim it's not fair, to cry out to God in the deafening silence. Lamentations tells us if we love God we will name our need for the Divine especially when it seems God is absent.

God's absence is essential to this work. God never speaks. The Lord of Hosts, the Creator of the Universe, the Liberator of Israel, and the Spirit of the Covenant is called upon repeatedly. Never once is there an answer. The voices are our mothers, fathers, our parents in faith poetically declaring the unspeakable agony of human suffering.

The book was written in the epicenter of loss. Israel had lost everything. They lost their homes, their palace, and their temple. Not even God's house was saved from the unimaginable destruction of war. It was all carelessly and nonsensically burned to the ground. The people wailed.

Lamentations is the response to the horror. Daughter Zion cries out as a violated woman. The narrator describes the emotional and theological abandonment of watching as everything

that is known and everything that brings meaning was turned to dust. A person wrestles with why such devastation could happen and yearns for the return of the promise the ancestors foretold. The covenant of God's never ending love.

The pain and loss of Israel is like the shock of a baby who thought they could run and now is wailing in the carpet. It is the agony of a young adult who has not only lost their innocence, but also must now face the chaos most adults are unable and unwilling to talk about. They wish they could be like their parents and ignore daily the news of gun violence, keep private any challenge with mental health, and silently pray suicide never comes. But teens go Monday to Friday 40 hours a week to where these terrors blossom. They along with the poets boldly, without cause insist on living with hope.

I did not understand where such hope came from until a teenager preached it. She stood there without a script awkwardly telling of the most intimate details of her life. The young woman proclaimed the horrors of her own mental health illness. She declared, "The past year has felt as if my body and mind were betraying me." I sat uncomfortable. She seemed to have no direction and I worried she made herself too vulnerable. Her words came out without direction. Hope felt impossible. It was like lamentations. Then she made her concluding statement. "I decided, after struggling, that this was an opportunity for great transformation. Do not give up hope," and there it was so simply stated. Community, God, and our broken humanity would create life never ending. May we all be so wise and courageous to insist that God's promise is still true.