***EMPTY TABLES***

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Texts: Lamentations 1:1-4, 3:19-24 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

*How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!* Those words are the lament that opens the collection of poems we call *Lamentations*. In Hebrew the book is known by its first word, *How*; and perhaps that is the more appropriate title. *How* tragic is the situation of those who live in the empty streets! *How* desperate are the people who can find no food, no shelter, no hope! *How* empty are their tables! *How* cruel is their fate! *How* bleak is their outlook! *How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!* The poems describe life in Jerusalem after the exile. The best and brightest of Israel’s people were carried off along with any things of value. The last and the least of Israel’s people were left behind to scour for food, shelter and hope amid the rubble of the invasion. They remembered better days when life had been good, but they struggled to remember any days when life had been as bad as those they now faced. *Gone is my glory and all that I had hoped for from the Lord!*

We’ve never lived in exile, but perhaps you know something of their pain from your own experience, not the pain of a UVA or Virginia Tech loss, but some point at which you wondered whether there was any hope to hold onto, any relief for your pain, any comfort for your grief. Lamentations is a cry to God from the midst of pain and suffering. It is a cry of anguish that has risen from the tongues of people in every generation – Christians persecuted by Rome in the first century, Muslims slaughtered in the Crusades, Jews interred in Auschwitz or the pogroms of Russia, Africans forcibly taken as slaves to America, Scots pushed from their land to the edge of the sea in the Highland Clearances, Cherokee men and women driven along the Trail of Tears, Syrian refugees caught in the crossfire of civil war.

Lamentations gives voice to the cries of those people, those who suffer and feel abandoned by God, those who search for a deliverer and find none, those who long for rest, security, and peace. It is a cry to God to remember a people who feel long-forgotten. It is a cry that has escaped many a lip and heart within this church and community. It is the cry of one who suffers and finds that God is nowhere to be found.

Ann Weems knows that sense of forsakenness. On August 14, 1982 her son was killed less than an hour before his 21st birthday. Amid her grief and anguish and at the urging of a friend she wrote a collection of psalms of lament to give voice to her pain. As she suggests in the preface:

*This book is not for everyone. It is for those who weep and for those who weep with those who weep. It is for those whose souls struggle with the dailiness of faithkeeping in the midst of life’s assaults and obscenities. This book is for those who are living with scalding tears running down their cheeks.*

She knows, for she has been there. Some years ago when a series of accidents took the lives of several kids at Buffalo Gap, I sat with our senior highs and listened to their frustration, fear and anger, and we read poems by Ann Weems that seemed to say for them what they could not express themselves. In a contemporary lament she gives expression to that sense of God-forsakenness that we sometimes feel:

*One day you were here, O God,*

*and then you disappeared*

*like a magician*

*doing tricks*

*on a stage.*

*One day we were talking,*

*and suddenly you turned*

*silent.*

*And I spoke only*

*to the wind.*

*Have you gone so far away*

*my voice can no longer*

*reach you?*

*Surely you’re not*

*rejecting me*

*when I am so desolated!*

*Surely you remember*

*that I’ve always*

*belonged to you!*

*When I was a child*

*I flew into your arms*

*and settled there.*

*I had no secrets from you.*

*Now like a baby*

*abandoned*

*on a doorstep,*

*I have awakened*

*in a strange place*

*where you do not live.*

*This is a godless land,*

*and I do not want*

*to be here.*

*Please reappear, O God,*

*and listen for my prayers!*

*When you hear me,*

*your compassion*

*will fly on the wind;*

*you will remember*

*your own*

*and I will leave*

*the horror*

*that I’ve lived in,*

*and my feet will walk*

*next to yours*

*once more![[1]](#endnote-1)*

The lament is a plea for help from one who feels helpless and is unsure whether any help will ever come. It is an honest expression of a wounded heart. One might wonder, whether it is okay to give voice to such laments – in the midst of pain to admit feeling abandoned by God? Are we not always to hope in God and to trust in God so that we need never be afraid, never feel abandoned, never lament? I know of a woman who lost her husband and believed she could never lament his loss, for she was a woman of faith who trusted in God and believed that lament would be a sign of faithlessness. Yet, in silencing the lament within her, she lost the faith that sustained her. Sometimes lament is the first step in healing, the first step back to the God from whom we feel abandoned, a first step from despair toward hope.

Jeremiah takes that first step after his long, lonely lament, crying out:

*But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:*

*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness!*

In a god-forsaken place Jeremiah recalls that God never forsakes us, never abandons us, never forgets us; God is still there, ever-faithful even when we doubt God’s presence or very existence. In a hopeless situation there is always a glimmer of hope, for there is always God. As one writer has suggested: *Hope works in this ways: it “lights a candle” instead of “cursing the darkness”.* Jeremiah lights that candle with those words about God’s steadfast love and great faithfulness as he anticipates what John will say centuries later, “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.”

At this table we bear witness to that light of hope which no darkness can overcome. For two thousand years bread has been broken and a cup has been shared in remembrance of one who understands our suffering because he suffered, one who is the source of our hope even when all seems hopeless. Jesus knows the trouble we’ve seen and the pain we bear and the suffering we endure, because he walked that path and suffered for us, died for us, and was raised for us so that we might have life and hope. With Christians around the world we take the bread and eat, we take the cup and drink, we gather at this table in witness to the truth that after the darkness of Good Friday there was Easter’s dawn when

the weeping of the night became the joy of morning, and

the cries of “It is finished” became shouts of “he is risen”, and

the voices who sang “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” now sing “Great is Thy Faithfulness!”

In the catacombs of a Catholic church in Hungary there is a huge hunk of granite around which Christians have gathered to break bread and share a cup each and every day for 1500 years. Through wars, famine, storms and plagues the bread and wine have been shared in remembrance of the risen Lord. No matter how empty the fields or the streets or the tables or the hopes of the people, the bread and wine have been shared at that stone table as a sign of God’s presence with us and God’s promises for us.

Today in African villages and European cathedrals and Syrian tent cities and here at this table Christians gather to continue that tradition – to boldly proclaim that in the midst of joys and sorrows, sickness and health, prosperity and poverty, war and peace, laments and hallelujahs, God is present with us and we are still full of the hope we find at this table. We began with a lament of Jeremiah and we close with another lament of Ann Weems, a lament I found long after I had titled this sermon. She writes:

*I stand at your empty table, O Holy One, and ask to be fed.*

*But there is no bread, no wine, no priest.*

*Is there no one to minister to me?*

*Is there no place at the table for damaged hearts and scarred souls?*

*Do you not invite everyone who believes?*

*I believe.*

*O God, I believe.*

*In spite of an empty table, I believe.*

*In spite of those who laugh at me as I wait for you, I believe.*

*In spite of evidence to the contrary that they scream in my face,*

*I will stand at your empty table,*

*and wait until you come,*

*your arms full of bread,*

*the wine splashing as you walk.*

*Come, O Holy One, and feed me.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Come, O Holy One, and feed us – all of us! Amen

1. Ann Weems, “Lament Psalm 38”, *Psalms of Lament*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 1995, p.76 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ann Weems, “Lament Psalm 47”, *Psalms of Lament*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 1995, pp.99-100 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)