

JUNE 28, 2009
PENTECOST 4/PROPER 8
“LAMENT”

Let us pray: Gracious God, in the midst of our lamentation we give you thanks for the promise that your steadfast love never ceases and that your mercies never come to an end but are indeed “new every morning.” We pray in the name of Jesus whom we remember lamenting over Jerusalem.
Amen.

“**Lament**” is a word we don’t use much in everyday conversation, or, for that matter, hear very much in church. In fact, the Hebrew scripture reading we heard this morning is one of the rare times in our three-year lectionary series of readings from Scripture that we read from this little-known five-chapter book of the Bible. “Lamentations” as the book is called in English simply takes its Hebrew title from its first word—really just a sigh, “Ah, how...”

and in its Greek translation it's simply entitled "Wailings."

You've all seen on TV news scenes of Middle Eastern funerals, Arab or Israeli, and of the public **wailing** that accompanies the rituals surrounding death in contemporary semitic cultures. In ancient Middle Eastern culture the dirge or lament was a common poetic form, and the Book of Lamentations is an especially advanced form of such art, particularly insofar as much of it, including today's reading is an **acrostic** poem where each verse begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, moving from Aleph through Taw. I encourage you to read the whole Book of Lamentations this week.

Historically, the Book of Lamentations was written, it's interesting to note on this Sunday preceding the Fourth of July — our national "holy day" — as a lament bewailing the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 587 B.C.E. and the ensuing

exile of many of the people of Judah who were sent off to Babylon — modern day Iraq. It's a national catastrophe, you see, that's being lamented. But, of course, it's a national catastrophe that's also experienced on the personal level, as a tragedy, in the Greek sense of the word, in which the people of Judah are in a strong sense to blame, as prophets like Jeremiah and Amos, Isaiah, and Hosea, had warned. For the people of Judah like the northern kingdom of Israel before them had proven unfaithful to the covenant God had made with them and their ancestors, a covenant which consisted, as the prophet Micah had reminded them, of Israel's commitment "*to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God.*"

It's good for us to be reminded as we anticipate later this week the Fourth of July and prepare to celebrate our national freedoms that we too as a people, as a nation, have much not only to repent of but

to lament over—beginning with the deaths of our soldiers certainly but also the deaths of innocent civilians and non-combatants, as well as the mistreatment, abuse and even torture of suspected enemies that lead many of us to lament the toll that this continuing conflict is taking on our own nation and its own values and identity.

Most of the first chapters of Lamentations is unrelieved doom and gloom—some of it blaming God, some of it confessing guilt, some of it pleading for help—a medley of emotions not all that unlike the so-called “stages of death and dying” that Elizabeth Kubler Ross claimed to have identified—denial, anger, bargaining, depression—with acceptance, acceptance marked by hope, being the longed for final stage—a stage the biblical Lamentor seems finally to have reached in the text appointed for our reading today.

And indeed it is that positive acceptance and stage of hope we most yearn for, and so

it's not surprising that this is the small chunk of Lamentations we hear today. But—and it's a big “but”—this good news that God's mercies are “*new every morning*” is only good for us once we've faced the bad news of our condition, once we've confronted honestly the negativity of life lived in the face of death, and our death-dealing ways, once we've acknowledged our need to grieve and lament in all of their stages.

Walter Brueggemann, a great contemporary scholar of the Hebrew Bible, puts it this way: “*It is clear that a church that goes on singing “happy songs” in the face of raw reality is doing something very different from what the Bible itself does.... For in doing so, he goes on, it is “...less an evangelical defiance guided by faith, and much more a frightened, numb denial and deception that does not want to acknowledge or experience the disorientation of life.”*”

Quite to the contrary, Brueggemann affirms that to lament, in the strong biblical sense, “*is*

an act of bold faith because it insists that the world must be experienced as it really is and not in some pretended way.” “On the other hand,” Brueggemann concludes, *“it is bold because it insists that all such experiences of disorder are a proper subject for discourse with God. There is nothing out of bounds, nothing precluded or inappropriate.”*

The Psalms, of course, are full of such laments, even angry recrimination of God. Just remember, for a moment, how Jesus dies with the words of such a Psalm on his lips—the beginning words of Psalm 22: *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* Or consider our Psalmody for today or Psalm 137 that begins, *“By the waters of Babylon we lay down and wept when we remembered you, O Zion”* or other such Psalms you might look at are Psalm 30 or Psalm 130 which begins with the memorable words, *“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.”* This is exactly the crux of brother Martin Luther’s distinction between a theology of the cross, which Luther said “calls

a thing what it really is”, as over against a theology of glory, a “theology of the happy face,” which Luther said calls evil good and good evil.

And so, especially amid our officially optimistic American culture and its favored brand of upbeat religiosity, we need to realize that the Gospel affirmation we hear in today’s text is a hard-won affirmation, a good word that is good precisely because it has weathered the storm, has entered into the darkness, has encountered death and the death-dealing forces of our world.

The last time I preached on this text, three years ago, I concluded with the story of Nicholas Wolterstorff, a professor emeritus of philosophical theology at Yale Divinity School who lost his 24-year old son, Eric, to a climbing accident some years ago and wrote out of his grief a meditation entitled Lament for a Son that has become something of a minor classic. But today I want to share with you another story of honest lament over the

death of a twenty-something year old son named Alexander as told in a sermon preached to his congregation by the former Yale chaplain whom I used to hear regularly at Batell Chapel at Yale—he packed the place with students back in the late 60’s, this feisty, prophetic preacher formerly a CIA operative by the name of William Sloane Coffin who had led the march on the Pentagon which the writer Norman Mailer immortalized in print. The bushy-haired, golden-tongued Coffin was an inveterate story-teller and raconteur who could’ve been a stand-up comic, as well as a concert pianist—he was the son-in-law of Arthur Rubenstein—but was also the best biblical preacher I ever hope to hear—even if immortalized by no less than cartoonist Gary Trudeau of *Doonesbury* fame—who began *Doonesbury* as an undergraduate at the *Yalie Daily*—and made “Rev. Sloane” a mainstay of his comic strip.

But in his famous sermon simply entitled “Alex’s Death,” we encounter another side of

the fiery prophetic preacher, a grief-stricken father lamenting the death of his son before his dear congregation, Coffin having moved from Yale in the late '70's to become pastor of the prominent Riverside Church in NYC on Morningside Heights near Columbia University.

Let me just share with you a few excerpts from his short sermon that itself has become widely known and admired. Taking as his text Psalm 34 and Romans 8, Coffin begins: *“As almost all of you know, a week ago last Monday night, driving in a terrible storm, my son Alexander—who to his friends was a real day-brightener, and to his family “fair as a star when only one is shining in the sky” —my twenty-four year old Alexander, who enjoyed beating his old man at every game and in every race, beat his father to the grave.”*

“Because so many of you have cared so deeply and because obviously I’ve been able to think of little else,” Coffin continues, *“I want this morning to talk of Alex’s death, I hope in a*

way helpful to all” and then he goes on to offer this memorable advisory tale:

“When a person dies, there are many things that can be said, and there is at least one thing that should never be said. The night after Alex died I was sitting in the living room of my sister’s house outside of Boston, when the front door opened and in came a nice-looking middle-aged woman, carrying about eighteen quiches. When she saw me she shook her head, then headed for the kitchen, saying sadly over her shoulder, ‘I just don’t understand the will of God.’ Instantly I was up and in hot pursuit, swarming all over her. ‘I’ll say you don’t lady!’ I said. (I knew the anger would do me good, and the instruction to her was long overdue.) I continued, ‘Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper of his, that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm, and that he probably had had a couple of ‘frosties’ too many? Do you think it is God’s will that there are no streetlights along that

stretch of road, and no guard rail separating the road from Boston harbor?”

*“For some reason,” Coffin went on to confess, “nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn’t go around this world with his finger on triggers, his fist around knives, his hands on steering wheels. God is dead set against all unnatural deaths. And Christ spent an inordinate amount of time (take today’s Gospel stories, e.g.) delivering people from paralysis, insanity, leprosy, and muteness. ... Violent deaths such as the one Alex died—to understand those is a piece of cake, as his younger brother put it simply, standing at the head of the casket at the Boston funeral, ‘You blew it buddy. You blew it.’ The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, ‘It is the will of God.’ Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was **not** the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the*

sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."

Coffin concludes his lament for Alex with a number of scripture verses that have brought him comfort but ends on this note:

... finally I know that when Alex beat me to the grave, the finish line was not Boston Harbor in the middle of the night. If a week ago last Monday a lamp went out, it was because, for him at least, the Dawn had come.

So I shall—so let us all—seek consolation in that love which never dies, and find peace in the dazzling grace that always is.

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Owning up to these authentic sadnesses and losses—in our personal lives, but also in our life as a nation—with authentic lament is an act of faith, patient, long-suffering, even grateful faith such as the biblical Lamenters

himself endorsed as he wrote more than 2500 years ago:

*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
God's mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning...."*

What many consider our greatest American President knew the power of lament himself and in our greatest piece of American political oratory once mused lamentingly over the bloody perplexities of the war between the states:

"Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His purposes." Lincoln concluded his Second Inaugural address, weeks before his assassination: "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this scourge of war might speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid

with another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.” Our sixteenth president knew how to lament as he beheld what Julia Ward Howe would describe in her “Battle Hymn” as the Lord’s “trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.” May we also have the courage and faith to do so.

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.