

The Lutheran Church of the Atonement  
Florissant, Missouri  
Proper 8 -- Year B  
June 26-27, 2021  
Lamentations 3:22-33; St. Mark 5:21-43  
Second Corinthians 8:7-15

I hope you didn't blink, because you might have missed it...."it" being the only reading from the Biblical book of Lamentations that we will hear for three years. If you want to hear it again, you'll have to come back on June 30, 2024. (Mark your calendars.) Now, to be clear, if you come on any other weekend between now and then, you will not hear any reading from Lamentations. That was it. But, perhaps, if you didn't blink, you noticed that today's reading from lamentations wasn't all that lamentation-y. It began and ended on a pretty positive note, and in-between wasn't all that discouraging either. Well, let me assure you, this is the only part of the entire book of Lamentations that fits that description. Everything else is lamentation. Everything else is woe; it is heartache; it is sorrow; it is guilt; it is regret; it is desolation. It is everything from princes being strung up by their hands to women boiling and eating their children just to survive. Just to be sure, I re-read the entire book -- all six chapters, all 13 pages in my New English Bible. And, what you heard was it, "it" being the only portion of the book that the lectionary folks considered suitable for public worship.

I get it! I do this for a living. Let's keep worship as positive and as upbeat as possible. Most of our services incorporate one of the Psalms, but the "Psalms of Lament"? Well, we pretty much avoid those altogether. We'll stick with the Psalms of Thanksgiving and Praise, the Psalms of Enthronement, the Pilgrim Psalms, the Festival Psalms, the Royal Psalms, the Wisdom Psalms,...Let's keep worship as upbeat and positive as possible. Except,...except that that's not necessarily where everyone who made their way to worship is at. There may be those here for whom it took everything they had to get out of bed and

get here. There may be those here whose sole reason for being here is to know that we are all praying for the health and restoration of a loved one. There may be those here who are here, because this is what they do on a Saturday evening or on a Sunday morning, but whose hearts are heavy, thanks to an undeserved misfortune or loss. There may be those who are here, hoping that this time the word of absolution spoken by the pastor will finally give them the consolation and the peace they long for. There may be those here facing a painful decision for which there are no good options. There may be those who are here who have only the most vague notions of what the Christian Faith is about, but are hoping that maybe, just maybe, it can fill the emptiness in their lives.

In other words, there may be those here for whom "I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart," not only may not speak to their need, but may even give them a sense that they don't really belong here. Those folks may be those for whom other readings from Lamentations might speak to their hearts:

- "I weep over my plight; my eyes run with tears; those who might comfort me or give me strength are too far away to seek;" (or)
- "For all my transgressions, my sighs are many, and my heart is faint;" (or)
- "See, Lord, how sorely I am distressed;...hear me when I groan with no-one to comfort me."

Perhaps, one of those verses resonates with someone who is here with us; perhaps, one of them resonates with someone who happened upon us over the internet. Perhaps, that someone is you.

In today's Gospel reading, you may have noted that, after Jesus is told that Jairus's daughter has died, the "weeping and loud wailing" had already begun. This too, actually, was worship. In accordance with the custom of the day,

flute players would be summoned to play mournful music, and professional mourners would come to give family and friends a context in which grieving was to be expected -- even encouraged. I have been saddened that there are those among us who lost loved ones, especially at the height of the pandemic, who never had the opportunity to grieve in the context of worship. Worship should never be solely about having "the joy, joy, joy, joy down" in our hearts. Worship should enable us to bring the deepest concerns of our lives before God -- and not just during the Prayer of the Church. And, yet, if we are so focused on making worship as upbeat and positive as possible, we may actually imply that there is no place here for those who feel distant from God, for those who have questions of God, for those who feel angry with God, for those who are certain that God is angry with them.

Human nature takes all those folks and drives them into isolation, whereas the worshipping community should open its doors and open its arms and insist that this is where all those concerns, all those sorrows, all those questions can safely be brought before the Lord, who can deal with them, just as the Lord has dealt with them from even before the days of the writing of the Biblical book of Lamentations.

For, if reading through the book of Lamentations leaves one impression, it is the impression of honesty. The writer of Lamentations bares his soul and brings everything before the Lord: his grief, his remorse, his anger, his guilt, his feeling of abandonment. Why should we do anything less? Why should we be any less honest?

The metallic artwork over the entry to the sanctuary says, "Come unto me." And, we all know how that invitation from Jesus ends, not "Come unto me, all you have the joy, joy, joy, joy down in your hearts," but, "Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." But, in many

ways, that's not just Jesus's invitation but also that of the whole worshipping community assembled here. For, Jesus comes, not only sharing in the lament tradition -- "Now is my soul troubled" -- not only taking on His people's burdens and making them His own, ...but also transforming the lament tradition, empowering us, through the Holy Spirit, to be people who lament with and at the heart of the suffering world's pain. The same Paul who in today's Second Lesson summons us to share in the suffering of others, also writes of the Spirit growing within us, as we groan with the pain of the world. "Bear one another's burdens," Paul writes, "and so fulfill the law of Christ."

All of which brings us back to today's First Reading from Lamentations. So, don't blink; you won't hear it again until June 30, 2024, but God's word remains true for all who lament, for all who seek the Lord and who wait for His rescue: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end."

Amen