

Defeat, Shame, Memory: A Sermon

Lamentations 1:1-6

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Psalm 137

Luke 17:5-10



This morning's lectionary readings contain two of the most difficult passages in all of Scripture. How does the preacher respond to a passage in which the final verse reads "Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock"? (Ps. 137: 9). Certainly the preacher cannot suggest that this is an example to be emulated? "As we go forth this morning, let us remember these words from our Psalm: 'Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and . . .' Uh, Never mind. Let us stand and say the words of the Nicene Creed." Turning to the Lamentations passage does not make things any easier. Lamentations is probably the most depressing book in the entire Bible. At least the book of Job has a happy ending! There are lots of thoughtful commentaries and theological reflections on the Book of Job. Not so much on Lamentations. Can you imagine someone saying to a seminary student on the day of graduation "Congratulations! I'd like you to give you this commentary on the book of Lamentations to help you with your ministry"?

When we come across passages like this in Scripture, I think it helps to remember that the Bible is not a book, but a collection of books. The Bible does not speak with a single voice, but with many voices. I think it also helps to remember that these are voices in a dialogue. Voices in Scripture ask

questions to which sometimes we have to turn to other passages in Scripture to hear the answers. I think that reading the Bible in this way is preferable to the kind of static view that imagines Scripture as a kind of database of theological propositions all of which are speaking with a single voice and saying the same thing. I think it is also preferable to the opposite view that says that the Bible is full of contradictions and so we can pick and choose what we like. Neither approach gives us a clue as to how the church might derive theological or spiritual insight from passages like this morning's readings.

So I would ask my listeners this morning to hear the morning's lectionary readings as voices in a dialogue. I am going to focus on three readings: the Psalm, the Lamentations reading, and the epistle reading from 2 Timothy. I would suggest that it is helpful to read each of these passages as asking the single question "Where is God?"

I also find it helpful to notice that there is a common pattern of themes in all three passages: defeat, shame, and remembering. I am going to use this three-fold pattern as a clue to hearing the dialogue between the voices in this morning's readings.

Biblical scholars sometimes have difficulty deciding the historical setting of a particular passage of Scripture: When and where was it written? There is no such problem with the Psalm and Lamentations passages. Both were clearly written some time after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and during the period of the Babylonian captivity, the exile of Judah sometime between 587 and 539 B.C. The Psalm was clearly written by a Jewish exile in Babylon itself: "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept." (Ps. 137: 1) Lamentations was written by someone who was left behind in Jerusalem, but who did not go into exile: "How lonely sits the city that was full of people. . . . Judah has gone into exile

because of affliction . . . From the daughter of Zion all her majesty has departed.” (Lam. 1:1, 3, 6)

The Psalm passage describes a setting of defeat. The Psalmist is in captivity in a foreign land: “By the waters of Babylon, we sat down . . . How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Ps. 137:1, 4), This is a Psalm of lament, of which there are many in the Psalter, but it is not simply a lament, but a Psalm of absolute defeat. This is not just failure, but the worst kind of failure, absolute defeat by an enemy. This is ultimate failure because the defeat is irreversible. The Psalmist is one of those who has been force-marched from the city of Jerusalem to Babylon, a distance of about 500 miles, walked by foot. There is no going back. The Psalmist knows that he or she will never see home again.

The humility of the defeat is accompanied by shame, our second theme. The defeat is not simply devastating but shameful because it is accompanied by the kind of mocking that successful conquerors love to impose on those they have conquered: “For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormenters mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion.” (Ps. 137:3) Put yourself in the place of this writer and imagine his or her sense of total helplessness and humiliation. Not only have you and everyone you know been defeated, but your enemy rubs salt into your wounds by reminding you not only that you have been defeated, but how all of your hopes have been crushed. You will never see your home again, but, hey, says your enemy, “Why don’t you sing us one of those old songs that will remind you of that home you’ll never see again?”

This leads to the third theme of remembrance. Remembering adds to the pain of defeat: “There we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.” (Ps. 137:1) But in spite of the pain, remembering is the only thing that still ties the Psalmist to his home, and so he forces himself to remember: “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! Let my

tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you!" (v. 5)

Finally, the theme of remembering comes up one more time as the Psalmist turns to prayer. "If I can remember Jerusalem," she prays, surely God should do the same. "Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, 'Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!" (Ps. 137:7) And the Psalmist appeals to God for justice. One bad turn deserves another. What goes around comes around. Let's have some instant karma! "O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us." (v. 8) Finally, there is the chilling conclusion. Blessed is the one who kills your children in the same way that you killed ours. And we know from history that the Babylonians were cruel. They did indeed kill men, women, and children in horrific ways.

From our safe setting, it is easy to be horrified by the Psalmist's prayer, but I think it is also important to remind ourselves that what we see in this Psalm is a kind of natural response to great injustice. When people are abused, when everything they have is taken away from them, they naturally respond with a plea for justice. If there is justice in the universe, such horrible injustice cannot be allowed to stand. The Psalmist is defeated, and he has no hope for his own future. But his answer to the question, "Where is God?," is that God is just, and a just God must punish the wicked by giving them what they deserve.

The same three themes appear in the Lamentations passage. Again, there is the theme of defeat by ruthless enemies "Judah has gone into exile . . . she dwells among the nations, but finds no resting place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress." (Lam. 1:3) Throughout the passage, there are images of reversal: The city that was full of people is now lonely; the princess has become a slave; Jerusalem's friends have become her enemies. And there is again, the theme

of the loss of children: "Her children have gone away, captives before the foe." (v. 5)

As in the Psalmist, there is the theme of shame in the presence of gloating by the enemy. Verses 7 and 8 read: "When her people fell into the hand of her foe, and there was none to help her, her foes gloated over her; they mocked at her downfall. . . . all who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; she herself groans and turns her face away." It is one thing to suffer in silence, but suffering is made worse when your enemies mock you, and even your friends who used to honor you, now turn their backs on you in disgust.

The theme of remembering appears again, but it is different in Lamentations. On the one hand, there is the remembrance of better times: Verse 7 reads "Jerusalem remembers in the days of her affliction and wandering all the precious things that were hers from days of old." Suffering is made worse because we remember when things were better. And, unlike Job which has a happy ending, the book of Lamentations ends with its own answer to the question "Where is God?" Does God remember? The last verses of Lamentations read "But you, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations. Why do you forget us forever, why do you forsake us for so many days?" (Lam. 5:19-20) As with the Psalmist, the writer of Lamentations wants God to act, but what if he does not? "Restore us to yourself, O Lord that we may be restored! . . . unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us." (vs. 21-22) What if the answer to the question "Where is God?" is that God is gone? What if God is no longer with us at all?

However, even in the Old Testament, the dialogue does not end here. In Isaiah 40-66, there is an answer to the question "Where is God in exile?" It becomes clear that God does remember as he leads his people back to Jerusalem from exile, and he reminds his people to remember who they are and who he

is: "Remember these things O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you; you are my servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me." (Is. 44:21) After the exile, it becomes clear that God does remember, but the Psalmist and the writer of Lamentations did not live to see it. Nonetheless, even during the exile, through the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the Lord had already given hope even to those in exile. Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant (Jer. 31:31), and Ezekiel speaks of a time when God will breath life into dead bones (Ez. 37).

I turn now to the passage from 2 Timothy. It is easy to forget when we read this passage that it is written from a position of defeat because Paul's opening is so positive: "I thank God, whom I serve," he writes to Timothy, "as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day." (2 Tim. 1:3) Paul writes, "I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy." (v. 4) But Paul too has been completely and absolutely defeated by his enemies. He writes from a prison cell. In verse 8, he describes himself as the Lord's "prisoner," and speaks of sharing in suffering. Paul's position becomes clear in verse 15. He has been abandoned by his friends: "You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me . . ." In his concluding paragraphs, Paul speaks of abandonment by a friend: "Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica." (2 Tim. 4:10) Paul writes that "Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm. . . . he strongly opposed our message." (v. 14) Paul writes about his trial, "At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me." (v. 16) When Paul was on trial for his very life, those whom he thought were his friends abandoned him, possibly to die alone. He writes to Timothy "Do your best to come before winter," and "When you come, bring the cloak . . . and also the books, and above all the parchments." (vs. 13, 21) New Testament scholar James Dunn suggests that these might well be Paul's last written words. We imagine an old man, alone in a jail cell, shivering with cold, asking for Timothy

to bring his cloak before winter so that he can keep himself warm, along with some reading material to help pass the time until the inevitable end.

These are circumstances that would discourage anyone, and the theme of shame appears again. The ancient Mediterranean world was a shame/honor culture, and to face imprisonment and death was certainly grounds for humiliation and shame. Even worse, these foolish Christians followed someone who had himself met his death in the most shameful and humiliating way, public execution by crucifixion. So Paul writes to Timothy, "Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God." (2 Tim. 1:8) But there is a twist here; Paul counters shame by actually encouraging Timothy to embrace the suffering that accompanies it.

We conclude with the final theme: the theme of remembrance. How does Paul, in his own situation of what by contemporary Mediterranean standards was his moment of greatest defeat, respond? By remembering. Paul writes to Timothy, "As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith . . ." (2 Tim. 1:4) He counsels Timothy to remember as well: "I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God . . ." (v. 6) And, finally, Paul himself remembers: "I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me." (v. 12) In the midst of Paul's suffering, humiliation, and shame, he is able to experience joy and confidence because he remembers something about the God in whom he has believed. And what is it that Paul remembers? He remembers the gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ. By the power of God, Paul writes, he "saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which has now been manifested through the appearance of our Savior Jesus

Christ who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." (vs. 8-10) In the midst of defeat by his enemies and abandonment by his friends, in the shame and the suffering of imprisonment, facing the prospect of approaching death, Paul is not ashamed, because he remembers that Jesus Christ's shameful death on a cross did not end with shame, but with the abolition of death itself.

One does not want to be superficial in comparing examples of suffering. However, if we situate Paul in the dialogue between our passages this morning, I think it plausible to claim that while Paul shared with the writers of the two OT passages an initial situation of defeat by enemies along with its accompanying shame, Paul's answer to the question "Where is God?" is different because Paul remembers something different. The Psalmist remembers that God is just and so prays that the just God will enforce justice. The writer of Lamentations remembers that God reigns, and his throne is eternal. However, in light of the destruction of Jerusalem, there is concern that God perhaps no longer remembers his people.

What makes Paul's memory different is something that has happened, the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The cross provides its own paradoxical answer to the problem of defeat with its accompanying shame, and the question of memory that arises, "Where is God?" For the Romans, crucifixion was the worst shame and defeat possible for a human being. It was the most degrading punishment that they could imagine. And yet the resurrection of Jesus means that God in Christ has defeated even that most shameful and humiliating defeat. Where is God in the crucifixion of Jesus? The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ means that God is present even in the humiliating defeat of death. Jesus of Nazareth came to a Jewish nation that was in exile in its own land; the Romans had defeated and ruled over the Jewish people every bit as much as the Babylonians had defeated them earlier. And yet, in the crucifixion and resurrection of his Son Jesus, the God of

Israel used the worst that this enemy conqueror could throw at him to utterly defeat death, the worst enemy of all. In 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote: "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Cor. 1:23-24) In this morning's passage, we read that our Savior Jesus Christ "abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." (2 Tim. 1:10) This is what Paul remembered. Even though Paul was a prisoner, and eventually would die at the hands of the enemy conqueror, he did not lose hope, he was not ashamed, because he remembered this.

What then should we remember? We should remember that like Israel in exile, and like Paul in prison, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, we are aliens who live in exile. As strangers in a culture that more and more has forgotten the God of Christian faith, we may discover that we have enemies, as Israel did and as did Paul. And those enemies may defeat us. But even if that kind of large scale defeat never happens, I can guarantee that at some point in our lives or in our ministries, we will encounter other kinds of suffering, and other disappointments. As Demas abandoned Paul, we may be abandoned even by those whom we love and care for. Even worse, we may discover to our own chagrin and shame, that we ourselves have abandoned or betrayed others. No serious Christian wants to be the kind of person who would lead someone to pray the kind of prayer for justice we read in today's Psalm passage. But we might be that person! It is in those moments of defeat and shame and guilt that we are called to remember the defeat and shame of the cross, and to remember that on the cross, God was with us in Christ, and he has defeated shame and death, and he has taken upon himself our guilt and shame, and the guilt even of our worst enemies who have defeated and shamed us. As Jesus forgave the enemies who crucified him, so we are free to forgive even as God in Christ has forgiven us when we were his enemies. In the cross of

Christ, God is always with us, and he will never abandon us.
Remember that and have hope.