

IS NEW LIFE POSSIBLE AFTER DEVASATING LOSS?

Lamentations 1: 1-5; 3: 21-26; 5: 19-22.

Sam used to be a happy-go-lucky girl. She loved school but she also loved the summertime with the hot sun and lots of outdoor fun with friends. But after that summer everything changed. First it was the smell of burning and smoke. Then it was the burning in her lungs. Then it was the constant watering of her eyes... And then the call for her family to leave. The whole neighbourhood was being evacuated. And even though they made it out and, eventually, when it was safe, returned and rebuilt their home... something has changed for Sam. She is not the same happy-go-lucky girl. Summers are not as nice as they used to be for her. She's anxious, especially when she hears her parents and others talk about fire season again. The nightmares that diminish through the winter flare up again as the weather warms... Hopefully things will ease for Sam, but they keep saying things will only get worse as the climate grows hotter.

Jean-Pierre has some of the same symptoms as Sam, but in his case, it's the rain that does it. It all started that spring a few years ago when flooding washed away his whole street and home along with it. He and his family got out. They, too, have rebuilt their home. But things are not the same. There's always worry. And there are the bad dreams too. Jean-Pierre was not an anxious boy. Now, it's as if he carries the world's burdens on his shoulders. His parents worry about him, but they also understand. Our world is changing in terms of climate and not for the better. Where will things lead?

One of the amazing things about living in Canada is that people from all over the world meet each other in common places, forming amazing friendships. In one Toronto primary school in the inner city, two boys from different worlds have become friends. Andriy is from Ukraine. His mother, sister and he are refugees because of the war. Their father is still in Ukraine helping defend their homeland. Hani is from Gaza and has arrived recently with his mother. The whereabouts of other family members is uncertain.

Both Hani and Andriy are good students. They love sports. Hani is a budding soccer player. Andriy also loves soccer but his real passion right now is music and learning the guitar. But both boys also struggle with bad thoughts and memories of things they've witnessed. They don't talk much about it all, but every time there's the sound of a plane both of them freeze and look up. They look around. And then it passes. No sound of bombs being dropped. It's ok... For Hani, it also happens any time he sees someone in a military or police uniform. He knows in his mind that Canada is a very different place. You can trust those in uniforms much of the time. But each time he sees someone a memory pops up... a check point, a raid in their neighbourhood or their home... A gun pulled out, aimed at someone and then the loud bang of

the trigger pulled... And even though both Andriy and Hani are safe now, how long will it take for them to settle their troubling thoughts and reactions?

And then there is Daakasim. She is First Nations Ojibwe. Since she was little she heard stories of missing family members, uncles, aunts, cousins and her grand uncle Mikom who had gone to a residential school and disappeared... But ever since the discovery of unmarked graves and the remains of the dead became public a few years ago, she's been having strange feelings and visitations... She's seen her mother and aunts crying... She's heard the men speaking angry words... And something else has also happened. At night in her dreams, her great uncle Mikom has begun to visit her... He doesn't say anything in words, but his presence is like a reminder that his spirit still lives... It's like every time one more body is discovered all the ancestors come to life... They're no longer silent... It's so special, she knows that... But it also makes her heart hurt every time... Daakasim wakes up with tears in her eyes... When will her great uncle and the thousands of others truly find peace?... When will she, her family, her community and her people truly heal from what has happened?

Thousands of years ago a Hebrew boy named Abner is growing up in a foreign town outside the great capital city of the empire: Babylon... Abner was told he had many relatives, but most of them had been killed during the great invasion and deportation of his people... He hears stories from the elders around him of the beautiful capital city - Jerusalem, and of happy days of people farming their own land, hunting and gathering for ceremonies, festivals and celebrations, worshipping in the great temple... All the ancestors had been buried there but who knows now where their bones have been scattered... There are few celebrations now... People spend more time sad and crying than laughing and celebrating... Those around his people, and especially the Babylonians, treat them as inferior, defeated people, as slaves destined to serve their racially superior masters.

Abner's people have a super hard time with this... They had known slavery and then they had known freedom on their own land... and now... This is awful... And where is the Holy One, their God – Adonai?... Has God abandoned them, forgotten them, turned against them because they have failed to keep the covenant?... That's certainly what the elders are saying... This is how they are trying to find meaning in what has happened... They have betrayed their God, they had made enemies with their own people, north and south had split, there were more and more poor people on the land while the elites of their people were getting richer and richer taking more and more land for themselves because poor people would sell it off if it meant avoiding starvation for one more season.

But would things ever change for Abner's people? Would he see his homeland again in his lifetime? Would God become reconciled with God's people again once they repented and sought to mend their relationships with God and each other? Would they find freedom from

those who enslave them? Would they find new life again as a people and be given another chance to make it all work?

Loss comes in many ways and in many forms. And children feel it and carry it in ways many of us adults do not. Children can feel even more helpless, disoriented and dislocated. And whereas adults can remember other days and happier days, for children not long yet in the world, a loss can be all-consuming and all-defining in terms of the meaning and hope of life. Whether it's our climate crisis, war, or peoples displaced from their land, abused, mistreated, humiliated, slaughtered and lost to themselves, how may new life be possible without papering over the loss because it's too overwhelming to deal with?

Enter the little book of prayer poetry called Lamentations. Actually, Lamentations is a softer title to the original, in Hebrew simply titled as: "*Eicha*" - "How." "How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!" reads verse one. This book pulls no punches. There is no joy or gladness in it. And despite a few verses in the very middle that speak of hope, all five chapters are full of lamentation over the devastating loss of the people with no relief whatsoever. And yet... Let's try to dive a little deeper to consider whether there is profound medicine offered here for all the sorrow of the loss.

In order to understand a collection of prayer poetry like Lamentations, we have to ponder a question some of us may be fortunate to never have to ask: What do we need to do in order to rise up from loss, from defeat and devastation, from a crisis of faith and hope, from a fear and hurt that paralyzes? What strategies does a book like Lamentations offer? Think about what indigenous people who have yet to reclaim their land and their lives must do. Think about Palestinians displaced and decimated off their land and what they must do once they can rebuild and properly mourn their dead. Think about our children and grandchildren as they grow up in a world where climate change affects more and more of their lives. What does rebuilding life after devastating loss look like? What strategies does Lamentations offer?

First of all, it has to do with speaking the truth and expressing what has happened... The great writer and holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said that it took him 10 years to find any words to express what he experienced... 10 years!... How long did it take the Hebrews who composed Lamentations? How about others in our world? Lamentations is not only words, but also exquisite poetry that expresses the truth of the peoples' experience in poignant prose: "How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she who was great among the nations!... She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies..." Speaking truth as awful as it is, and finding creative ways of expressing it is always the first step toward release, toward healing and toward empowerment for a new day.

And what it is that is being expressed in the poetry? It is lament, yes, for all the devastating loss, the loss of loved ones, a homeland and an identity attached to the land... A whole world has been lost and the loss is both personal and collective. But beyond lament there is also bitterness and rage that is expressed. There is the injustice of what has been done to them by foreign powers... and there is also the harm done to them by God... "But you, O Lord, reign for ever; your throne endures to all generations. Why have you forgotten us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days?" That's how the people interpret what has happened to them. If God had not abandoned them or incited their enemies against them, this would not have happened as it did. They are sad and they are angry and bewildered... To express it and to name it, and to give people language and permission to do it, to pray it, sing it, yell it and cry it... This is step one always of healing.

Second, though, Lamentations not only offers beautiful, honest and raw words to express the sadness and the anger, it also challenges people to take responsibility for their healing journey. And it does so in a way I myself had not appreciated before. The Babylonian oppressors are barely mentioned. And even though as the instruments of great injustice the colonizers have got it coming, they are here today and gone tomorrow. No, rather, the people's freedom, restoration and new life as a people, must come as they re-engage and wrestle their faith anew with God. They have to become reconciled with God. They have to take responsibility for their moral collapse which is tied to their physical and social collapse.

You know, too often, we give in and fall into helplessness in our sorrow, rage and blame of those who we focus in on as the cause of our trouble, or is it an illness, condition or circumstance beyond our control that's to blame. And yet, unless we find our agency again in some way, there is no future. What choices can we make? How can we take back responsibility for our life within a wider set of options than those we typically get reduced to when the walls of helplessness are caving in in our minds and hearts... We need to open our eyes and see beyond the confines of our situation... Prayer poetry like Lamentations is trying to give language to sorrow, rage and accountability so that the people rise up to express and to imagine a future again as a people. Beyond the colonizing oppression what may yet be possible? What may God still have to accomplish in and through them if they take responsibility for their part in all this and work to rise up to a different future?

And this brings us to the last and final point. Lamentations is part of a larger literature and story. The people are reclaiming their identity. When devastating loss and grave injustice is done to us, we lose ourselves and our identity because our identity is tied to what we were and what we had: health, land, a kingdom, freedom, the way things were. And yet, this time of oppression has also exposed things that have to change because they were not good, but also things that have to change because they can never go back to the way things were. Too much has happened.

And so, Lamentations communicates not just through words but structure. There are five poems in the book patterning the five first books of the scriptures called the books of Moses which frame the originating core story of the people from the time they first emerged as a people, fell into oppression and slavery under colonization, and then made their way to freedom all the way to the edge of a new life in a new land. And each poem of Lamentations has 22 verses except the middle one which has 66. And each verse starts with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet which totals 22. The word for this is: acrostic. What is being communicated in all this?

The people are rebuilding their identity in a whole new way – they are building up their language and their identity as a people with a different narrative beyond simply a land and a kingdom with kings. They are now spread out all over the world through repeated exile and colonization. How do they build their identity as a people, a culture, with ceremonies and festivals and all kinds of identity markers that don't need a fixed land or a fixed place or a monarchy. They are a people together, before their God and with each other and they can take the temple with them wherever they go just like the people did on their journey of freedom.

God is calling the people then and God is also calling to us now to build and rebuild our lives even as there is much that can be sad, difficult, even overwhelming. God is greater than all that kills and destroys. God calls us to lament and rage it as much as we need to do so and as long as we need to do so. God inspires us also to dig deep and become creative, to reframe our identity, to take responsibility for ways that need to change in us and our relationships. And God opens us up to see that there are always choices we can make to take back our lives, however long we have left to live them. We are part of a larger whole of the communion of saints, and within families of faith, cultures and communities that live on beyond us.

How will you and I build and rebuild our lives? What deeper and more solid foundations do we need to build on? Where do we find God, ourselves and the people who become family to us not just biologically but spiritually? How do we reclaim responsibility for our lives and power for living with faith, hope and love despite all we cannot control or make as we want?

Prayer: Come to us, O God, give us the freedom to speak it, share it, cry it and yell it... Give us places, spaces and people who can receive it without judgement or fear... Give us creativity, imagination and grace... Give us the courage to take responsibility and the hope that you will never forsake us, but will embrace us... And give us an identity in your love that has deeper foundations than any loss, failure or grief... Amen.