

Difficult Hope

Matthew 23:37-39

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, (Oct.22) 2023

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*The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair.*

-Walter Brueggemann

Jesus enters Jerusalem and according to both Matthew and Luke, he tops the hill outside of the city, the Mount of Olives, pauses and looks out over the city and begins to lament. Luke says he wept. In one modern translation, Luke says,

*When the city came into view, he wept over it. "If you had only recognized this day, and the opportunity you have for peace! But now it's too late. In the days ahead your enemies are going to bring up their heavy artillery and surround you, pressing in from every side. They'll smash you and your babies on the pavement. Not one stone will be left intact. All this because you didn't recognize and welcome God's personal visit." (Luke 19:41-44).*

Matthew records Jesus saying,

*"Jerusalem! Jerusalem! Murderer of prophets! Killer of the ones who brought you God's news! How often I've ached to embrace your children, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you wouldn't let me. And now you're so desolate, nothing but a ghost town. What is there left to say? Only this: I'm out of here soon. The next time you see me you'll say, 'Oh, God has blessed him! He's come, bringing God's rule!'" (Matthew 23:37-39).*

Matthew says Jesus spoke these words during that Passover Week on one of his trips back and forth each day from Bethany into the city. According to Luke, Jesus said this as part of his first entry into the city that Passover Week. Both agree that he speaks the truth to a city that is distracted, living in an illusion, and that he laments over their denial.

Jesus is being prophetic and part of what prophets did was foretell the future, not by looking into some sort of crystal ball or hearing an oracle from God, but by immersing themselves in God and in God's Word, by being in the world around them and then connecting the dots. Jesus connects the dots, looks at the city and laments over its path to death, destruction, and loss. Here is the city that's very name means peace and they have an opportunity to embrace the Messiah and God's Way, but they are hell-bent on destruction. All Jesus can do is lament. Sometimes that's all we can do. Weep.

I remember the old Baptist radical Will Campbell once told a group of college students, "All your human efforts, all strategies, all techniques, all movements will fail; all human engineering will go lame, and only your understanding of the tragedy will remain – only your broken heart, ability to weep – because you have the capacity to understand." (*Crashing the Idols*, p. 62-63).

The last two weeks have been like that. Our hearts are broken, we lament. We weep. Over Jerusalem, over Gaza, for the Palestinians, for the Israelis, for the ordinary people caught literally in the crossfire, for the children dying, for people suffering.

Since October 7 we have been inundated with these stories. Hamas' surprise attack of Israel, committing all sort of atrocities against noncombatants hiding in shelters – women, old people, children, foreign nationals. They rampaged through

Israel for more than a day before being driven back by Israeli forces and took 200 of hostages with them as they fled.

Meanwhile, Israel ordered a full siege of Gaza cutting residents off from all food, water, electricity, and aid. Communications infrastructure has been targeted, limiting Gazans ability to communicate with the outside world. Air and missile strikes have killed over 4,000 Palestinians, including perhaps 1000 children. Huge swaths of Gazan cities have been destroyed, resulting in an estimated one million refugees. Most observers believe a ground invasion is imminent. As of yesterday, Gaza has been opened to limited humanitarian supplies.

At the same time, as the war enters its third bloody week, many false or unsubstantiated claims are circulating as well. Some of the misinformation is intentional by both Israel and Hamas. Each side trying to win the propaganda war, hoping to convince everyone that they are the victims. As the old saying goes, “truth is the first casualty of war.”

Hamas is a terrorist organization. No doubt about it. And their attack on Israel has been compared to our own 9/11 attacks in the effect of shock and grief upon the people of Israel. At the same time, Israel’s Right-Wing government has demonstrated repeatedly they care nothing for Palestinian rights. Before the Hamas attacks, there were massive protests by Israeli citizens against their own Right-Wing government and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is accused of all sorts of corruption.

A dozen years or so ago, I was on a bus with about 20 American clergy as we went through the Israeli military checkpoint at the wall with barbed wire and guard towers as we left the West Bank and Bethlehem. Two young soldiers got on

the bus and checked all our passports, then they proceeded to verbally abuse, intimidate, and try to provoke our Palestinian Christian bus driver and guide along with his 7-year-old daughter who was with him due to a school holiday. We had been strictly instructed ahead of time to not say a word through the entire process, but it was one of the most appalling things we White clergy had ever seen. The Black clergy knew exactly what was going on. And as soon as we drove out of sight, we all exploded in indignation. It was an eye-opening encounter.

Journalist Chris Hedges says “the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians has left both sides embracing death. They each believe that they are the only real victims” (Hedges, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, p. 92).

In his 2002 book, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, Hedges tells of being in a crowded refugee camp in Gaza and watching boys play with a soccer ball and making kites out of pieces of scrap paper. Suddenly from the Israeli side of the perimeter came this booming voice on loudspeaker from an Israeli armored vehicle shouting obscenities and insults to the refugees, daring and taunting the boys to come out and face them. The boys, mostly ten or eleven years of age, ran around the corner onto sand dunes and started throwing rocks at the armored vehicle. Before Hedges’ horrified eyes, many of the boys started being shot. There was no sound of gunfire because the Israeli soldiers used silencers. He wrote that he had seen children shot in other conflicts, El Salvador, Guatemala, Algeria, Sarajevo – “but I had never watched soldiers entice children like mice into a trap and murder them for sport” (p. 94)

Hedges went on, “There was a frightening symbiotic relationship between the Israeli soldiers taunting the children on the [sand] dunes and the Islamic

militants who promoted martyrdom. It spun Gaza into an every faster more passionate dance with death” (p. 94).

Hedges sat with a mother in the hospital tell of Israeli atrocities while at the same time tell of how many Palestinian children are fed hatred for the Jews from the day they are born. She said, “All they hear is that we have to get rid of the Jewish enemy. The call to fight is pumped out over the radio and television. The trucks go through the streets of the camp praising the new martyrs and calling for more. The posters of the martyrs are everywhere. And the kids see their fathers, helpless against the Israelis, out of work, and admire the militants with guns. They want to fight” (p. 98).

And the Gospel writers say Jesus looked out at what was before him and wept, “How often I’ve ached to embrace your children, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you wouldn’t let me.”

While Israel and Hamas are in a war that could easily spread, we’ve watched our own U.S. Congress paralyzed by the Right-Wing fringe group acting like school yard bullies calling each other names, unable to function like adults and pass legislation. And we’re not getting much more from our own governor in Austin. After watching the continuing dysfunction on the border with scores of immigrants suffering and policies from Austin that serve to punish people trying to get out of cruel and brutal conditions in their own country... After watching, an out-of-control ex-president monopolize the headlines by daring judges to put him in jail so he can be a martyr, because he thinks everything is about him.

And Hedges’ quote comes back to me, “everyone believes they are the real victims.” And Holden Caulfield’s line in *Catcher in the Rye*, “old Jesus would have puked.”

Add to this Ukraine, nationalism, climate change, cancer, and . . . on and on, to quote Luke, “When the city came into view, he wept over it. ‘If you had only recognized this day, and the opportunity you have for peace!’”

I don’t know about you, but I feel like shutting down – just sit in a stupor and not say anything or do anything. I have no energy while feeling like there is nothing we can do.

T.S. Eliot has a line in his poem *Ash Wednesday* that says, “Teach us to care and not to care.” In other words, there are some things worth crying over and some things not. Learning to know which is which is important.

The ancient Greek speaking Desert Fathers and Mothers of the Eastern Church wrote about *apatheia* and *acedia/akedia*. *Apatheia* (or apathy) originally was a kind of virtue, in which one learned there were some things we should not care about – wealth and power and making a name for ourselves chief among them. They believed we should practice apathy toward those things. Learn not to care for trivialities so we can love what is important.

But they also believed that we had to be careful about *acedia/akedia*, which was the sin of not caring for anything. It was a kind of giving up on love. *Acedia* was closely akin to the sin of despair. Despair, not to be confused with Depression which is a clinical condition related to brain chemistry. Despair is the sin of giving up hope and giving up on God. If *acedia*, one of the seven deadly sins, is not caring, the sin of despair is not hoping.

I remind you that one of the stratagems of the Powers of Domination is demoralization. The cruelties and brutalities and injustice of this world become so overwhelming that we quit hoping – despair. And we quit caring – *acedia*. Which

means we quit being human and we slowly die spiritually. Hence, one of the seven deadly sins (see Belden Lane, “Caring and Not Caring: The Desert Christians on Apathy,” *The Christian Century*, May 18, 2020).

If our spiritual roots in God and God’s Word, in prayer and community are shallow, it is easy for us to become demoralized. We quit resisting the Powers of Domination and they check another off their list.

To hope and to love is hard work. It is difficult. We need to put our roots down deeply.

I think it is interesting that grieving and lamenting are signs of hope. People who express lamentation are people who care. To weep means that you still love.

I remember back in the mid-1980’s when I was an intern with the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America at Oakhurst Baptist Church in Atlanta, one Sunday when the associate pastor, Nancy Sehested preached, she broke down during the sermon and cried. This was back in the early days of women ministers and during the week Nancy received criticism for crying during her sermon. You just didn’t do that in a sermon; it was too feminine.

A few Sundays later, Nancy was again in the pulpit and addressed these criticisms directly. Rather, than practice some sort of stoicism or be in denial about the state of our lives and our world or practice emotional repression, Nancy said that some things are worth crying about. She said we need to be real and sometimes that means weeping.

Nancy was practicing the ancient virtue of *apatheia* – learning to be indifferent about things that did not matter, so she could more deeply love what

does matter. She was practicing what Jesus practiced – lament. And Jesus practiced what the prophets practiced and what the Psalms express.

Did you know that one third of the Psalms are lament psalms? The old rule of thumb about the Psalms is that they are either glad, mad, or sad – some are full of praise and joy, some are psalms of anger, and some are psalms of lament. All the Psalms are about honesty and telling God the truth.

God can be trusted to handle the truth and God can be trusted to honestly hear what we feel and what we think. The main thing is that we keep talking to God. If you don't know what to say or if you need a prompt to get you started, do what the church has done for 20 centuries and what the Jews have done for 30 centuries and pray the psalms. Take one a day and read it out loud, letting it be your prayer. If you want, then pray your own words after the psalm. But be honest and keep talking to God.

Walter Brueggemann says, “To lament the state of things means we must bring our grief, our anger, our sadness, our heartbreak, and our frustration before God. To lament is to cry out, ‘Enough!’ and then look for the hope that arrives through the cracks in our façade of ‘just fine.’ When we allow ourselves space and time to lament fully, to reach the point of saying, ‘No more, O Lord, no more,’ we begin the process of turning from what was to what could be” (from “The Loss of Lament”).

In other words, lament is about hope. To weep over the things that matter means that we're not going to take it anymore. The Powers of Domination love silence. Silence means no one will resist them and no one will raise a ruckus. But to cry and mourn means that we will not be demoralized by the Powers of



Domination. It means we will not cease being human and that we're not going to die a spiritual death without a fight.

It is instructive that Jesus cries over Jerusalem and says, "How often I've ached to embrace your children, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you wouldn't let me." It is instructive, because in the Jewish tradition, lament is to cry to God because God is often a busy mother, washing dishes, cleaning the house, tending to the world, and like an infant, we cry to get God's attention. "I need to be fed!" "I need my diaper changed!" or "Oh, God! Your children are killing one another, please make them stop!"

We cry to God with the hope and expectation that we can get God's attention and, furthermore, God will do something about it.

Last night at SFA, many of us heard Vic sing with the A Cappella Choir. One of the most powerful things we heard was a three-movement portion of the lament called *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* by young Atlanta composer, Joel Thompson. It tells of the tragic and unjust shooting of young African American men. Last night we heard the movements for 17-year-old Trayvon Martin shot in Florida in 2012 by George Zimmerman, 23-year-old Amadou Diallo shot 41 times by police in 1999 in NYC, and Oscar Grant III age 22 shot by police in the rapid transit station in San Francisco in 2009.

They sang, we listened, and we all lamented. We wept.

"Oh, God, please gather your children under your wings. Please, do something and bring peace! Please hear our prayer."

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.