

“Communal Grief”

Lamentations 1:1-6, 3:19-26

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There is something that happens when a city or community experiences a tragedy, whether it is the aftereffects of a major weather system, or an act of mass violence, or a painful breach of trust with ripple effects across a town or church. There is a collective memory that is held in relationship to this event, such that it only takes a single word to shift the energy in a room. I felt this when I lived in Connecticut and someone said, “Newtown” or “Sandy Hook.” In the moment those words are said aloud, everything becomes still, for a long agonizing second.

Written across the faces of the people around you are memories - of people they knew who were impacted, of where they were the Friday when it happened, of the weeks following that horrific day. Some people are unable to move, stuck by grief that is waiting to fall down with tears, unable to be fully present because they have suddenly found themselves in another time and place, a place they hoped to never return to. These are events so powerful and wide sweeping that a single word can collapse time and transport us somewhere else.

Not every community has experienced these events in recent enough memory to have this effect, but many have. In Michigan, I’ve witnessed this happen when people say “Flint” or “Nassar.” One word, and we all know what story we are talking about. Grief, shame, and anger bounce between us - here one second and dissipating into the air in the next.

The book of Lamentations is a book of poetry that captures these collective moments. Lamentations turns those brief flashes of grief into prose that fills its pages. The words that would have triggered the early listeners of Lamentations would have been “Jerusalem” and “The

Temple.” This poetry was written in response to an attack on Jerusalem by the Babylonians, a violent siege that tore their city apart and left them in ruins. The attack lasted for over a year. Their sacred place of worship, Solomon’s Temple, was burned down and destroyed, alongside the lives and livelihoods of many, many Jewish residents.

Lamentations captures a people in grief, pouring out their pain at the violence they have experienced and the despair they feel for their future.

“How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal. She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has not one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies.”

These images and words from Lamentations invite the listener into communal grief. This was not poetry that was kept at home in a private notebook - this was written so that it might be read aloud to crowds. It was written to bring people together in their pain, to give voice to the grief that shaped every action, movement, and decision Jerusalem was faced with in the aftermath of the destruction.

The author of Lamentations did what many of our modern poets and artists do - use compelling images and words to help ease us into the grief we feel and to connect us across our individual emotions and pain - to draw us together into a common story so that we might recognize a shared, larger experience and move from isolation to comfort and perhaps one day even hope. Poets give voice to collective, communal grief, helping us find the shape and boundaries of feelings that often feel overwhelming and all consuming.

When we don't know to how to carry our grief over communal tragedies and events, I believe we turn to our poets and artists to draw us in and help us process what we have experienced. It helps us turn our grief from a private to a shared public experience, and in doing so helps us move through it when alone we might have gotten stuck.

Often I hear concern that we don't know how to grieve anymore, or that we don't give time and space for it. And it's true that given the opportunity, we will gladly turn away from grief and toward something more uplifting. But I think there is a difference in being uncertain about how we should and can grieve together, and doing it. Communal grief takes many forms. For some it means taking to the streets or the capitol or the rock at MSU in protest - shouting our grief in chants and listening to speakers lament injustice. For some folks, we gravitate towards quiet vigils, space to share our fears and sorrows, to ground our lament in prayer and contemplation, lighting candles to remind us that there is still light in the world amidst such pain.

Communal grief is ritualized. It is discovered as we move to be together in community, in silence or in restless discontent, moving our bodies and using our voices, and giving ourselves over to the feelings that bubble beneath the surface and joining together our shared story and sorrow. Sometimes there are tears. Sometimes there is rage. Sometimes there is silence.

One of the aspects of communal grief that is so beautifully captured in Lamentation is the relationship between the griever and God. CS Lewis said that, "God whispers in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains." It is in our pain and grief that we most long for God and to which we turn for comfort and healing.

Lamentations tells the story of a people who turn to God and pour out their sorrow, knowing that God is strong enough and big enough to hold onto it. It tells the story of a Creator who feels the pain of its peoples and grieves with them. It tells the story of a Spirit who moves

through the community, pointing people toward hope and healing that they once thought was impossible. It tells the story of a God whose steadfast love never ends, whose mercies never come to an end, whose faithfulness is great.

There is no end of situations or experiences that send us into grief, both privately and communally. I don't know that expecting an end to grief will do us much good. What does do us good is the reminder that we are not alone. And as often as we encounter pain and violence and loss, so also we might encounter our siblings and friends, traveling the journey of grief alongside, bringing words and images and rituals to embody our emotions, knowing that whenever we do this healing work, whenever we tend to the grief that dwells within us, surely God will be beside us, steadfast and faithful.