



“O Come O Come Emanuel”

My message today comes primarily from the book of Lamentations. Like most pastors, I tend to avoid this book in the Bible. I can't recall ever hearing anyone preach from Lamentations; it is a very odd book. The verses are kind of a downer - consider Lamentations 1:1-2:

“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 no one to comfort her;  
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her,  
they have become her enemies.”

Why would God want this book to be included in the Biblical canon? It helps to know some of the historical context to the book of Lamentations. First, the author was an anonymous survivor of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. After 500 years of self-rule, the city fell to the Babylonians. The fall of Jerusalem was a horrendous time, and Lamentations is a series of 5 poems that describe the pain and anguish of the Jewish people who were living in the aftermath. These people were broken, displaced, confused and ashamed.

The poems of Lamentations dramatically describe this time in history using metaphor and allegory. God promised the land to Abraham, David was given victory to capture Jerusalem, and from him came the succession of Jewish kings. When Jerusalem fell, that line of kings seemed to just... .end

Now we know that Jesus, from the line of David, would eventually fulfill that prophecy and be the ultimate King of Kings. But for God's people living in exile... they didn't. Also, these early Jewish people believed that God's very presence was in the temple. When it was destroyed, God had left the building. They were asking, “Where are you now, God?”

As we read in Lamentations chapter 1, Lady Zion is bereaved, and no one comes to comfort her. The fall of Jerusalem is compared to the death of a loved one. Chapter 2 is about God's wrath and how God confronts sin with just punishment. Chapter 2 asks for mercy, understanding that God's judgment is slow to anger, yet deserved. It also acknowledges that the fall of Jerusalem was not an abandonment by God, but the natural conclusion for disobeying their divine father.

Chapter 3 takes a different vantage point. It is written from the perspective of a lonely man who represents all Jewish people. In chapter 3, the poet finds hope in God's justice. His faith is in God's justice and mercy. He trusts in God's

covenant not to let evil have the last word. Chapter 4 is a depiction of the two-year siege of Jerusalem. Children used to play and laugh; now they beg for food. The anointed king from the line of David was dragged away.

Chapter 5 is a communal prayer for God's mercy. The poet speaks on behalf of all of Israel. In Chapter 5, Israel implores that God will hear their prayers and not ignore their suffering. The 5<sup>th</sup> poem gives a list of those who suffer from the fall of Jerusalem. The poet asks God not to forget these people or abandon them.

The final words of the book don't offer a nice, neat conclusion. They say:

"Restore us to yourself, O Lord,  
that we may be restored;  
renew our days as of old—  
unless you have utterly rejected us,  
and are angry with us beyond measure."

Thank goodness the Bible doesn't end here! The people who first heard this were in the middle of deep suffering. They didn't know that Jesus was coming. From our post-resurrection vantage point, we have a lot of answers. But for them, they only have questions like "why?" and "where are you, Lord?" and "how long must we wait?"

Let's go back to my original question: why does God want these poems in the Bible? Lamentations are a memorial. It helps tell the whole story of God's people and our journey to get where we are. The poems are similar to the Psalms in that they give voice to the suffering of God's people. They are a form of venting, giving voice to confusion, a confusion that we all feel at times. They are a form of protest, a protest over just accepting things for the way they are, hoping instead for a reality more like the kingdom Jesus describes.

And Lamentations dignify human suffering. This book reminds us that as God's people we are not alone in our struggles. It shows how God asks us not to hide our emotions, but to cry out in protest to a fallen and imperfect world. Lament, prayer and grief are a crucial part of the human experience as God's people.

For us, living in today's world, we may not be living in exile. We may not be enduring the specific hardships of the Jewish people in the ancient world. But our hurts, our pains, our worries and our laments are just as present, and just as powerful for us today.

We do have something that the author of Lamentations didn't have... and that is Jesus. Jesus had not entered the world in human form yet, so this poet had no idea of the hope that God would bring the world through Jesus. The laments and prophecies of old were answered in the New Testament.

The laments of today are addressed as well in 1 Peter chapter 5: "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you... [be] steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering."

This is such an important message, especially this time of year. The Christmas season tends to amplify our emotions. Our happiness and our love are all heightened in this season of joy. Our sadness and grief are also elevated. The first Christmas after you lose someone close to you is really hard.

Christmas is the most wonderful time of year, but for many of us, it can be fraught with worry, fear, sadness, a sense of scarcity, and a sense of loss. The unfortunate truth this holiday season is that many of us are suffering - millions of us, actually. The pandemic prevents us from reaching out for the comfort of family and friends, gathering together

with them. It is truly difficult for many of us not to be physically in church this time of year. We know how it feels to be the people of Jerusalem, separated from the temple.

But listen to the words of 1 Peter 5:10: "And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you." Our suffering will not last forever. We will not be without family and friends forever. We will be together again in church one day. God promises us - all of us - that an end will come to our trials and tribulations. We must trust in that. We must hope.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as we prepare our hearts for the coming of our Savior and King Jesus, let us offer our laments to God, just as God's people have always done, trusting that God hears our prayers. And to truly prepare our hearts for this Christmas season of Advent, let us allow God's hope to fill our hearts, replacing our laments with joy and faith, love and peace.

O come; O come Emmanuel  
And ransom captive Israel  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to you, O Israel.  
Amen.