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Listening to Lament

Tim Hart-Andersen

Sunday, February 28, 2021

Lamentations 1:1-4

Scholar Kathleen O'Connor describes the Book of Lamentations in the Hebrew Scriptures as, "A searing book of taut, charged poetry on the subject of unspeakable suffering. The poems," she says, "Emerge from a deep wound, a whirlpool of pain." ("The Book of Lamentations," in *The New Interpreter's Bible, vol. 6* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001], p. 1-13)

The *whirlpool of pain* in our nation caused by the coronavirus pandemic was made more vivid this week as we passed the milestone of 500,000 lives lost. In our scripture reading this morning we will hear the opening lines of the Book of Lamentations, as we *listen to the collective lament* of our land.

Let us pray: God of love, you are Lord of all in this life and the next. Open us by the power of your Spirit to hear your

word to us this day, as our lament joins that of your people long ago. Amen.

The reading today is Lamentations 1:1-4. Listen for the word of God:

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.

Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard
servitude;

she lives now among the nations, and finds no resting
place;

her pursuers have all overtaken her
in the midst of her distress.

The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to the
festivals;

all her gates are desolate, her priests groan;

her young girls grieve, and her lot is bitter.

How lonely sits the city – the nation – that once was full of people!

We begin today by hearing the names of ten individuals from across the country who have died from Covid. We will do this five times during the sermon. Each name we hear, each candle we light, represents 10,000 lives lost to Covid in our land.

Pastor Kevelin B. Jones Sr., 72, Flint, MI

Kim Forn Luey, 79, Portland, OR

Jesse "Jay" Taken Alive, 65, Standing Rock Sioux
Reservation

Erika Becerra, 33, Detroit, MI

Abdulkadir Mohamed Mursal, 67, Minneapolis

Nola Mae Moore, 88, Shoreline, WA

Dar'Yana Dyson, 15, Baltimore, MD

Dr. Juan Fitz, 67, Lubbock, TX

Tou-Fu Vang, 76, Minneapolis

Ramón Román, 52, Brooklyn, NY

Last week, on the first Sunday of Lent, I encouraged the congregation to go into the wilderness with Jesus and

listen in this season. Into the desert we went, attentive to what we might hear, and on Monday the sound came to us. It was the sound of names. That was the day we passed 500,000 lives gone from Covid.

The scale of loss from the pandemic is hard to grasp. It can numb us. We look the other way and try to avoid being drawn into the whirlpool of pain ourselves. It's more than our human hearts can handle.

Scripture is replete with lament. Remember Rachel weeping for her children? Remember the wisdom of Ecclesiastes – that for everything there is a season, including *a time to mourn*? More than one third of the Psalms are poems of lament, expressing the anguish of the people of God.

Sometimes a *collective* cry goes up. At one point when ancient Israel is surrounded and surely doomed, the king lifts a lament to the heavens on behalf of the people. It sounds like many of us earlier in this awful past year: “We are powerless against this great multitude coming against us,” the king says. “We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.” (2 Chronicles 20:12)

Sometimes the pain in scripture is more personal. Here's Job: "Why did I not perish at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?" (Job 3:11)

The Book of Lamentations voices the suffering of a land that has been overrun, defeated by forces beyond its control. *How lonely sits the nation that once was full of people!*

Blanca Margarita Ramirez Gonzalez, 23, Huron, SD

The Rev. Sherrie Dobbs, 72, Holmdel, NJ

Lilliantyne Fields, 89, Renton, WA

Amihilda Halim Menina, 76, Livingston, NJ

Marcus Pino, 42, Alamo Navajo Community, NM

Hector Rocha, 83, Houston, TX

Adiel Montgomery, 39, New York, NY

Arnold Obey, 73, San Juan Puerto Rico

Isabelle Papadimitriou, 63, Dallas, TX

Pearl Pruse, 75, Oahu, HI

Next to each one, 10,000 others.

"I have called you by name," God says in the voice of the prophet Isaiah. "You are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you." (Isaiah 43:1b-2a)

When a nation grieves massive loss of life, it must do so in a way that makes the sorrow real and personal, not detached and political. The names matter. We all share the suffering.

I was in Washington, D.C., on Veterans Day, November 13, 1982, when the Vietnam Memorial was dedicated. As some may remember, considerable controversy surrounded the design of architect Maya Lin. People wanted a memorial that might project the heroism of our troops, or the circumstances in which they fought. Instead the design offered, simply, the names. *The lives.*

On that day in 1982 I got to the Memorial late at night. Small hushed groups of people were clustered along the wall that pierced and then emerged from the earth. They were lighting candles, leaving notes and flowers, recounting memories, weeping. They were there *because the names were there.* The lives were there.

Part of the whirlpool of pain over these pandemic months has been the fact that so many died without family near them. Death is hard enough, but when it happens at a distance the heart bears a burden of a different sort.

Our faith holds fast to the claim that God never leaves us. This past year I supported a Westminster member through the cancer death of their loved one, and could be with them only by phone. This happened again and again in the care our pastors provided this past year. The phrase we kept saying over and over again, in order to make the grief a bit more bearable, was, simply, “You are not alone.”

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.

Rev. Simplicio Granado, 65, Salinas, CA
Mercia Bowser, 64, District of Columbia
Corrine Thinn, 44, Navajo Nation, Arizona
Petra Karr, 59, Sumner Washington
Gary Washington, 56, New York, NY
Michael Lang, 18, Dayton, OH
James Simpson, 28, Burian, WA
Unnamed incarcerated man, 57, Faribault, MN
Dr. Susan Moore, 52, Indianapolis, IN
Leola Bear Runner, 78, Pine Ridge, SD

When the AIDS pandemic devastated the nation, starting in the 1980s, the loss in some communities was overwhelming. San Francisco activist Cleve Jones came up

with the idea of making quilts to celebrate the lives of those who died from AIDS. The idea caught on both as a way to remember lives, but also to defy stigmatization.

It took Covid less than one year to surpass the number who died of AIDS in its first *two decades* in the US. We learned from our sorrow during the AIDS crisis that *names matter*.

My wife Beth and I were on the Mall in Washington DC in October 1996, the last time the full Names Project Quilt was laid out. It's now too big to show in one place. We spent hours walking between and around and among thousands of quilts – *thousands of names*. All those lives.

We said the names aloud. We heard others saying them, or sharing stories, rising up across the Mall. We watched the tears and saw the silent heartache. We were listening to lament.

How do we address the enormity of what has happened with Covid? How do we comprehend the loss of life? How do we respond? Our Jewish siblings have asked those questions, and the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem is their response. It's called *Yad Vashem*. It means, simply: *a*

memory and a name. To keep the name is to preserve a memory. We honor a life, and they are not forgotten.

A memory and a name.

Judy Wilson-Griffin, 63, Springfield, VA

Hermán G. Carrillo, 59, Detroit, MI

Skylar Herbert, 5, Detroit, MI

Edna Adams, 105, District of Columbia

Wogene Debele, 43, Takoma Park, MD

Chianti "Tiki" Jackson Harpool, 51, Baltimore, MD

Margit Buchhalter Feldman, 90, Morristown, NJ

Leilani Jordan, 27, Largo, MD

Tom Poor Bear, 66, Wanblee, SD

Rev. Dr. Kejuane Artez Bates, 36, Vidalia, LA

I first realized the power in the name of someone who had died when my family visited St. Paul's in London. I was 13 years old. When we entered the American Memorial Chapel in the vast cathedral, my dad approached the glass case holding a book full of the names of U.S. soldiers who had been in the UK and had died in World War II. The pages of the huge book are turned every day. My dad looked at the open page in the book and saw the name of

one of his close friends who had served with him and had been killed in the war. He was overcome with emotion.

It was only a name on a page, and more than 20 years after he had died, but the name belonged to a life, a friend, a son, a brother. Each name we hear today represents 10,000 lives. A mom. A dad. Stories of a Grandfather, an auntie, a child, sibling, great-grandmother, co-worker, teacher, nurse, neighbor.

This pandemic is no respecter of persons. Every community has been touched by it, some more than others.

It's important to listen to lament, not to gloss over the loss, or turn away. Healing begins there, at the sound of a name, in the whirlpool pain. Change commences when we remember. The memory of these lives calls us to transform the inequities in our healthcare systems, which have been laid bare by Covid. Death on such a scale exposes injustice.

During the conflicts in Latin America in the 1990s, when people would suddenly disappear with no trace, at all churches across our country held vigils to honor the lives

of *los desaparecidos*. *The disappeared ones*. I used to go a gathering at a local Catholic church on Friday evenings. Each week they would read more names, and after each name they would pause, and the congregation would shout with a mixture of lament and anger: *presente!*

Presente! Present. Not forgotten. Can we hear that word as we listen to the names?

Rev. Dr. Allan Janssen, 72, New Brunswick, NJ

Siddiq Mohamed Arab, 83, Waterloo, IA

Dr. Adeline Fagan, 28, Syracuse, NY

Brenda Lee Monson, 59, Ramsey, MN

Isai Morocho, 16, Madison, WI

Alexa Rose Veit, 15, Barlow, KY

Yu Lihua, 90, Schenectady, N.Y

Tyler Amburgey, 29, Peoria, TX

Seymour Young Dog, 77, Pine Ridge, SD

Alfonso Cardenas, 55, Tampa, FL

How lonely sits the nation that once was full of people!

Thanks be to God for these lives, and for a love that sustains us in this life and the next. *Requiem aeternam.*

Eternal rest, grant unto them, O Lord, and may light perpetual shine upon them. Amen.