

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

LAMENTING IN HOPE

Law-Gospel Dynamics in Lamentations

Lamentations 3:22-33

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Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

22The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; 23they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 24“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” 25The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. 26It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. 27It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth, 28to sit alone in silence when the Lord has imposed it, 29to put one’s mouth to the dust (there may yet be hope), 30to give one’s cheek to the smiter, and be filled with insults. 31For the Lord will not reject forever. 32Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; 33for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.

Author’s Note: The book of Lamentations is a small (five in all) collection of communal lament songs (psalms) written and sung in response to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 B.C. The singers or worshippers would have been a small remnant of those few who were left behind. The portion before us in Chapter 3 is the author’s attempt to preach good news (God’s mercy) in the face of the bad news (God’s chastisement) that has fallen upon Jerusalem. As such, the book is a fine example of a Crossings style diagnosis/prognosis interpretation of Judah’s present situation.

DIAGNOSIS: Lamenting Over Many Enemies

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Judah Lamenting Babylon as Enemy*

In 587 BCE, the unthinkable happened: Judah fell to the Babylonians, their enemy. Chapter 1 of Lamentations describes the immediate situation: “Her foes have become her masters, her enemies prosper” (1:5). As a result, Judah now has no place on the geo-political stage of power. Its leaders are shipped off into exile; it’s religious and cultural heritage is crushed to rubble; its former allies are in no position to help. Indeed, those allies had no desire to help. To be sure, to those who had ears to hear, this should have been no surprise. God had sent a whole series of prophets to warn Judah. Nevertheless, now they found themselves gathered in a ceremony of lament in the midst of their city, their nation in ruins.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Judah Lamenting Her Nationalist Ideology as Enemy*

Why this happened needs revealing—and that’s precisely what the writer of Lamentations attempts to do. This moment in history is not explainable simply in geo-political terms. This calamity did not happen simply because of the failure of will or a miscalculation of the geo-political situation. This happened because of a misplaced faith. Chapter 1 also gives some of the clues here: “I [Judah] have rebelled against his [the Lord’s] word” (2:18). Judah sought her security in other “lovers” (theologically and ethically compromising political alliances) but they “deceived her” (1:19). It would seem that Reinhold Niebuhr’s critique—that the “moral man, immoral society” ideology justifies the misdeeds of the nation-state—applies to Judah well. Judah has turned God’s election of her into a self-serving political ideology. But here we learn that

political/national ideology (even when theologically argued) provides no security for either the nation as a whole or its individual members. All “great nations,” all “patriotic enthusiasts” ... beware!

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Judah Lamenting God as Enemy*

As if human enemies, like Babylon, and misplaced faith in political ideologies weren't enough to deal with, the poet of Lamentations says that the greatest enemy of Judah was its very own Lord. Chapter 2 provides theological revelation of this most dangerous dimension of Judah's situation in verse after verse. I mention only two: “How the Lord in his anger has humiliated daughter Zion!” (2:1); and “The Lord has become like an enemy; he has destroyed Israel” (2:5). The world belongs to the Lord, much to the disbelief of “great nations.” Israel's apostasy, its ideology of world dominance, means it has gone the way of the “great nations.” But great nations, Judah included, are no match for the word and will of the Lord. Great nations in their arrogance may rise and reign for a season, but even then, they are allowed to reign only as the instrument of God's anger against all forms of political ideology. Judah's downfall and lament is a testimony to the wrath of God on all such apostasy.

PROGNOSIS: Hoping in the Mercy of God

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God Lamenting His Wrath and the Sign of the Cross*

But wrath is not necessarily the end of the will and word of God upon apostate Judah and apostate nations. To the world's great surprise, right in the middle of this penitential collection of laments (Chapter 3, the text for the day), comes a countervailing word of hope. The God of wrath who “destroyed without mercy” (2:2), that is, the Lord of history who is absolutely right in his anger, nevertheless, laments that self-

same anger. The text variously calls that countervailing word, the “steadfast love” of the Lord and the “mercy” of God (3:22) and, furthermore, describes it as “everlasting,” in that it “never ceases” or “never comes to an end” (3:22). Indeed, it is precisely because this word of mercy is everlasting that it can overrule the word of wrath. To be sure, at the time Lamentations is written we have no clue as to how the word of mercy will come in this world, among the nations, in a way that is as historically concrete and tangible as the word of anger. Then, when Lamentations was written, the word of mercy existed as a promise of “the salvation of the Lord” (3:26) yet to be realized. Since then, however, it has been realized in the coming of Jesus the Christ. Jesus is Lamentations’ Word of promise fulfilled among Judah and the nations in a historically, concrete way. By taking up the cross, Jesus is God, historically and concretely, lamenting God’s very own wrath upon Judah and apostate nations. In rising from the dead, Jesus is God exhausting God’s very own wrath in himself (specifically, in God the Son, the second person of the Trinity), bringing forth “mercies [that] never come to an end” (3:22), the promise of new and everlasting life in him. The death and resurrection of Jesus is the historical fulfillment of God’s promise to offer mercy as a never ending alternative to a world rightly slated for God’s anger.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Judah Hopes in God’s Lament*

So, how do Judah and the nations become trans-referenced from subjects of the word of wrath to subjects of the word of mercy. Answer: by faith in that word of mercy even though the evidence of the alternative word of anger is still all around them. Lamentations calls such faith by the name “hope” (3:23) and describes it as “wait[ing] quietly for the salvation of the Lord.” Faith means abandoning other “lovers,” those who

“deceive” (cf. 2:19), and “seek[ing] him” (3:25) as our “steadfast love[]” (3:22), whose “mercies never come to an end” (3:22). Faith means having the “Lord [as] my portion” (3:24). To be sure, even today, faith consists in “wait[ing] quietly,” that is, trusting in what Christ has accomplished in his death and resurrection will eventually be accomplished on us. Knowing that, we sing with the poet of Lamentations: “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him” (3:24).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Judah’s Lament Is a Sign of Hope for the Nations*

Finally, what does such faith mean for the hope of the nations? Here the fact of the lament itself, that it is spoken by that remnant of believers left behind in Jerusalem, is of utmost importance. Events like the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE could be (and often is) used by the nations as a sign of God’s weakness—to justify the prevailing political ideologies that fortify national prowess, and as evidence that the God of Israel is not really in charge of history or able to deliver his people from their enemies. Faced with that cynical assessment, the remnant residing in a destroyed Jerusalem simply told the truth. Ultimately, God will not allow a people or nation to assert that their power is from God, if it is done only for the sake of political expediency or personal or corporate gain. The people of God, who are guilty of such an apostasy, are now, by faith in God’s never-ending mercy, in the best position to assert that truth. Lamentations calls all believers in God’s mercy to place that mercy in the context of their iniquities and God’s wrath: “Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord” (3:40). Only then will God truly be confessed before the nations (with historical concreteness) as all powerful, but, more importantly, as the One whose “steadfast love... never ceases” (3:22).