

# Abandoned Places

A sermon expositing Romans 5:1-5 and Lamentations 1:1-6

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“I was just thinking maybe you could go in and cheer her up,” she said. A nurse at a local hospital had paged me in the night. “Her mother just died and I just thought she could use somebody right now,” she explained. She meant that her mother had *just* died fifteen minutes prior and she wanted me to “cheer her up.” It wasn’t the first time I had received a request like that as a chaplain, nor my colleagues. Some of them believe this kind of request arises from a misunderstanding of what we do in times of loss and pain. That may be, and this may be splitting hairs, but I think it arises instead from a misunderstanding of the role of loss and pain in our lives. I think what that nurse, who had otherwise done a magnificent job of caring for this family during their matriarch’s end-of-life, was getting at was something we’re all tempted to do, indeed humanity has always been tempted to do. One of the most powerful tools in the study of the New Testament letters is the recognition that writers do not answer questions that hadn’t risen at least implicitly in the lives and culture of those they write to. When the Apostle Paul argues in our reading this morning that suffering isn’t all loss, it’s because suffering was even then considered shameful, weak, and entirely undesirable. That nurse recognized pain, and it was uncomfortable so she tried to snuff it out just like we humans have always done. Because that’s what we do with pain, that’s all we do with pain. It’s as if we only live during times of joy and happiness, but somehow cease to exist during times of grief and loss. Therefore, we should avoid grief and rescue others from theirs whatever the price.

We certainly seem to put a lot of effort to that end. How often in our world are tears on the part of one met with, “Oh come on now, don’t cry,” on the part of another? How many of the self-destructive behaviors our world offers are begun in attempt to “take the edge off” of the implicit loneliness of the age we live in? Dr. Jerry Duvinsky, author of *How to Lose Control: and Gain Emotional Freedom*, lists mechanisms by which we try to avoid the “dark emotions”: preoccupation with financial and material accumulation, procrastination, social withdrawal and avoidance, lying/cheating, self-cutting/self-injury, withdrawing/withholding, thrill seeking, tattoos, irresponsible expression of sexuality, caloric restriction, vomiting, cleaning, worrying, obsessing, and hoarding. He notes, “This list is far from exhaustive.”

In a sense, a large part of human existence is given to running from pain. Consider even our lesson from Lamentations this morning. It’s dark!

Written in reflection upon a period of time in which a very proud people, The Israelites, faced great collective loss, it’s not exactly an “upper.” Believing their land and their way of life were an irrevocable, unqualified gifts from God they set about building a society they believed could be a blessing to the whole world. A temple to YHWH, their God, stood in their Holy City, Jerusalem, and was a wonder to behold. They lived in the protection and security of God and lived on God’s provision from the land – until they didn’t. In the

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Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

year 586 or 587 Babylonian armies laid siege to their Holy City, and forced anybody who was anybody to uproot their existence in the promised land and migrate to a foreign and seeming profane place. Their glorious temple was destroyed and seemingly with it, the very presence of YHWH.

Lamentations is a powerful reflection on that experience. It personifies the beloved Holy City as a once proud princess now subjugated to foreign rulers, as a person betrayed by her closest friends and left alone in bitterness. It calls to mind the once jubilant festivals in celebration of God and nation packing the streets now desolate and empty. The rulers of Judah are thought of as deer chased away by predators. These words, now something near 2500 years old still cut straight to our core. If you let them, they'll draw blood dragging up the sorrow and devastation we've shoved into the unattended places of our lives. They will certainly pick at any suffering near the surface. Some would say that a preacher is better not to evoke the pain their hearers carry – another attempt, I think, to hide from grief. Generally we don't let these words broach our ears. How many times do we turn to lamentations for devotional reading? When I told my friend Rabbi Friedman some years ago that I was planning to preach on Lamentations that week he said, "Why!? Don't you know what that's about?" He was *partially* joking. We do with these words the same thing we do with Good Friday every year. It's the day in the Christian year that we thrust ourselves into the depth of despair in reflection upon the death of Jesus, but we try so hard to make it a happy occasion. "Jesus died for us" we recall almost forgetting that sentence begins with "Jesus died." We're tempted to give sorrow no time. Good Friday services across the land will end with the words, "It's Friday, but Sunday's comin'." Whatever happened to just plain, simple "it's Friday." Where O death is thy sting? Stashed away in a closet somewhere, we don't like to bring it out.

So too with Lamentations. When we do study it we do so only in passing, the pages turning before we've even let the words wash over us. We're ready to get on to the good news. We read it in hind sight saying, "See this is the depths we've come from, aren't you glad that's over?" We can't tarry here, that would be unfaithful – to say such things, to complain so. That would be so unfaithful we tell ourselves, God wants us to think positively.

And yet, here it stands amid Holy Scripture. The Apostle Paul beckons us this day to stop running from suffering, to stop hiding our suffering – to try to alleviate suffering on the part of others before it begins, yes – but to pretend that it doesn't exist once it's come, no. Embrace pain and find hope from within it.

You see, there's the power of our understanding of suffering. When I said that just now, "...find hope within it," it felt wrong to say that. It felt like it trivializes suffering. It felt like for those who know suffering all too well saying such a thing might deepen it, darken it. I didn't want to say say it. I wanted to leave grief alone, unmentioned. That's the power of suffering to hide in our culture and in our lives. No more.

I came across an image not long ago. It was an abandoned miniature golf course. The iconic windmill obstacle lay on its side broken and crumbling. The plaster-built moat ran dry, overgrowth swallowed the holes. I don't know why it struck me as a particularly emotive picture, but I couldn't stop looking. It felt like I could hear the fading sound of a child's laughter in looking upon a place of amusement and joy left in ruins. I didn't know the story, I just felt – pain. It made me sad.

I looked a little further into the photo and discovered there are several artists working in the area of photography of abandoned places. These photos follow tragedy, disaster, financial ruin. Each conjures a different flavor of pain, each seems to connect in an indirect and abstract way to feelings I've experienced in my life, perhaps that's why I kept looking at image after image. Or perhaps there was something else stirring alongside my sorrow, it was beauty. They were all beautiful pictures. I loved looking at them even though it hurt a little.

I wonder if beauty and pain co-exist.

I know I'm treading in sensitive territory here. I don't want to imply that there is beauty in tragedy, in loss, in death. There are things in the world that are simply ugly. Hatred, predatory power, cancer. There is nothing beautiful about these and I don't mean to suggest there is. I only mean that when loneliness, insecurity, alienation, shame, rejection, fear, abandonment and others take hold and we find a way to embrace them we may find an unexpected beauty within. Not joy, I don't mean a working through sorrow until it becomes joy. I mean actually within the depths of pain there may be something beautiful.

As a chaplain, I couldn't count the number of times I waited with families while their loved ones reached the end of cherished lives and someone said, "It wasn't what I expected." Amid their tears they would say, "I'll miss him, I'll miss her, but I'm glad I was here. It was so peaceful." You see, I think that when time and circumstance have allowed us to become fully present with our pain, truly breathing it in it becomes something else. It becomes lament.

That's what the book of Lamentations is, it's a full, gritty, unflinching expression of the loss of an entire people and it tells us something about God that we cannot know in any place other than an abandoned place. When we sit amid the rubble, when the tears have run out, when all is lost, when nothing's left, the shouting stops, and all falls silent we find ourselves in abandoned places. It is here that we learn God is with us, not offering quick fixes or cheap tricks, not running from our despair, but joining us in it. You see, lament isn't unfaithful at all. To breathe out such stunningly raw, magnificently sharp, beautifully painful expressions requires a belief that someone is listening, that someone is with you, with us. Lament may be the most faithful thing we could possibly do.

Amen.