

## **PENTECOST PROPER 22 C 2010**

The book of Lamentations – from which our first reading this morning is taken – is attributed to the prophet Jeremiah. It is a response to the destruction of the nation of Judah, and of her prize city Jerusalem, by Babylonian invaders in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Jeremiah's lament captures the sentiments of the Israelites who remained in Judah after the invasion, and sought to carry on amidst the ruins.

Our Psalm this morning speaks of the same period in Judah's history, but it is written from the perspective of the Israelites who were carried away into exile. Interestingly, both Lamentations and the Psalm are written in verse. Poetry, if you will. It seems that if one must speak of sorrow "too deep for words," one should do so with great economy. Far better to evoke than to describe.

It is difficult to say who has the harder time of it, those who live among the ruins or those who live in exile. To be sure, this isn't a competition, and if it were, both contenders would gladly be declared the loser. Ultimately, living among the ruins and living in exile are different forms of the same thing, different ways of existing separate and apart from that which nurtures and sustains us. In both cases we feel like strangers in a strange land. The principal difference is in whether we find ourselves in completely foreign surroundings, or whether that which is familiar has somehow been rendered strange.

Exile is not exactly unknown in our modern world. Consider, for example, Palestinian refugees living in camps and longing for a homeland. Or the people of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, forced into exile by Hurricane Katrina and not yet able to return to the land and the waterways that for so long defined their existence. Consider, as well, the hundreds of thousands of Haitians who were driven from their towns and villages by a devastating earthquake this past January, and the millions of Pakistanis who have been displaced by flooding on a scale we can scarcely comprehend. And then there are those who have been displaced by war, in such disparate places as Afghanistan, the Sudan, and the Congo.

Exile is also a reality in cities and towns all across this great land of ours, especially in municipalities that have lost their industrial base, or have otherwise suffered from a fundamental change in their economic structure. Exiles have long-since

## Page 2

Pentecost Proper 22 C 2010

fled from much of rural America, thanks to changes wrought by agribusiness and the globalization of agriculture. And in each and every one of these situations and circumstances, there are matched sets of people who remain behind amidst the ruin and rubble, trying desperately to piece together a semblance of lives that will never be the same.

Our lessons this morning capture the rawness of the feelings that are unleashed when people are uprooted, or when the very ground in which they are planted has shifted. Jeremiah says of Jerusalem: "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." The Psalmist speaks in even harsher terms: "O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!"

Raw human emotion, expressed in unflinching terms. The compilers of Scripture chose not to airbrush a thing. These expressions of desolation, despair, betrayal and revenge are not the end of the story, but they are very much a *part* of the story, and a place where we are invited to dwell. It always feels a bit strange to me to say "The word of the Lord; thanks be to God" after passages such as these are read, but they are meant to inform and instruct us every bit as much as passages that are more uplifting.

I suspect that few of us have experienced the kind of devastation and dislocation that prompted this morning Old Testament passages, or that is the fate of millions of people even today. But that doesn't mean that we are unfamiliar with the feeling of exile, of having the ground shift under us, of having a world that is dear to us suddenly change in ways that leave us feeling like outsiders looking in. And the fact we have not been taken into captivity by an invading country, nor had our lives ripped apart by an earthquake or flood does not invalidate the fact that on occasion we may feel like a stranger in a strange land, or more confusing still, a stranger in a once familiar land. For some of us, this feeling of dislocation, disorientation and estrangement occurs within a community that we hold dear. For some, it occurs within our own families. And for some of us the feeling of being a stranger in a strange land happens within our own skin, so much so that we no longer recognize who it is that seems to be inhabiting our own body.

Next week Jeremiah will have something helpful to say about how we might respond in a practical way to the feeling of being in exile, and of being displaced. In the book that bears his name, he offers wise counsel about how to foster hope and counter despair. It's funny, I never thought that I would look to the book of Jeremiah as a source of good cheer. Be that as it may, this morning we are stuck with the Book of Lamentations, and it is difficult to find a good word in it. And yet, I am convinced that a good word is in fact embedded there.

And the word is "the Word." The Word that has been present from the beginning, and *will* be present for all of eternity. My brothers and my sisters: God is still standing. Despite the exploits of marauding nations, despite the faithlessness of the Israelites, despite *our* faithlessness, despite hurricanes and floods and earthquakes, despite our penchant for warfare, despite our tendency to create God in our own image, despite despite despite ... *God* has not gone into exile. God remains *steadfast*. We may be feeling dispirited, but the *Holy Spirit* has plenty in reserve. We may be at loose ends, but God still has it all together. We may be exhausted, but God is inexhaustible. We may be ready to give up, but God will never abandon *us*. We may be weighed down with bitterness and grief. No problem; God can handle it. Whatever it is, God can handle it. We do get to lament, but we should also take heart in the assurance that at the end of the day, God is still standing.

And since we are the people of God, made in God's own image, we dare not sell ourselves short. We are a blessed people. We are a graced people. And we are a people of obligation. No matter how out of sorts we might feel from time to time, no matter how unappreciated or misunderstood or estranged we may feel at any given moment, we have a gospel to spread; we have God's mission to pursue; we have a planet to take care of; and there are people who need to experience God's love through us.

So then, let us join Jeremiah in his lament, and unashamedly add our own alongside his. But let us also share in his recognition that at the end of the day we should give it all up to God – our sorrows, our frustrations, our anxieties ... all of it – and then be about the business of being God's people in the world. Amen.