

A Defining Moment

Lamentations 3:1-26

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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On Wednesday morning, a pastor friend sent out an intriguing text to a group chat I am a part of.

It's an interesting mix of guys. We're all roughly the same age, although some have younger kids and some, like me, are the parents of adults.

Some I have known since I was a teenager, others I have only gotten to know recently through mutual friends. Some have been lifelong committed Christians; others came to faith later in life or are hovering on the periphery of the church.

Ordinarily, the group chat is pretty light banter about sports, music, sharing funny memes and videos, etc. There are occasional serious interludes, but by and large it's pretty light fare.

Wednesday morning was different. At 8:36 am, the following message pinged on my phone:

Today I read in my devotional that "we will experience a defining moment in our lives that will shape our faith if we let it." **Would you say you could name at least one in your life? How did it shape your faith?**

I'm not going to lie; I expected the question to land with a bit of a thud.

Group chats aren't typically the best place for in depth sharing. There are different kinds of relationships within any group. What you might be comfortable sharing with one person isn't necessarily what you'd want to share with the whole group.

But it was fascinating to observe what followed. There were some fairly deep and reflective answers. And every response included some reference to hardship of some kind.

One spoke of going through his young son having a brain tumour and learning to lean on God for strength to endure what was beyond his control.

One spoke of going through a time of serious illness and isolation which was followed two months later with his wife's cancer diagnosis and the long journey of chemo and radiation that followed. He spoke of learned God's peace in a new way, of coming to inhabit the words, "Be still and know that I am God."

One pointed to a cancer scare in his twenties that reignited his faith and changed his life from that day forward. He wondered if he needed to think back to that time more than he had been.

One talked about experiencing death. A friend who died in a tragic accident in high school, his dad, his grandparents, others who were close to him. He said that he had learned to hold on to the comfort and presence of God's character in many situations in his life.

One talked about a marriage that was on the verge of divorce and about how God spoke to him in a dream, promising that they would have a child. He told his wife about the dream and it instilled a confidence in them that their marriage would survive. Soon after this, they were pregnant. He talked about how grateful he was for the faithfulness of God.

I spoke of our journey with infertility and adoption, and the ways this led me deeper into explorations of race, family, belonging, and God as adoptive father.

All in all, it was a fascinating and inspiring collection of responses.

It reminded me of the importance of being curious about people's lives. It reminded me of what can happen when you have the courage to ask a good question.

And, again, I was struck by that common thread that ran throughout each response.

When asked to point to a defining moment in our lives that shaped our faith, nearly all of us pointed to a time of trial, a time of suffering, a time when we had come to the end of our resources and had to rely on God alone.

I wonder how you would answer the question? Would you say you could name at least one defining moment in your life? Maybe it's the experience of these last three months!

How did it shape your faith? Did it draw you closer to God? Did it shatter some illusions about God? Did it lead you to deeper questions and more devoted prayer? Did it destabilize your faith?

I invite you to think about these questions.

It's good to actually think about our lives periodically—about where we've been, where we're going, and what it all means. It's very easy to just settle into the humdrum rhythms of daily life without pausing to remember or interpret our own experiences and how God might be speaking to us along the way.

A pandemic is as good a time as any to do this remembering, asking, and interpreting.

In order to interpret our lives and God's presence in them, we need to listen to those who have gone before us. We need good categories to think with. We need a vocabulary of faith.

The Psalms are one place that many people turn for this vocabulary.

The rock singer Bono once had a conversation with the late Eugene Peterson about the Psalms. He said that read them like a musician and that it seemed to him that you could divide the Psalms into two basic categories: gospel and the blues.

This is true. There are beautiful expressions of hope in the goodness of God. There is also bitter complaining, anguish, anger, and sorrow. Sometimes this takes place in the same psalm!

The Psalms give voice to the full range of human experience. They train us to pray and to speak honestly to God.

In a sermon last Sunday, Brian Zahnd said it this way: "Prayer that is always sweet is not honest prayer. Sometimes prayer should be sour."¹

He's right, isn't he? So often we think that our prayers ought to be these saintly well-crafted expressions of appropriate piety and deference. It's especially easy for those of us who pray in public to almost treat them as performances, making sure we hit all the right notes.

We so easily gravitate toward the sweet rather than the sour in our words about and to God.

¹ <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/word-of-life-church-podcast/id83833326?i=1000474892667>

The Psalms help us to be honest.

What is true of the Psalms is also true of the book of Lamentations, the collection of poetic laments written in the aftermath of the Babylonian exile that our reading is taken from this morning.

We have both gospel and the blues, sweet and sour in one chapter.

I am the one who has seen affliction...

So begins the lament. The prophet Jeremiah is traditionally thought to be the author, although there is some disagreement amongst scholars about this.

But whoever is writing these words is facing a defining moment in their life and in the life of their people. They are suffering. Everything familiar and good has been taken from them. They feel abandoned and adrift.

What follows is twenty verses of fairly brutal and raw expressions of pain. And not only is the writer expressing his despair at his circumstances; he is attributing his pain directly to the hand of God!

Did you notice that? Did you notice who was the subject of the writer's lament?

He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light..

He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship...

He has walled me in so I cannot escape...

Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer...

He has barred my way...

God is even compared to a predator (lion, bear) who is out to destroy.

This is hard language. I suspect not many of us feel the freedom to speak this way in the midst of our pain.

And I *also* suspect that few of us are comfortable attributing our suffering directly to the hand of God. God is good, God is love. God is the one who can turn our sorrow into gladness. God can redeem our suffering, but he surely doesn't *cause* it.

It can be psychologically impossible to imagine that the same God who weeps over our tears is their direct source! Can the one who offers comfort be the same one who inflicted the pain?

This is an important question.

I think we should be careful about constructing firm and inflexible theological doctrines about God's role in suffering based on the more poetic passages in Scripture (i.e., Psalms, Proverbs, Lamentations).

This passage is probably less a timeless theological declaration of God's role in human suffering than an honest expression of how the writer's pain *feels*.

It *feels* like God is out to get him and is hunting him down. It *feels* like God has shut out the light and closed off all means of escape. It *feels* like God isn't even listening to his prayers.

Who among us hasn't felt like this at times? I certainly have.

Passages like this offer great comfort simply because they remind us that these experiences are not unique to us. They are part of what it means to be a human being and to walk with God through the peaks and valleys of life.

But to return to the question of God's role in our suffering. I wonder if we sometimes rule out too quickly the possibility that God could have a more active role in our pain than we like to imagine.

I say this with some trepidation because I have seen how it can be abused. I have seen people describe suffering as the highly specific judgment of God in all kinds of destructive ways that have done incalculable damage to people's faith.

But I wonder if, in the same way that we tend to keep our prayers sweet rather than sour, we often shrink back from the idea that God could have a purpose in our pain. Maybe we don't want to ruin God's reputation. Perhaps, we don't want to implicate God in the horrible things in our lives and our world.

And yet I think back to the defining moments people pointed to in the group chat I mentioned earlier. If hardship and suffering can be a means of drawing us closer to God (and this is certainly the testimony of faithful Christians who have suffered down through the ages), who are we to say that God cannot be their source?

Indeed, is not this among the central truths of Good Friday?

Jesus was executed by a collusion of empire and religion, the innocent victim of earthly powers. This is true.

Jesus was *also* obedient to the will of the Father who would not remove the cup of his suffering. This is also true.

The cross alone should probably make us wary of saying that God can never be the source of our pain.

Again, I say all this with some trepidation. But whatever we make of the theological question of God's role in human suffering, passages like this absolutely give us permission to be honest before God.

Sometimes, the blues is the only music we can make. Sometimes, a defining moment in our life can lay us low, and all we can do is cry out to God.

Sometimes, bitter lament is a faithful expression of faith.

After the writer of this lament has dredged the very depths of his soul and laid his pain before God, he makes a turn from the blues to gospel.

But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

These words express the very bedrock of our faith.

The steadfast love of God. The unending mercy of God. The faithfulness of God.

Our faithfulness is hampered by many things—by sin and stubbornness, by self-interest, by impatience and forgetfulness, by doubt and cynicism, by apathy and neglect.

God’s faithfulness is strong and true. Always. Even in the midst of a pandemic. Even (or especially) in the defining moments of our lives.

The invitation and the challenge is to remember this when it’s not obvious.

Lamentations 3:21 begins, *“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope...”*

To call something to mind implies intentionality. It implies a deliberate choice to turn our hearts and minds to instances where we have seen evidence of God’s faithfulness.

We do not automatically notice God’s faithfulness. We often take it for granted or ignore it. We presume upon it or complain that our experience of it isn’t more obvious or consistent.

But if we are to be a people characterized by the deep peace and hope of the way of Jesus, we need to become more skilled and more persistent in calling God’s faithfulness to mind.

There are many ways of doing this. It could be as simple as praying to ask God to show you, to remind you, to open your eyes to see the many and varied ways that God has been guiding and shaping your path.

It could mean writing things down. Many people find journaling to be a good way to keep track of “God-sightings” in their lives, whether it’s the big defining moments or smaller expressions of God’s faithfulness and goodness that weave through our everyday lives.

It could mean borrowing the eyes and ears of a trusted friend—often, others see God’s faithfulness in our lives better than we do!

It could mean being more curious about our own lives and the lives of others. It could mean asking a good question.

Whatever approach we take, I am convinced that an important part of living faithfully in God’s story means learning to become better interpreters of God’s work in our lives.

Defining moments can remind us, again and again and again, that God’s faithfulness is far truer, far sturdier, far more reliable, than ours.

My hope and my prayer for you, as these days of pandemic grind on, is that you would feel the freedom to lament—to see it not just permissible (getting something off our chest) but as a faithful expression of what it means to follow Jesus in a broken world full of pain.

My prayer is also that we would continue to grow into a community that knows deeply and speaks often of God’s faithfulness, God’s mercy, and God’s love.

My prayer is that we would all have eyes and ears to see and hear God’s mercies, which are new each morning—that we would continually call these things to mind, and that they would strengthen our hope in the risen Christ.

Amen.

