
God's Counter-Memory

Lamentations 3:19-26

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 2, 2016 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

You've heard the Old Testament reading in Mandarin and you might be wondering what in the world does this Lamentations reading have to do with homecoming weekend? I really don't know but it was in today's lectionary. I do know, however, people are lamenting in the world and there's no lack of lament to go around. I'm not just talking about the upcoming presidential election nor the ways in which the wormwood and gall mentioned in the passage might make you think we are speaking about our rivals, the Tarheels. People are lamenting over the death of loved ones or missing the Founders of this university or grieved over blood being spilled on U.S. streets. Maybe this passage reminds us how good it is to be back home in Duke Chapel after lamenting the year out of it, which felt like the lowest realm in Dante's *Inferno*. But I don't want to focus so much on the lament today because we get an 'A' for lament in the classroom of life. The question is what grade do we get for hope? Are we failing in hope?

Particularly interesting is how biblical lament is hopeful speech, articulated to a God whom one believes can save or deliver. Biblical lament is full of faith in God. In fact, built into the heart of biblical lament is hope as most lament psalms have a movement many Old Testament scholars describe as from plea to praise or to hope. One New Testament scholar, Clifton Black, who is also a Duke alum, writes, "Hope is the spine of lament." For instance, a classic biblical lament is Psalm 22, which begins with "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" and eventually moves to "You who fear the Lord praise him...stand in awe of him..." The poem of Lamentations 3 has a similar move from painful statements about horrors to more hopeful tones. After the poet says, "Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the Lord" (3:18), three verses later, there's an amazing transformation when he says, "This I call to mind; and therefore I have hope" (3:21).

How is your hope? Hope isn't something we create. According to the mournful bluesy poet of Lamentations, hope is based on memory, what we remember and whom we remember. "But this I call to mind, therefore I have hope." How we think is linked to how we thank or not and how we remember is linked to how we hope or not. The absence of memory of the past may be the cause for absence of hope in the present because hope is restored through remembrance. Some believe that if the past isn't properly forgotten, it becomes, as Nietzsche says, "the gravedigger of the present." But I believe if we don't remember, we won't re-member the future.

In Elie Wiesel's 1986 Nobel Lecture titled, "Hope, Despair, and Memory," he says, "Without memory, our existence would be barren and opaque, like a prison cell into which no light penetrates; like a tomb which rejects the living...it is memory that will save humanity." The poet in Lamentations basically says it is memory that will save hope. Wiesel goes even further when he says, "Just as man cannot live without dreams, he cannot live without hope. If dreams reflect the past, hope summons the future." If we don't remember the past, we can't remember the future. Wiesel is adamant on remembering the horrors of the Holocaust and he refuses to forget. For him, forgetting is not an option as he recalls how throughout the Bible Israel is called to remember over and over again.

Of course, some people want to forget the pain of the past; who wouldn't want to forget about the child who, in hiding with his mother during the Holocaust, asked very softly: "Can I cry now?" It is human to want to forget. But it is also human and faithful to remember as a means to hope. And this remembrance is a courageous act of resistance against the despair of the present, against the wormwood and gall. Remembrance is a hopeful act that functions as a counter-memory to exilic memories of depression and trauma.

More specifically, what the poet calls to mind which brings hope is God and God's steadfast love. It is a particular memory of God. "This I call to mind...The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." If we don't remember this, we won't re-member hope. Throughout scripture, and prominently in the book of Deuteronomy, the people of God are called to remember the words and deeds of God, to remember, for instance, how God delivered the children of Israel out of Egypt. We remember God's faithful presence, not transcendent absence. We rely on the memory book of scripture and God's mighty acts throughout history from creation through the wilderness to the empty tomb; as believers, we remember differently and daringly in order to remember our future in God.

The key is to remember not the events per se, but the God of the events (Leong Seow). Remember the 'who', not just the 'what.' Croatian Yale theologian, Miroslav Volf, in his book, *The End of Memory*, talks about how bringing to mind the "memories of God," such as Israel's exodus and Christ's death and resurrection, recall God's promise as the reality of our own future.

And what the poet in our text reminds us, is how God remembers us and how this is rooted in God's divine promise or covenant. "*This* I call to mind." The 'this' is "the steadfast love of the Lord." 'Steadfast love' is the *chesed* of God, in Hebrew. It has multiple meanings but it can mean the "unbreakable devotion to the promise." *Chesed* defines the basic loving nature of God (Exod 34:6). In this passage, it is in plural form implying that it's not some good, feeling high, emotion, but "actual deeds that reveal the realities of unbreakable devotion"(John Holbert). Our translation reads, "The steadfast love (*chesed*) of the Lord never ceases," but one commentator says the Hebrew text might be better read "Ah, the steadfast deeds of the Lord! We will never be cut off!" The parallel line in that same verse, "God's mercies never come to an end" uses a word for "mercy" based on the Hebrew word for "womb." Thus the mercy of God is likened to a woman's womb, imagining God's love to be like that tender, intimate love shared by a woman for her child. When we call to mind that unbreakable love, we can find hope because it is "new every morning." God's love never grows old. It never wears out. It never gets tired. It is faithful day after day, all-nighter after all-nighter, hangover after hangover. Love is still there.

You may think hope depends on you but hope depends on God, God's covenantal love that will never let us go, unlike other things or other people. This particular memory of God is remembering that we are remembered in love. That's how God remembers us— as beloved children. We are ingrained in God's memory. We are loved despite what other reports say and "nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"(Rom 8). This is God's counter-memory. And these hopeful words about the steadfast love of God are at the center of the book of Lamentations because hope is central to our faith. Because of this memory of God, we have nothing to fear because God doesn't break promises. Present circumstances might be terrible, but our future is assured. In this biblical context of trauma, I can say like Walter Brueggemann that what the poet asserts confidently doesn't seem to be supported by the data of his reality but love is not a science. Our memories of hope are rooted in remembering that despite what we endure God's love for us endures and we are never forgotten even if we forget. The unceasing love and unending mercy of God are the dyads grounding our doxology. God's love is a counter-memory to all the chaos and hatred being spewed out over our nation's airwaves and on the streets.

And what is beautiful and necessary is that this memory and remembrance of God are communal. It is not your memory or my memory but our memory. I say that because Lamentations is survivor literature, five mournful poems giving voice to the grief of the people of Israel over the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of its people in Babylon. The poet or poets are survivors of this trauma and they survived to encourage us to remember. Those who endured this horror are helping us to never forget because we can't remember on our own. We need those who've come before us to tell us the story of God. We have to support and help each other sustain our memory in order to maintain our hope for the future. Just as it took many Founders to establish and sustain this university, it takes more than a village but the

whole body of Christ to keep us hopeful. We need the entire community of faith and communal memory of God's mighty deeds throughout history, recalled through creeds, proclaimed in sermons, sung in liturgies, read in scriptures, and tasted at meals. We need each other, the worldwide communion of believers, to support the collective memory of God, to be reminded of God's present movement in the world and our lives, especially when our memory begins to fail.

*Lean on me, when you're not strong
And I'll be your friend
I'll help you carry on
For it won't be long
'Til I'm gonna need
Somebody to lean on*

If we don't lean on each other to remember, we'll forget and as a result, lose hope. But if we remember, hope will be born. "This I call to mind, and therefore I have hope." Hope will even sing.

I told this story at a Christmas Eve service a couple of years ago. Naomi, a Jewish woman, became vulnerable, as she would sing Christian songs to Gladys, an elderly, fragile African American woman with Alzheimer's and who was unable to speak. She did this as a way to reach her because she knew Gladys grew up with these songs in church. At one particular point, Naomi rubs Gladys' right arm up and down, stares into her eyes, and then begins to sing, "Jesus loves me..." As Naomi continues to sing, Gladys begins to keep tempo with her right hand. When that song is finished, Naomi rubs both of Gladys' cheeks with her hands as she begins to sing the spiritual, "He's got the whole world in his hands." Something amazing happens when Naomi starts to sing the verse, "He's got the mothers and the fathers in his hands." Naomi sings, "He's got the mothers and the fathers" and Gladys, who couldn't speak, responds antiphonally, "in his hands." This happens twice. After the singing stops, Naomi, with her hands on Gladys' cheeks, asks Gladys, "You feel safe? With Jesus?" and Gladys, in a soft whisper responds, "Yeah."

In that moment, we see how friendship and community helps one transcend one's condition in order to express faith and hope. Naomi's singing of the love of Jesus and how God holds the world stirs a musical memory that causes Gladys to sing and to remember as hope comes to voice even when someone may be at the end of their own words. Literally, in this case, "hope is a song in a weary throat" (Pauli Murray) but it was the memory of God's steadfast love through music that stirred the hope. "This I call to mind, therefore I have hope." You have to exercise your memory in order to maintain memory, which is why we "do this in remembrance" at the communion table every month.

We exercise our memory and call to mind the steadfast love of God when we eat and drink. Naomi and Gladys reveal the same is true when we sing. There is wormwood, gall, Tarheels, infernos, but there is also the eternal love of God. So remember to sing this to each other, "O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come." If you don't remember anything else, remember that.