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## Is It Nothing?

### Lamentations 1:12 and 3:1-8, 16-24

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Good Friday, April 18, 2014 by Dr. Ellen Davis

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From the book of Lamentations:

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look around and see.

Is any suffering like my suffering...that the Lord inflicted on me...? (1:12)

That sounds just like what Jesus must have felt, doesn't it? You can imagine him framing that question in his mind, wanting to fling it at those who passed him that day in Jerusalem, as he was led through the busy streets carrying a cross, and then, just outside the walls, was lifted high—stretched out, nailed, and naked for all to see. “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look around and see. Is any suffering like my suffering...?” Those words were in fact written about six centuries before Christ, by another sufferer in Jerusalem—some anonymous Jew who had survived (barely) the devastating siege and total destruction of the city by the Babylonian army. The poems that make up the book of Lamentations were composed by the shocked and awed. Those poems were ancient already in Jesus' time, and almost certainly he knew them. So it is appropriate that Christians have traditionally read from the book of Lamentations on Good Friday, as though the words came from Jesus' own mouth on this, his day of devastation:

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look around and see.

Is any suffering like my suffering that he dealt me,

that the Lord inflicted on me on the day of his heated wrath?

There is a lot festering in that question. It may be the toughest question that any believer can pose or hear, because it implicates God so thoroughly in human suffering: “Is there any suffering like mine, that the Lord inflicted on me on the day of his heated wrath?” Today, that question equally implicates us: “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?” This suffering of Jesus'—does it have nothing to do with you, or does it touch your life, maybe closely? That is the question for each of us this day. To hear Jesus pose it to us from the cross—that is the reason, the only reason, for any of us to stop what we were doing and sit here this Friday afternoon.

“Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?” Jesus addresses us as busy people, just like those who bustled through the streets of Jerusalem that other Friday, getting ready for Sabbath. Sabbath preparation is always a lot of work, but this was the Sabbath that began the Passover, the high point of the whole year. It was like the last few hours before Christmas, and more, because everybody came to Jerusalem for Passover, thousands upon thousands of excited, insanely busy pilgrims—and now with Jesus nailed right in the midst of them, silently posing that question: “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?” It is really no different for us. Good Friday comes to us this year in the final week of class; we are all insanely busy, stressed about papers and exams, excited (and stressed) about graduation and summer programs and weddings and jobs. And here is Jesus in the midst of us, mounted high on the cross—a ghastly Roman-style public spectacle. In this first hour of his crucifixion, the only good news is that he won't live out the afternoon. But right now the dying Jesus has a question for us: “Is it nothing to you, this suffering of mine...or is it something?” Maybe we are not yet ready to answer.

There is more to Jesus' question. “Look around and see,” he says, speaking through these words from the book of Lamentations, “Is any suffering like my suffering?” The obvious answer is Yes. Jesus suffers as have many humans before and since; two other men, naked and nailed, died alongside him that Friday in Jerusalem. Few of us may have witnessed executions or death by torture, but we know they happen every day in our world, even in our name. Jesus' horrible death was very far from unparalleled in the Roman world, and although we affirm in faith that he died for us, there is no evidence that human suffering has been on the decline in the nearly two millennia since. The meaning of the cross is that Jesus shares our suffering fully; he does not end it. So that is one part of an answer to Jesus' question: “Is any suffering like my suffering?” Yes, our suffering is a lot like

yours. The deepest pain we bring into this Chapel today, the agony of those we hold in our hearts as we sit before this cross—yes, Jesus, it looks remarkably like yours.

Our suffering seems always to come unexpectedly, just as Jesus' death on the Roman cross came as a bitter surprise to those who were expecting the Messiah to rescue Israel from Roman oppression (Luke 24:21). Have you noticed? So often suffering comes when we are looking eagerly for something else: a new phase of life, not a terminal diagnosis; safe delivery of a longed-for child, not wrenching loss; a nurturing marriage, not an intimate form of cruelty; a happy young adulthood, not long, grinding depression; the blessings of peace, not the sudden explosion of war in the streets. One of the cruelest aspects of suffering is that it often comes when we were expecting something else, just when we were counting our blessings and giving thanks to God. That is why Jesus' question from the cross is finally a question about God:

Is any suffering like my suffering that he dealt me,  
that the Lord inflicted on me on the day of his heated wrath?

Now we have come to the really tough part of this question and this day. It is tough, because religious people like us don't like to suggest that God has some part to play in our suffering. We simply don't know where to go with the thought that God has somehow allowed the worst thing we can imagine to happen. We are afraid of the overwhelming anger we might feel if we let that thought into our minds and hearts. And so, "Hush..., hush," we say to ourselves and each other, "Don't go there."

While we are busy banishing that thought, hushing our anger, the Bible is paying no attention to us. It is broadcasting terrible cries of anguish and bewilderment, accusations directed against God. We hear them from psalmists, from prophets, especially Jeremiah; from Job and Lamentations. We hear Jesus' own cry from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Taking their clue from that cry from the cross, Christians through the ages have not been afraid to say that these terrible words from the third chapter of Lamentations sound just like Jesus on the cross, having his say about God:

He has shattered my bones....  
He has walled me in so I cannot break out....  
He shuts out my prayer....  
He makes me the target for his arrows....  
He has filled me with bitterness....

So the biblical witness and the church's tradition together declare this truth about the suffering of the faithful: It often feels like abandonment by God, or worse, like God is aiming at you with a deadly weapon. This poet of Lamentations screams out the truth that we good churchgoers try so hard not to admit to ourselves and each other: If you have loved and trusted God for a long time, then acute, prolonged suffering feels like divine attack.

That is part of the truth that the biblical writers dare to utter, though not the whole truth. Suffering is one of the deepest mysteries of life with God. The writers in both Testaments return to it again and again, because the agony of suffering in faith—believing that God is implicated in our suffering and yet somehow not being able to give up on God entirely—this is an abiding problem for us. It is not a problem we solve once and for all, either as individuals or as a community of faith; it is a problem with which we are struggling to live. Part of the honest struggle is crying out to God and others who share both our faith and our outrage. That crying out is itself part of our answer to Jesus' question: Yes, Jesus, my sense of abandonment by God is a lot like yours.

There is still more to the truth that the poet of Lamentations is disclosing to us, to get us through another Good Friday, and that truth is this: Honest talk about God and to God in the midst of suffering is the only way to realistic hope. Did you notice it in our reading? This anonymous sufferer, who sounds to us so much like Jesus on the cross, says,

I thought...my hope had died before God (3:18),  
...and then suddenly:  
This I recall to my heart—therefore I have hope:

The faithful acts of the Lord are not ended; his mercies are not finished;  
they are new every morning.

And now, speaking directly to God for the first time:

Great is your faithfulness! (3:21-23)

Now where did that come from: hope in God, bursting forth out of the very ground where hope seemed to have died? Is this so-called hope just a pious scam of some ancient poet, or is it real?

We often suppose that hoping is sort of like making a bet—a bet based either on careful assessment of the odds, or on magical thinking—you blind yourself to the facts and follow a lucky hunch. But hoping in God is not betting on something; it is building on something. The foundation for hope as the biblical writers understand it is the character of God, the ultimate Source of all that is good in this broken world. That process of hope-building is precisely what the poet traces for us. Listen again:

I thought...my hope had died before God.

...This I recall to my heart—therefore I do have hope:

The faithful acts of the Lord are not ended; his mercies are not finished;  
they are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness!

Hope may show itself in a sudden burst, as it does here, but nonetheless, it has to be built over time. Lasting hope does not come from a cheerful disposition, an unusually high serotonin level perhaps; it comes from the steady habit of re-orienting your whole self to God. Day by day, week by week, in good times and in the very worst, genuine hope comes out of turning our hearts fully toward God—whatever we may be thinking or feeling. Whether we turn to God in joy or sorrow, in anger or bewilderment or gratitude or shame, hope builds. Slowly we add to the almost imperceptibly thin layers of lasting hope each time we turn our hearts honestly and fully toward God.

It is for that reason we call this Friday “Good.” Look, the nailed man is turned fully toward God. Incapable of any physical movement, bound to die in the next few hours, he is moving into the arms of God. With every labored breath, through excruciating pain, he is drawing steadily closer to the One toward whom his whole being is oriented in wild and certain hope. Jesus’ hope is fixed on God; that is its certainty. Jesus’ hope is for us; that is its wildness. He is there on the cross, we are here in the Chapel for just one reason: that he may draw us with him straight into the outstretched arms of God.

Maybe now we are ready to answer his question. Is that nothing to you, all you who pass by, all you who have come to sit for an hour or so before this cross—is it nothing, or is it something? His suffering, his wild and certain hope for us—is it nothing to you, or could it be...everything?