

One of the true blessings that I've seen happening to our church since we started reading through *The Story*, is that we are getting a breadth of Scripture, and a more complete picture of the story of salvation, than we would if all my sermons were from the New Testament

To be honest, that are parts of the Old Testament that are hard to preach from. And the readings from this week, take us to a very dark time in the history of God's people.

Lamentations, one of our readings for this week, is one of the darkest books that we find in the Bible. I found only one passage from Lamentations, in our 3 year cycle of Scripture readings. And you've probably never heard a sermon based on Lamentations.

But it's an important part of God's story. Listen to Jeremiah during the period of the Babylonian exile writing in Lamentations, chapter 3:

I am the man who has seen affliction
by the rod of the LORD's wrath.
² He has driven me away and made me walk
in darkness rather than light;
³ indeed, he has turned his hand against me
again and again, all day long.

⁸ Even when I call out or cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer.

¹⁵ He has filled me with bitter herbs
and given me gall to drink.

¹⁷ I have been deprived of peace;
I have forgotten what prosperity is.
¹⁸ So I say, "My splendor is gone
and all that I had hoped from the LORD."
¹⁹ I remember my affliction and my wandering,
the bitterness and the gall.
²⁰ I well remember them,
and my soul is downcast within me.

For us to be People of the Bible, two things are necessary. The first is to know the biblical story. The second is to recognize that story as our own.

The Book of Lamentations is a tiny part of the Bible
but it is the hinge on which this part of God's story turns.
It can also represent a hinge in own lives as well.

Although the book is short it took a long time to write.
Listen to the story of the writing Lamentations and see how represents our story as well.
The book began to be written in Abraham's time, some two thousand years before the birth of
Jesus.

When God called Abraham into service he gave the patriarch two things:
a purpose; he was to be a blessing to the world
and a hope; and that hope was for a special life-giving relationship with God.

With those two promises Abraham set off on the spiritual journey we continue today.
He set off into Canaan and his descendants continued into Egypt where they eventually
became slaves.

Then God gave them the great experience of escape and new life we call the Exodus.
It was an experience of hope that speaks to us even today.

God also gave them the Law, God's path that leads to life.
When they followed that path, they fulfilled God's purpose by being a blessing to others.

But then they got hope and purpose mixed up.
And they put their desires ahead of their calling.
They put what they wanted from life ahead of God's purpose

The symbolic moment of this confusion was their desire for a earthly king,
instead of following God, who is the one true king.

But God allowed it, and their kings held the title "Anointed One" or Messiah.

They were sure that God would take care of them
because of the special relationship promised to Abraham and his descendants.

While their hopes were clear, their purpose became murky.

God sent them warnings in the form of prophets
And the prophets had essentially one message: They said, "You are getting it backwards."

Purpose precedes hope.
because what we hope for is only found by fulfilling our purpose.

Our purpose is to allow God to use us to be a blessing.
But the people of Israel and Judah, got that backwards.

They kept on doing whatever they thought was right, in their own eyes.
They didn't listen to the prophets.
They kept expecting that God would take care of them no matter what they did.

The focal point of that expectation was Jerusalem.
Surely God would not let anything happen to the Holy City!

But in 587 BC something did happen.
Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and the Book of Lamentations that had been taking shape since the call for a king was finally put on paper.

Lamentations is the biblical equivalent of rock bottom, the realization that things have gone terribly wrong.

It takes a long time to get to rock bottom.
It takes a long time to write the book of Lamentations, for the people of Israel and for us.

The Bible's story is our story as well.

Every birth and every marriage, even the life of this Community Lutheran church is enfolded by God's purpose and hope.
Just like purpose and hope God gave to Abraham.

And just like the God's people in the Old Testament,
we find it hard to keep those two gifts in proper sequence.
We, also tend to let hope precede purpose.
We let what we desire in life, take precedence over what God expects of us.

And God sends us prophets.
God send us words of warning that we find difficult to hear.
Individuals who have dealt with addiction are surrounded by signs indicating that the path they are on does not go where they want to be.

And not just addictions, but our own sin carries other warnings: headaches, inability to sleep
guilt that nags us, white lies that become more than white lies;
excuses, and rationalizations these are all prophetic signs

Are we writing our own Book of Lamentations and if so how far along are we?
It takes a long time to write a Book of Lamentations.

Jeremiah faithfully delivered these warnings to Judah.

But they squandered their one last chance.

The Bible sums up this entire period in which God allowed his people to put their hopes for a king, ahead of their purpose in this passage:

The LORD, the God of their ancestors, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy."

When you get to the place where the God of the universe says "No remedy" you know it's over. And it was for Judah.

Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, breaks through the walls of Jerusalem, and burns the whole city, including the Temple, to the ground.

From our Lower Story perspective, the destruction of Jerusalem seems harsh and unnecessary. If you love your people so much, why treat them this way?

But in the Upper Story, this is precisely why God had to act as he did: he loves them that much.

If God continued to bless Judah while they rejected Him and His purpose, what kind of love would that be?

Instead God is trying to implant a vision of a new kingdom, not a kingdom of earthly kings and their selfish desires, but the kingdom of a coming Messiah who would restore God's people to its true hope and purpose.

The entire point of God's judgment of Judah was to get their attention and remind them of his promise. A king would come from their tribe, and God was preparing them for that day.

Through Ezekiel, God said,

²⁴ "For I will take you out of the nations;

I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. ²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.

²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you;

I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my

laws. ²⁸ Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God.

Can you imagine how these words sounded to the people of Judah?
hearing them when they were living in exile in Babylon
at the point when they were hitting rock bottom
crying out in lamentation?

Can you imagine how these words sound to people today
who have mixed up God's purposes for their lives?
when we realize that we are writing a book of Lamentations,
and cry out to God for rescue...

For those times, when you and I have turned our backs on God...
and we hear his voice calling us home...
listen to these words of hope declared by Jeremiah
and let them be the hinge that swings your life back to God:

²¹ Yet this I call to mind

and therefore I have hope:

²² Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.

²³ They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

²⁴ I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him."¹

Amen.

This sermon was inspired by Rev. Francis H. Wade

¹ Lamentations 3:21-24