

21st Sunday after Pentecost  
October 14, 2018  
St. Luke/San Lucas Episcopal Church  
Vancouver, Washington  
Rev. Dr. Ellen Richardson

## **Stuff, Loss, and Lamentation**

First, it is a deep pleasure to be here with you this weekend and I thank you so much for your hospitality; and second, for all you brave souls who made it through the workshop yesterday and came back for more today, for the sake of reassurance I want to point out that today I am confined to the length of a sermon.

If only the lectionary had offered us something light and comforting today, but no, what we have to work with this morning is lamentation on all sides. Lamentation is a kind of prayer offered to God when we have nothing left. It encompasses weeping and wailing, a song of sorrow and complaint, an expression of a sense of abandonment and despair. Surely prayers of lamentation are being raised to the heavens this day over the massive devastation of the recent hurricanes in the Deep South, just as they were in the Caribbean a year ago, in Indonesia short weeks ago, and in the West after each run of wildfires. When prayers do not come easily, when we have lost everything and are at a loss for words to lay our sorrow before the Lord, lamentation is what is left. Psalm 22 that we prayed this morning is a beloved lament, whose words were spoken by Jesus from the cross:

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Surely if Jesus Christ cried out in lamentation, it is a form of prayer we are called to.

Today's chapter from the Book of Job is just one in a long painful lamentation of a man who had everything anyone of his time could have hoped for—health, livestock, land, servants and lots of children. He loved his God and considered himself blessed by God and was described as a righteous man. He certainly had the right to his wealth in his world, and according to his friends he was quite privileged—over and above everyone else. And then his whole life as he knew it was all gone—in the blink of an eye.

We know from the back story that Job's losses and painful physical afflictions came about from a sort of a bet between God and Satan, that Job could be just as righteous *without* his wealth and happiness as he was *with* them. Job tried for a long

time to hold God blameless, in spite of a long 30 chapter conversation with three friends who tried to get Job to admit to what *he* had done to deserve his calamity. Job resisted their contention that he got what he deserved, but eventually got tired of the whole conversation, assumed God had abandoned him in his grief, gave up and prayed to die:

If I go forward, he is not there;  
or backward, I cannot perceive him;  
on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;  
I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.

This is a familiar feeling in the experience of intense loss--a loss like an impending or recent death, or having one's home or town wiped out compounded by having lost a sense of God's presence, God's love and protection--the most devastating loss of all.

That is when God entered the conversation to remind Job that God *was* there with him, and had *always* been there, even when Job did not see him or hear him in the darkness of his loss. When Job recognized that God loved him with an everlasting love, just because God made him--not because of his righteousness--then God allowed the restoration of Job's life with double of all that he had before. Job had learned that none of it--none of his stuff or status or righteousness in the eyes of other--was important if he lost his relationship with God.

My work in hospice and palliative care was saturated with Job stories of people nearing the end of life railing against their loss, bewildered by their weakness, wondering why they were singled out for such suffering when they had led good lives--were not evil people. Their physical symptoms of pain, anxiety, and nausea could be skillfully managed, but their symptom of spiritual distress played itself out in a kind of physical agitation that is unique to the dying process--whether or not the patient is lucid or even conscious--beyond the reach of prescriptions or reassurance. During these non-verbal conversations with their Creator that no one else could hear, their family members

would begin to ask, "How long is this going to take?" The answer was always that it would take as long as it takes for the dying one to find, to be found by, and to be reconciled to God. Once that had happened the patient's entire countenance would be transformed to one of acceptance and peace, even joy, and a palpable sense of God's presence could be sensed even by those who were not practicing any particular faith at the time. At that point, the death itself--marked by the last breath--had just become just another detail--transformed from penultimate loss to blessed release that was clearly a crossing over into oneness with God.

But what of our gospel today, the sad take of the young man who had many possessions? Imagine him as Job in his younger days, blessed with family, productive land and animals, and servants to do the hardest work. We are to understand he was not a bad man; by all local standards a good one. He followed the commandments: he did not steal or kill, cheat on his wife or neglect his parents. Surely he had earned God's favor; surely he had earned a place in the Kingdom of God. But just to be sure--to cover all his bases--he wanted to punch his ticket with Jesus, to come away with his reassurance that he had gotten everything right. What the young man got instead was a personal encounter with the living Word, that *word of God that is sharper than any two-edged sword*.

The most powerful line in this gospel is when it says, "Jesus, looking at him, *loved* him..." before he told him--with compassion--that his love of all those things that he had let define him--that he did not think he could live without--were the things that would become his stumbling blocks to the Kingdom. This shocked the man, and sadly, he went away grieving. He had much to learn about what was important. I suppose he had never heard the story of Job, or understood what Jesus was all about, constantly preaching and teaching that the last would be first, and the first would be last.

That is the hardest and most important Good News that we Christians have to learn over and over. Because God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that we might have abundant life, we have been offered a path for finding our way to the Kingdom--finding our way into relationship and oneness with God. That path is the one of sacrificial love, and it is the same path that takes us through life, with or without privilege and wealth, with or without stuff, with or without the world's assessment of

our righteousness. And that same path will lead us to the moment of our death, which will carry no sting, no victory.

On Thursday, waiting in Eastern North Carolina for another mere glancing blow from the second hurricane in a month, I was reading one of many stories that are offered up during disasters to both terrify and tear our hearts. This story from the Washington Post, was from an interview with a woman who lived near Tallahassee, Florida, who had heeded the sheriff's knock on her door and raced with her three grandchildren to a quickly opened shelter. She describes how each of them quickly grabbed what they could carry--quickly made sandwiches, some pillows, notes of affirmation from a teenager's bedroom wall, a couple of toys, not much else. She said, "It was amazing to look at a house full of stuff and think you only need a few things." Her daughter added, "We had to humble ourselves to think about what's truly important." Those are insights worth remembering, though it usually takes a life-threatening event, or a death, to remind us. More powerful is what followed, that when she looked around the open shelter, she noticed lots of different kinds of people--different races, different politics, different backgrounds that dictated how much and what quality of stuff each had left behind--and expressed she was "thankful that so many strangers were living together peacefully...that sometimes you need a reminder that we are just people." We know that for many of those people in that shelter and many others like it, life will never again be the same. Stuff is just stuff, but the loss of everything but your life--is still a deep significant loss that calls for lamentation worthy of Job, and a significant response from those whose lot it was to be spared this time.

Whether it follows us slowly and personally, or dramatically and publicly, we are all living in the shadow of death. The Good News is that our God looks upon us with an everlasting love through it all, always, knowing how hard and scary it is to lay down whatever it is that we hoard that makes us feel safe, but obstructs our view of that certain path laid for us all the way to the Kingdom. May this Good News be a blessing, now and at the hour of our death. AMEN