

# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## “Jesus’ Lament for Jerusalem”

*Sermon preached at the eleven o’clock service, February 21, 2016  
The Second Sunday in Lent—Based on Philippians 3:17-4:1 and Luke 13:31-35*

The more and more we enter into scripture and listen, the more and more scripture will startle us, move us, convict us, and turn our hearts.

On the second Sunday of Lent we hear Jesus’ song of lament over Jerusalem, a lament that pits his own desire for his people against their own will to violence.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

The Bible is full of denunciations and judgment, stuff that is hard to hear.

One way we deal with the hard stuff is by reading the harsh words as addressed to others: The Pharisees of Jesus’ time, the Jerusalem back then, or Jewish people throughout history, or the government of Israel, or some other “enemies of the cross of Christ.”

So then this text is all about the “bad guys” who killed the prophets.

But when we assign judgment to others and grant easy grace for ourselves, we scapegoat and make others into enemies, and we do not let scripture work the way it is meant to.

We miss the invitation to self-reflection and conversion.

So a fundamental principle of reading scripture: The hard stuff is for us.

This is hard stuff—Jesus’ lament. A lament is a song addressed to someone, naming grief, describing loss, giving voice to pain.

Hear the repeated name of the city, addressed like a person: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem.”

Hear the question that is a cry: “How often?” “How long?” “How often have I desired to gather your children together... ?”

Imagine that these two lines stand for a longer song, a ballad, with weeping, wailing, with ululation. Imagine it with lots of verses, like “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner: “Alone, alone, all alone/ alone on a wide, wide sea/ and never a soul took pity on me/ my soul in agony.”

Lament is heard in English literature and in the Bible: “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refuses to be consoled, because they are no more.”<sup>i</sup>

Lament grieves what is gone, what is lost, what is not right. People of faith cry out—in complaint to God, disappointment, anger: “Why are you so full of heaviness, o my soul, and why are you so disquieted within me? My tears have been my food day and night, while all day long they say to me, ‘Where now is your God?’”<sup>ii</sup>

Lament weaves through and through the story of the God.

Startling. That Holy Scripture permits lament and our culture promotes denial and dishonesty. In last Sunday's *New York Times*, there was an article by Kate Bowler, a professor of the History of Christianity at Duke, mother of a preschool child, diagnosed with stage 4 cancer.<sup>iii</sup> She is a scholar of the Prosperity Gospel, that belief that God rewards faithfulness and positive thinking that "everything happens for a reason."

God makes those he loves "blessed"—free of sickness and grief—and that goes hand in hand with the American belief in self-reliance and self-improvement.

After her CT scan, she writes, "I am 35. I did the things you might expect of someone whose world has suddenly become very small. I sank to my knees and cried. I called my husband at our home nearby. I waited until he arrived so we could wrap our arms around each other and say the things that must be said. *I have loved you forever. I am so grateful for our life together. Please take care of our son.*"

"I sank to my knees and cried." This is lament.

In scripture, lament is corporate and communal as well, performed together by people who come together to grieve publically for their community what is not right.

To speak of the gulf between what is and what should be. How our community falls short.

Would that we might recover lament in our day as a congregation, as a church.

Would that we might recover lament instead of blaming others. Would that we would name the gulf between what is and what should be. Lament for children who don't eat, for children who can't read, for children killed by guns, for children orphaned by disease and war.

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem. Jerusalem, Jerusalem. America, America. America, America.

Why are you so divided, oh my country? How long will you suffer and weep?

Of all the expressions of lament in holy scripture, the most startling and profound is the lament of God.

Hear God's outcry in the voice of the prophets, the children whom he sends: Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, Jesus of Nazareth.

Hear Jesus: "To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,

'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;  
we wailed, and you did not weep.'"<sup>iv</sup>

No matter what we did, you did not respond, you did not accept our invitation and joy, mercy and comfort.

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

In these words Jesus laments for humanity, for the people of Israel, for the people of God, for the city, for us; and he sees the tragic gulf that has opened up and deepened and widened between us and God, like a mother weeping for her children.

And with these words Jesus laments for himself and for his own death that he heads right into as he walks to Jerusalem. "I sank to my knees and cried."

The lament of God arises out of God's yearning for us.

Many years ago I heard Martin Smith, former superior of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist give a lecture in which he said that a much better name for "God's will"—a word that evokes command, oppressive pressure, power—was God's "desire," what God wants—for you, for the world.

Doing God's will—abstract and hard to picture—is really doing what God desires for you, what God yearns for. Yearning comes in two forms. There's sexual yearning, the desire of a lover to be united with one's love: and there's parental yearning, parents' hardwired, indissoluble bond with their children—their passion to nourish, to protect, to

keep them safe.

God yearns for us, like a lover and like a parent.

Time and time and time, today and tomorrow and the next day... how many times have I desired, like a lover, like a mother, to gather you under my wings, beneath my breast, and you were not willing?

I was baptized. I was tempted by Satan. I cast out demons from your children, unclean spirits that caused your children to foam and shriek. I opened the eyes of the blind, unstopped the ears of the deaf, made the lame leap like a deer and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

I came to show the kingdom of God among you, growing and rising like leaven the woman kneaded into flour, and to show that all manner of things shall be well.

And you wouldn't dance, you wouldn't mourn, you wouldn't come under my wings.

You picked up stones, wove a crown of thorns, hammered together a cross.

In Jesus' lament we hear the yearning of God to be one with us again, to gather and shelter us. God's cry of disappointment, hurt and regret moves us and awakens within us our yearning for God, reminds us who we could be, and gives us hope to cross over that gaping divide.

The sound of Jesus' cry of lament turns our hearts, turns us around.

It's not too late to return, the day is not too far gone.

Come back, dance when the piper plays; accept healing and forgiveness.

We can make a new plan. As the Ash Wednesday service says, we can "make a right beginning of repentance."

Kate Bowler, writing about how she will face her own death: "The prosperity gospel has taken a religion based on the contemplation of a dying man and stripped it of its call to surrender all. . . [it has denied] much of our humanity: our fragile bodies, our finitude, our need to stare down our deaths . . . and be filled with dread and wonder. At some point, we must say to ourselves, *"I'm going to need to let go."*

This is hard stuff, scripture to listen to. That it would move us, convert us, to turn our hearts, to let go, and to move us to return to the warm, throbbing breast of God, the mother who weeps for us, who calls us, plays the pipe for us, desires us, all her scattered children to be gathered under her sheltering wings.

Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 2:18.

<sup>ii</sup> Psalm 42:5; 3.

<sup>iii</sup> Kate Bowler, "Death, The Prosperity Gospel, and Me" *New York Times*, February 13, 2016.

<sup>iv</sup> Luke 7:32.

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