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Good Friday: Lamentations 3:1-36 & John 18

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The prophet laments in the city's distress. Jesus' capture and trials.

Some passages referenced:

Lamentations 2:11-19 (similar expressions and voice to chapter 3); Lamentations 2:11 (similarities to Lamentations 3:48-51); Jeremiah 11:19 (Jeremiah led as a lamb to the slaughter); Jeremiah 20 (the word of the Lord lying heavy on Jeremiah); Lamentations 1:1 (the city of Jerusalem sitting alone); Jeremiah 8:13 (alluded to in Jesus' judgment on the fig tree); Jeremiah 11:18-20 (Jeremiah like Christ); Jeremiah 18:16, Lamentations 3:19, 2:15 (verses alluded to in the crucifixion account of Matthew);

2 Samuel 15:23 (David crossing the Brook Kidron when fleeing from Absalom); John 13:37 (Peter's overconfidence about his ability to lay down his life for Christ); John 21:9 (Peter restored by a fire of coals).

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Lamentations 3.1-36 of long ago. He has walled me about so that I cannot escape. He

has made my chains heavy.

Though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. He has blocked my ways with blocks of stones. He has made my paths crooked.

He is a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding. He turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces. He has made me desolate.

He bent his bow and set me as a target for his arrow. He drove into my kidneys the arrows of his quiver. I have become the laughingstock of all peoples, the object of their taunts all day long.

He has filled me with bitterness. He has sated me with wormwood. He has made my teeth grind on gravel and made me cower in ashes.

My soul is bereft of peace. I have forgotten what happiness is. So I say, my endurance has perished, so has my hope from the Lord.

Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall. My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning.

Great is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in Him. The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him.

It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him.

Let him put his mouth in the dust. There may yet be hope. Let him give his cheek to the one who strikes, and let him be filled with insults.

For the Lord will not cast off forever. But though He cause grief, He will have compassion, according to the abundance of His steadfast love. For He does not afflict from His heart, or grieve the children of men.

To crush underfoot all the prisoners of the earth, to deny man justice in the presence of the Most High, to subvert a man in his lawsuit, the Lord does not approve. Lamentations chapter 3 is a chapter with an acrostic pattern. There are 22 sets of three lines, each line beginning with the same letter, in alphabetical sequence.

It's the central section of the entire book. While it doesn't have the same dirge elements of the other chapters of the book, it does have elements of instruction, individual and communal lament, and wisdom. Its more disparate structures and genres mean that the

unity of the chapter is most readily apparent in the tightness of its literary structure, with the three-fold repetition of each letter of the alphabet following all the way through.

Nevertheless, as we look more closely, we'll see the unity of the movement within it as well. Within the chapter there are a number of changes in points of view. It begins with first-person singular speech in verses 1-24, moves to third-person masculine speech in verses 25-39, moves to first-person plural speech in verses 40-47, before finally reverting to first-person singular speech in verses 48-66.

And these changes in points of view represent natural transitions in the material of the chapter, but don't require a change in the speaker, as the same person is almost certainly speaking throughout. It's very important to recognise these sorts of transitions though, as they represent psychological transitions in the speaker, among other things. There are a number of other striking transitions to be noted.

For instance, the first 21 verses alternate between the first-person singular of the speaker's references to himself and continual third-person masculine singular references to the Lord's acting and devastating judgment upon him. Yet the name of the Lord only appears once, in verse 18. Throughout this section the Lord is the unnamed he who's bringing disaster upon the person who's speaking.

In verses 22-39, the I and the Me of the speaker disappears, and third-person masculine singular references to the righteous sufferer join the third-person masculine references to the Lord. But now the Lord is repeatedly named, not merely appearing in pronouns he and him. This section involves a wisdom-flavoured reflection upon the manner of wise suffering and what he has learned from it.

And the transition here is noteworthy, as followed by a further movement into the first-person plural references to the people, especially in exhorting them to turn back to the Lord, while the references to the Lord start to shift to a second-person singular form, you. So it's moved from the speaker speaking about I and the Lord constantly being spoken of as he, to the speaker moving to speaking about he of himself and the righteous sufferer, to the Lord, now named. And then beyond that, to exhorting the people, let us turn to the Lord.

And then following that, a return to the first-person singular voice once again, but now addressing God as you, speaking to God directly and appealing to his covenant name in confidence. Merely studying the pronouns and the names within this chapter will give us a sense of the movement that's taking place. This chapter, the pivotal chapter of the book, thus represents a movement from the voice of futile lament to a positive and hopeful address to the Lord.

The intensity of the first-person singular crisis that opens the chapter, where the Lord's identity is largely eclipsed by the bitterness of the speaker's experience, is answered by

the intensity of the confident address of that person to the Lord at the end, where the Lord is foregrounded and the speaker retreats to the background. In our section of the passage, the speaker shifts from a description of his experience of suffering and the heaviness of the Lord's hand upon him to a discussion of how a person should respond in such circumstances, of the Lord's steadfast love and character, and how the Lord acts towards such sufferers, reminding himself of the Lord's goodness. Perhaps one of the greatest questions that hangs over our reading of this text is the identity of the man who describes his experience from verse one onwards.

While the book of Lamentations is about the desolation of Jerusalem and the captivity of Judah, the speaker here presents himself as the direct personal target of God's wrath. Is this a personification of the nation or of Jerusalem? I don't think so. Comparing chapter 2 verses 11 to 19 with chapter 3 can be illuminating, as there are a number of similarities to be observed between these earlier verses and sections of chapter 3. For instance, the resemblance between chapter 2 verse 11 and chapter 3 verses 48 to 51.

The speaker in chapter 2 verse 11 closely identifies with Jerusalem's suffering, even if not yet with the intensity that we see at the beginning of chapter 3. The speaker of the opening verses of this chapter seems to have been singled out by the Lord for judgment, despite the fact that the judgment in question was one that fell upon the entire people. He stands for the whole people, even though he is just one person. He doesn't seem to be a personification of Jerusalem or Judah, nor a generic person, just the man in general.

I'm inclined to hear the voice of Jeremiah himself here, representing the entire people in himself. If we look through the prophecy of Jeremiah, we'll see that Jeremiah is the suffering prophet. Large sections of the book of Jeremiah describe the suffering of the prophet himself, often in charged language.

For instance, he is led as a lamb to the slaughter in Jeremiah 11 verse 19. Jeremiah is a man who, in contrast to most of the rest of the prophets, consistently bears his soul. He describes the heaviness with which the message of the Lord lies upon him, for instance in chapter 20.

He also has a number of individual laments of the type we find in the Psalms. Jeremiah is the weeping prophet, the one who is established by God to stand against the people of his day as a fortified city, an iron pillar and bronze walls, but who is also established to stand for the people as he takes the blows of God's judgment upon himself in bearing the prophecies against them. In Lamentations chapter 3, I believe we're seeing this.

Jeremiah is the prophet who feels those painful blows of the judgments of the Lord before they fall upon the people, and in Lamentations chapter 3 he's giving voice to his experience. He is brought down, as it were, to the state of the dead. God brought the prophet into darkness, but also cornered him, blocking off all of his paths.

God is the unnamed adversary of the prophet, acting towards the prophet as a hunter towards its prey, tracking him down, lying in wait for him and destroying him. God has given him bitterness and gravel to eat, the bitterness like the bitterness of the herbs of the Passover connected with Israel's affliction in Egypt. He has lost all peace and his old hope in the Lord has perished.

It's crisis time. How will he respond? And in the verses that follow, the prophet moves beyond the crisis of his lament and the extinction of his hope to refounding his confidence upon the character of God, beginning to address the Lord directly. He rediscovers his confidence by reflecting upon the Lord's covenant faithfulness and mercies, reversing his loss of hope in verse 18.

God's character is unchanging despite his crisis. God's steadfast love and mercies never come to an end, but they are also new every morning. They're everlastingly renewed.

They never grow old or fade. Some people can imagine God as if God were an old man in the heavens, but the eternity of God is a youthful thing. It's a constant bubbling up.

Possibilities aren't exhausted but are restored. We grow old but God does not. And the prophet turns to this God as his portion and consequently his hope.

God is his inheritance. The city of Jerusalem, the nation of Judah may come to an end, but God, the inheritance of his people, does not fade or fail. Even as the earthly inheritance of Israel crumbles and perishes before its enemies, the Lord who is their portion endures in his unaltered youthfulness.

So as he refounds his hope, the prophet turns to reflect upon what is good. Each verse from verse 25 to 27 begins with that word, the word good, recognising at the outset God's goodness, not just in an objective sense but in a relational sense, that God is good to those who wait for and seek him. The prophet turns to the goodness of acting accordingly, of waiting patiently for God's salvation and bearing his judgment.

In this section the first person singular of the prophet has been replaced by a third person masculine singular, as the prophet is drawn beyond the immediacy of his own suffering to reflect upon enduring truths in a wisdom-like discourse. These claims are followed by a threefold general exhortation to the sufferer, which the prophet is clearly applying to his own experience, but he's speaking in a more objective way here, to recognise what's true more generally and then to relate that to his experience. He's no longer caught up within the immediacy of his own suffering and bitterness.

He ought to sit alone in silence, the sufferer, taking up the language used to describe the city of Jerusalem itself in chapter 1 verse 1, to submit to judgment and to take its blows upon himself. From this the prophet articulates a threefold rationale in the next section, each beginning with the word for. For the Lord will not cast off forever.

He may cause grief but he will have compassion. And finally the Lord does not take delight in afflicting men but he wishes to bless them. God does not want to crush people underfoot, as we see in the verses that follow this, to deny them justice or to prevent their case from being heard by him.

Judgment is not God's primary mode of action. God wishes the good of his people. Judgment is an exceptional thing that God does not delight in.

In the New Testament and especially in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is like Jeremiah in a great many respects. He declares judgment against the temple, describing it using the words of Jeremiah as a den of robbers. He again alludes to Jeremiah chapter 8 verse 13 in his judgment on the fig tree.

In the final days of his life he is the prophet weeping over Jerusalem and warning it of its impending judgment. Like Jeremiah he is physically beaten and as Jeremiah was a lamb led to the slaughter to be cut off from the land of the living in Jeremiah chapter 11 verses 18 to 20, so was Christ in fulfillment of Isaiah 53. He suffers on account of the people and with them.

He feels the painful burden of the Lord's calling upon him and in places like Jeremiah 20 the prophet bitterly laments his experience. Finally as we have seen in Lamentations 3, he feels within himself the full force of the tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem as if he himself were the city. Matthew's crucifixion account alludes to Lamentations and Jeremiah at a number of points.

Lamentations chapter 3 verse 19. Lamentations chapter 2 verse 15. Jesus is as it were the embodiment of the fallen city of Jerusalem in Lamentations.

He's presented as suffering the judgment of Jerusalem's exile himself, the fate predicted to Jerusalem in Jeremiah chapter 18 verse 16. Jesus is the one who suffers a fate like the fate he declares will fall upon Jerusalem in the Olivet discourse. The sky is darkened over him.

He is surrounded by his enemies on all sides. As the greater Jeremiah he bears the force of the day of the Lord that awaits the unfaithful city, taking that judgment upon himself. Yet just as Jeremiah in Lamentations 3, a confidence in God even in the deepest tribulation and distress enables Jesus to await the mercies and the steadfast love of a new morning.

A morning when the desolate city would be restored and a third day on which the destroyed temple would be raised again. A question to consider what are some of the explicit allusions that you can hear to Lamentations in the gospel's accounts of the crucifixion. John chapter 18.

When Jesus had spoken these words he went out with his disciples across the brook

Kidron where there was a garden which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas who betrayed him also knew the place for Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees went there with lanterns and torches and weapons.

Then Jesus knowing all that would happen to him came forward and said to them whom do you seek? They answered him Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus said to them I am he. Judas who betrayed him was standing with them.

When Jesus said to them I am he they drew back and fell to the ground. So he asked them again whom do you seek? And they said Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus answered I told you that I am he so if you seek me let these men go.

This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken of those whom you gave me I have lost not one. Then Simon Peter having a sword drew it and struck the high priest's servant and cut off his right ear. The servant's name was Malchus.

So Jesus said to Peter put your sword into its sheath. Shall I not drink the cup that the father has given me? So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound him. First they led him to Annas but he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas who was high priest that year.

It was Caiaphas who had advised the Jews that it would be expedient that one man should die for the people. Simon Peter followed Jesus and so did another disciple. Since that disciple was known to the priest he entered with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest but Peter stood outside at the door.

So the other disciple who was known to the high priest went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door and brought Peter in. The servant girl at the door said to Peter you also are not one of this man's disciples are you? He said I'm not. Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire because it was cold and they were standing and warming themselves.

Peter also was with them standing and warming himself. The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. Jesus answered him I have spoken openly to the world.

I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them.

They know what I said. When he had said these things one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand saying is that how you answer the high priest? Jesus answered him if what I said is wrong bear witness about the wrong but if what I said is right why do you strike me? Annas then sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest. Now Simon Peter

was standing and warming himself so they said to him you also are not one of his disciples are you? He denied it and said I am not.

One of the servants of the high priest a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off asked did I not see you in the garden with him? Peter again denied it and at once a rooster crowed. Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning.

They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters so that they would not be defiled but could eat the Passover. So Pilate went outside to them and said what accusation do you bring against this man? They answered him if this man were not doing evil we would not have delivered him over to you. Pilate said to them take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.

The Jews said to him it is not lawful for us to put anyone to death. This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die. So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him are you the king of the Jews? Jesus answered do you say this of your own accord or did others say it to you about me? Pilate answered am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me.

What have you done? Jesus answered my kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world my servants would have been fighting that I might not be delivered over to the Jews but my kingdom is not from the world. Then Pilate said to him so you are a king? Jesus answered you say that I am a king for this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth.

Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice. Pilate said to him what is truth? After he had said this he went back outside to the Jews and told them I find no guilt in him but you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews? They cried out again not this man but Barabbas.

Now Barabbas was a robber. In John chapter 18 we read the events leading up to the crucifixion of Christ. Jesus crosses the brook Kidron at the beginning of it.

Something that should be related to David's crossing of that brook in 2 Samuel chapter 15 verse 23 during Absalom's coup. David retreats from Jerusalem. He's leaving the city going into the state of exile for the people to return one day.

In the same way Christ is going into a state of exile here. He's leaving the city. As David left before Absalom and his coup Christ is leaving as it is the hour of the rule of this world.

As it is the time when his enemies seem to have their ascendancy but Christ will return.

In the garden on the far side of the Kidron Jesus is captured by his enemies who have been brought to him by Judas. Jesus answers those coming to arrest him with the highly significant words I am at which they draw back and fall to the ground as if in worship.

His words in verses 7 to 9 also show his commitment to suffer on behalf of the disciples and to protect them even as they abandon him. He wishes for them to be delivered but he will take the full force of the time of testing upon himself. Peter attacks the high priest's servant cutting off his ear.

Malchus in many ways could be seen as Peter's opposite number. Both are servants of a high priest. Peter is the lead priestly assistant to Jesus a fact that's particularly significant from this chapter onwards.

This is the sort of laying down of his life that Peter had in mind in chapter 13 verse 37. He was less prepared to lay down his life in the manner that Jesus actually required of him. Jesus is said to act to fulfill the word that he had spoken.

Of those whom you gave me I have lost none. Jesus' protection of his disciples from being caught up and being crucified with him is one of several ways in which we see Christ's death in John portrayed as a suffering on behalf of others, a giving of his life so that others would not perish. Jesus opposes the use of violence to defend himself knowing that he must drink the cup that the father has given to him.

Like David rebuked Abishai who sought to kill Shimei when he was cursing him as he left Jerusalem during Absalom's coup, Christ opposes Peter's action of violence towards the high priest's servant. Simon Peter serves as a sort of high priest among the disciples under Christ. While Jesus is being tried before Annas and Caiaphas, Peter is denying Jesus in the high priest's courtyard and there's an important parallel being established.

Peter stands around the fire of coals and later on Jesus has a fire of coals when he restores Peter in chapter 21 verse 9. The other disciple, presumably the disciple Jesus loved, was known to the high priest and he seems to have good connections and access. Jesus is questioned but Peter is also questioned at the same time, heightening the contrast between them. Jesus' I am's contrast with Peter's not me's.

Peter is questioned by the servant girl at the door, primarily about his association with Christ's disciples, then by the servants and officers warming themselves by the charcoal fire, then by one of the high priest's servants, a relative of Malchus. Peter's denial, along with the entrance into Jerusalem, is mentioned in all of the Gospels. Peter is not the hero of this story.

Having faced Caiaphas, Jesus is sent from Caiaphas to Pilate. This is early in the morning, it's probably around dawn. These are the first events of that first Good Friday.

They're dealing with Jesus as a matter of urgency. They're concerned to be able to eat

the Passover, which raises some chronological questions. It's possible that they were using different calendars, Jesus using the solar calendar for instance for the There's no reference to a lamb at the Last Supper.

The Last Supper may be connected to the Passover while not itself being the Passover meal. But the different Gospel accounts have their differing purposes and intentions. John, as elsewhere, focuses more upon the relationship between the symbol of the Passover and the fulfilment with Christ as the Passover lamb.

Christ is, as Paul declares in 1 Corinthians chapter 5, our Passover, sacrificed for us. Pilate asks for an accusation against Christ. He isn't particularly keen to get involved and this would serve an apologetic purpose.

The true enemies in John's Gospel are not the Romans. The leaders of the Jews didn't have the authority to give a death sentence, so they're eager for Pilate to declare judgment, a death sentence upon Christ. Once again we're reminded that Jesus' word is being fulfilled even in the events of him being condemned to death.

Pilate questions Jesus, presumably after hearing the accusation that he presents himself as the king of the Jews, a claim that he would naturally interpret as revolutionary in character. His triumphal entry would also seem to give some substance to this claim. However Jesus doesn't seem to emphasize the title.

Jesus defines his kingdom in terms of truth rather than in terms of ethnicity and nation. His is a different sort of kingdom. If his kingdom were like other kingdoms his disciples would fight.

And truth means different things to different ears. Pilate's question what is truth is ambiguous. Probably he's dismissing Jesus as a mere philosopher, harmless for his sort of political purposes.

To avoid having to cast any final sentence, Pilate speaks of the custom of absolution at the time of Passover. The Jews insist that he release Barabbas, the insurrectionist, instead. They falsely presented Jesus as a political revolutionary but now ask for an actual violent revolutionary to be released to them instead.

They have chosen their course of action. It's better for one man to die than for the whole people to die. And they will eventually align themselves with Caesar.

We have no king but Caesar. They've committed themselves to that course. There's an irony in the Gospel of John.

People say much more than they know on a number of occasions. There are contrasts between the surface meanings and intentions of people's actions or statements and the deeper things that are happening or being communicated. A number of such moments

occur in the context of Christ's trials and the events leading up to and involving his crucifixion.

A question to consider. In this passage we see the religious leaders of the Jews, the most enlightened religious teachers in the world, and a governor of the greatest empire in the world to that date, the Romans, both condemn Christ and seek his death. Why is it that Christ, so often perceived by us to be nothing more than gentle Jesus meek and mild, poses such a threat to such authorities?