

Eyes to See

communion meditation

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Deuteronomy 15:7-11; 24:14-22

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How lonely now sits the city whose little ones beg for bread.

Forlorn and beyond all pity; forsaken and filled with dread.

My eyes are worn out from crying; my heart is poured out in grief.

I mourn for the dead, the dying. I look, but I find no relief.

Did you note the mournful tone of this morning's anthem? Did you catch its tragic words? Did you wonder at them? As we rehearsed this new piece of music over the fall, we nervously laughed, wondering which pastor would be blessed with incorporating it into a service. It isn't, after all, your most upbeat, festive piece. However, as we sang, we detected something else. We saw expressed in its words something of the reality that is afoot in our world. We saw tragic expression of the refugee camps where displaced Syrian children this day beg for bread and die from exposure to the elements. We saw the unspeakable violence Boko Haram is unleashing upon northern Nigeria, where thousands die. We saw the bitter ethnic cleansing ISIL is waging on a "historic scale," to use Amnesty International's words, in far flung areas of the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. We shudder for those caught in the middle of these deadly realities.

Although they may be unfamiliar to us, the words of this morning's anthem are biblical. They come from Lamentations, a collection of the laments that seem to have been voiced in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. Their mournful tones were uttered in the decades when the Temple lay in ruins, and they have continued to be used to this day during the annual ninth of Av (July-August) commemoration of Jerusalem's destruction. They describe a city ravaged by unspeakable suffering—hunger, rape and the murder of children. In anguish they alternate between railing out at God—Could Israel have possibly sinned so much to be worthy of this?—and hope in God's mercy. For anyone who has experienced grief or studied the process of grief, this vacillation between anger, doubt and hope is expressive of what we call "grief work"—the honest process we must go through to find some level of resolution of our pain. Grief work is not about hiding our eyes and pretending the terrible loss has not happened or merely distracting ourselves until it somehow goes away. It is about the day to day task of putting one foot in front of the other and moving forward, even when it does not make sense. Fittingly, passages from Lamentations are still used today in many Good Friday services.

Hebrew scriptures, as do Christian scriptures, reflect deep human emotion, ranging from the heights of joy to the depths of empathy and sorrow. Almost 2000 years ago one of the church fathers sought to separate the God of Jesus from the God of Israel, distinguishing a God of grace from a God of wrath and punishment. Wisely, the church moved to brand such a division as "heresy." Unfortunately, we in the church have not been so attentive, tending brand the faith of our Jewish forebears as "legalistic" and inattentive to human need. Admittedly, the great prophets accuse their religious and political leaders or currying favor with the powerful and wealthy at the expense of the poor and needy. The Apostle Paul, however, bemoans Christians coming to the table of fellowship to enjoy lavish feasts they provide for themselves to the exclusion of those who have nothing to eat and who must go away hungry; and James chastises Christians who show favoritism in their assembly toward the affluent and powerful, even as they dishonor the poor and powerless (1 Corinthians 11; James 2). Any religion, including Judaism and Christianity, may at points fail to live according to its core teachings, which is a reason for us all to be more attentive to the things that matter most.

Deuteronomy, the fifth and final book of the Torah, the heart of Hebrew scripture, is composed as Moses' farewell address to his people before his death. It seeks, then, to gather up what matters most in terms of how the people are to live their lives before the God of delivering Exodus love. It is about Israel's "answering love." It is about how one lives one's life loving God with all of one's "heart, soul and strength." And central to that way of life is being attentive to those in need—not in sweeping generalizations, but with excruciating specifics. Contrary to living life drawn up protectively into oneself it is about living life with an open hand, giving liberally and ungrudgingly. You missed a sheaf

of grain in the field? Leave it for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Do the same when you harvest your olive trees and grapes. Live life, not as if you are the Lone Ranger, self-sufficient and complete unto yourself, but as if you are part of a covenant community and as if what happens to your brother and sister impacts you at the roots of who you are. Remember the grace that brought you—yes, *you!*—out of slavery in Egypt and consider it your responsibility to see others in need and extend that grace to them.

Jesus, reviled as a friend of sinners and tax collectors, said it, too. If you would come to his table, you cannot be choosy about those with whom you will sit. As a matter of fact, if you come to his table, your eyes will be opened and you will see a whole world in need. And rather than bothered or weighed down by the experience, you will claim them as sisters and brothers. So, do come to Christ's table. And do, O Lord, give us eyes to see and hearts to act.