



WATCH NIGHT

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection – Lamentations 2:19 (New Revised Standard Version)

Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the watches! Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the LORD! Lift your hands to him for the lives of your children, who faint for hunger at the head of every street.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The Watch Night Service, in the Christian tradition, is celebrated on the last day of the calendar year as a time to reflect on the past year and look forward to the future (i.e., the New Year). The service highlights the significance of *remembrance* (of past actions) and *journey* (towards the future). Though time is a human construct, many Christians find spiritual value in spending the last few minutes and moments of the “old” year in prayer as we reflect on our relationship with God and with others. It is not too late to pray or to cry to the Lord for forgiveness, for courage, and for the ability to live better in the New Year.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship

My childhood memories of Watch Night Service still haunt me. I was glad to be at church with my friends. But I was even happier that I had this one last opportunity, in the old year, to make amends and to ask God for forgiveness for the wrongs I had committed so that I could begin the New Year in a fresh way. Yet, it was not uncommon for me (and my friends) to fall asleep. Two hours of singing, praying, and testifying became a bit much for us. As much as we hoped to “pray through” those final minutes of the old year, we often slept through them. I always felt guilty about it the next day.

As I reflect on those early memories, I realize that God is bigger than my childhood hauntings. In fact, God knew my heart. My desire was in the right place; I really wanted to do the right thing; and, more importantly, if I didn’t, I knew I needed God to help me make things right, not just with the Almighty but also with the person I had wronged. To me, that’s what “watch night” (any day of the year) really means.

The book of “Lamentations” is a collection of laments. Even though it is written later, the author has set these “cries” in the time period of Israel’s period in Babylonian exile [circa 586 BCE]. But the book’s focus is not on the people *in exile*; it’s on those few who have been left behind. The Babylonians only dragged the “best and brightest” into captivity. The conquering enemy thought that these Israelites could serve them as their doctors, scribes, field workers, and seamstresses. They wanted only able-bodied people. They simply left behind other less-abled folk (from the viewpoint of the invaders).

The canonical location of this book, in the Protestant tradition, is also instructive: it is between “Jeremiah” and “Ezekiel.” These two great prophets of the Babylonian exile are key figures during this period of chaos. Ezekiel was taken with the exiles; Jeremiah was left behind. At an early point in the tradition, Jeremiah was associated with Lamentations as its author. The Greek translation (the Septuagint) of the original Hebrew story included a preface tying Jeremiah directly to this book: “... after Israel was taken captive and Jerusalem was made desolate, Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented this lament over Jerusalem” (my translation). Most critical, biblical scholars question this authorship. But, at least, it imagines creatively the possibility that one who was left behind is responsible for these dirges.

This collection—of five laments—is written in a very *formal* way. The author took time to construct his thoughts in poetic meter. In fact, the writer decided to begin each stanza acrostically, that is, using the Hebrew letters in alphabetical order. The literary structure doesn’t seem to fit the tone. And, yet, it does. The informal lament is offered in the spur of the moment, when the crisis initially happens. The formal lament comes later, after time has passed and things still haven’t changed. The formal lament comes when the loss of people, time, and joy still linger in the air because the exiles haven’t returned. The formal lament comes after the author has had time to reflect on the impact of the destruction and realize that he, too, was also left behind. He, too, was considered one of the less-than-able. [Yet, God used him—more likely, the author was a male—to pen these words that we still read today!]

The focus of our passage stems from chapter 2. The lamenter in this chapter is personified as a widow crying out on behalf of her “children,” that is, the people of Israel. [“Children” are mentioned elsewhere in the book as well; cf. 1:5; 2:11, 20; 4:4.] The theological perspective of this lamenter presents a belief in God’s sovereignty to the extent that God brings the suffering and the good. In this chapter, it’s all suffering. The calamity that has befallen Daughter Zion is *God’s* doing (cf. Lam 2:1-8): “[God] has delivered into the hand of the enemy the walls of her palaces” (2:7). The Babylonian attack was viewed as a punishment because of the “sin” of the people (2:14). With this theological perspective, the people’s primary responsibility is to “cry out” to God (2:18-19). And, they should do so not just on behalf of themselves, but on behalf of their children (i.e., the future). In these cries, the mourners should call on God to recognize the severity of the calamity: “Should women eat their offspring?” “Should priest and prophet be killed in the sanctuary?” (2:20). They must call on God and beckon God to observe the drastic nature of the suffering.

It is easy to claim that this lamenter sees little hope in his or her situation. After all, the time is depicting a period of utter destruction in Jerusalem, when many of his or her fellow citizens were taken into captivity. It was a time of sincere lament. Yet the chapter calls on those who remain to remember the “lives of the children” (2:20). Herein lies the look to the future and a sign of hope. Do not cry out (only) for one’s own imperfect circumstances, but think of the next generation and ask God to intervene. Perhaps their burden will be less than ours. God does have a choice to intercede on our behalf and to “Restore us to yourself, O LORD... (and) renew our days as of old” (5:21).

Challenge



Trayvon Martin

The challenge for us all is to remember that lament is part of our Christian heritage. As African American people in the USA, lament is central to our common experience. Even if individual families “make it,” we all must remember that Trayvon Martin could be any one of our children. We must lament, as we remember. We must lament, as we progress. We must lament, as we live out our common experience in this land. We must always remember to ask God to intercede on our behalf. And we must live in ways that uplift the poor around the world, include the locked-out, and encourage the hopeless. Then, and only then will our lament be turned to joyous shouting because God will be pleased.

Descriptive Details in This Passage

The descriptive details include but are not limited to:

Sounds: People crying out at the beginning of the night watches; people pouring out their hearts before the Lord; people crying for their children;

Sights: People standing; groups of people weeping; people lying prostrate; people kneeling; worried faces; determined faces; children in crisis; and

Colors: Dingy clothing of poor families; torn clothing of people under siege; blue skies signaling the dawn of a brighter day.

III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions

1. Think about the connection between the “Watch Night” service tradition and the formal structure of “Lamentations.” The Watch Night opportunity is a *formal* time to look back and forward and to reflect on our journey as a community, as a church, as families, and as individuals.
2. Reflect on the impact of those persons “left behind” during the Babylonian exile. We can only imagine who these persons may have been, who the Babylonians did not consider “useful” for their societal benefit. Obviously, it wasn’t good news for the exiles either; but “Lamentations” groans out about those who remained to pick up the pieces. This is an opportunity to think through the impact our ecclesial decisions and activities have on our children, persons with disabilities, and the generally marginalized in our faith communities such as persons in the LGBT community.
3. Compare and contrast the *laments* of “Lamentations” and those of the Spirituals. This comparison may be explored with real value for the sermon. There is some evidence that the “lamentations” were sung at public events in Israel’s history. Two Spirituals constantly came to mind while working on this short exegetical reflection: “Nobody Knows the Trouble I See”; and “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.”
4. Luke Powery’s book Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009) laments the loss of “lament” in sermons, as homileticians frequently want to move to preaching celebratory messages too quickly. As he states, “Lament is vital...because it provides a theological language that embraces God and human suffering *simultaneously*...” (134; his italics). Preaching from Lamentations is an opportunity to reclaim that part of our canonical and ecclesial tradition.