



MAAFA

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY



***“Slave Group in a Ship Clamoring for the Surface”**

Photo by Martin Dixon for St. Paul Community Baptist Church, Brooklyn, NY

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Lection - Psalms 88:1-7 and Lamentations 5:1-5 (New Revised Standard Version)

Psalms 88:1-7

(v. 1) O LORD, God of my salvation, when, at night, I cry out in your presence, (v. 2) let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry. (v. 3) For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. (v. 4) I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; I am like those who have no help, (v. 5) like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand. (v. 6) You have put me in the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep. (v. 7) Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves. *Selah*

Lamentations 5:1-5

- (v.1) Remember, O LORD, what has befallen us;
look, and see our disgrace!
- (v. 2) Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers,
our homes to aliens.
- (v. 3) We have become orphans, fatherless;
our mothers are like widows.
- (v. 4) We must pay for the water we drink;
the wood we get must be bought.
- (v. 5) With a yoke on our necks we are hard driven;
we are weary, we are given no rest.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

MAAFA is a Kiswahili word meaning the “disaster” or “terrible occurrence,” referring to the history of slavery and suffering endured by black people across the world, particularly those who suffered during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This disaster is also known as the African Holocaust, the wholesale dehumanization of African people.

Some congregations hold MAAFA services to honor our black ancestors who fought and died during this great tragedy. Their resistance to this horror is celebrated, but the unjust act is lamented, along with any other forms of oppression. To commemorate this event, lament is important—moans or groans only heard by God—lamenting what could have been or what should have been or lamenting what still is the oppressive reality of many African Americans. MAAFA services provide a liturgical setting to give voice to historical and contemporary pain.¹

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalms 88:1-7 and Lamentations 5:1-5

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Lament offers unto the human soul and spirit the exercise and expression of sadness, sorrow, and perhaps even regret. At a surface level, lament may be wholly an emotion or a feeling that we would altogether avoid at all times and at all costs. However, there is a significant benefit which lament affords us. There is an advantage that we possess as result of lament. Life is never always moments of celebration. As Christians, we believe that a balanced perspective admits that there are crosses to bear. “Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free? No, there’s a cross for everyone and there’s a cross for me.”

Lament positions us to begin to cope with the obstructions and disappointments of life. As human beings, as Americans, as Christians, and as African Americans, we need to have something about us and inside of us that is automatically activated when we face the lows of life, loss in life, and the lack in life. The energy of the Divine has been placed in us by God; this helps us to hunker down at the appearance of disappointment, failure, rejection, exclusion, persecution, and shortfalls. One may call lament an ontological witness. Lament signals to ourselves and others that we are not simply made up of parts with biological function. We’re more than our epidermis, more than the cerebellum, cerebrum, and the medulla oblongata. We are God’s

creation, made a little lower than the angels, and because of that, when we hurt, we lament; when we pain, we cry; when we are rejected, we're saddened; and when we lose, we despair. Without lament, we would be as programmed robots without emotion or humaneness. Lament affirms our humanity.

I celebrate the historic ascendancy of Barack Obama and his victorious election to become President of our country; yet, these are still times of lament—people losing jobs, people losing homes and, as a result, some people are losing their minds! There is still a great need for us to engage in lament to help us interrogate the non-sensical happenings in our lives. Just take a look at the current circumstances in the world—human lament is right before our very eyes. CNN reports on lament resulting from terrorism around the world. There is lament in Darfur due to the horrors of genocide. Families who have lost relatives to gunfire, child abuse, and spousal abuse have no other choice but to engage in lament. Without lament, we would make ourselves vulnerable to the desensitization of our very humanity, but the writers of Psalms and Lamentations will not let us do that.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Biblical lament basically says life is not right and it does so in the face of God. Lament psalms comprise one-third of the entire book of Psalms yet, in church practice, they are hard to find. They are bold prayers of complaint, anger, grief, despair and even protest to God. In many ways, regardless of the specific content, lament suggests that problems and pain are God's business because, as Emilie Townes notes, lament appeals are "always to God for deliverance."² God may be questioned but, at the same time, God is also being acknowledged as sovereign. So, even if angry, the psalmist remains in relationship with God. Even in the midst of questioning, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22), God is still his (the Psalmist's) God.

This is critical to understanding any manifestation of biblical lament, whether in the Psalms or Lamentations. Lament is truthful speech, both about the human situation **and** God's power. Most lament psalms move to praise but this one, Psalm 88, does not, because sometimes there are situations in life about which one can only lament. No joy. No justice. Just terrorism on every hand. In this psalm, the writer's soul is "full," so he has to cry out to God even if he thinks God is to blame for his disaster, his MAAFA. His life is the pits, nearing Sheol or the Pit and death. In fact, he is a dead man walking, feeling like "the slain that lie in the grave," disappearing from human memory, a vapor that vanishes without a trace. He is in his own tomb and needs a resurrection so he turns to the "Lord, God of my salvation." He laments in God's presence but God can handle this. Questions of concern and cries of lament can happen even in God's presence. This is what happens in the book of Lamentations.

The first word mentioned in the book of Lamentations is "how." It is based on the Hebrew interrogative, "ekah." And this "how" question, this "ekah" moment in our lives, begins the process of lament which, in turn, stimulates the process of healing and eventual restoration. Life is filled and laden with many "ekah's" and "how's." Our days reverberate with the echoes of "ekah's" and the heralding of "how's" on both individual and collective plains. Because you're human you've experienced this, too. All of us ask how questions: How did that tragedy happen? How did things go wrong after we took such solemn vows? How is it that I worked the hardest,

but received the least or received a pink slip? How did my children manage to make the choices they have? How did I get such a dreaded disease but lived a healthy life?

And, as African Americans we have a whole other set of “ekah’s” that we’ve asked: How is it that we comprise 13% of the American population, but make up 50% of the population in penitentiaries? How is it that in the midst of a foreclosure crisis, more foreclosures have disproportionately occurred in impoverished communities of color? How did my law-abiding son end up jailed for a crime he did not commit or killed by police?

And then, if you understand the significance of local and global economic justice, there are a myriad of “ekah’s” and “how’s” you ask: How is it that the rich pay for next to nothing and the working poor and middle class have to overpay for everything? How is it that during times of prosperity profits are privatized, and during times of economic adversity, losses are socialized at the expense of taxpayers? How is it that politically connected real estate developers make private profits using public dollars? How is it that municipalities can build stadiums and jails, but cannot build schools and affordable housing? How is it that the U.S. government can spend billions each month on war and not spend a fraction of that on Veterans after they come home from the horrors of battle? How? These are the cries of lament on the tips of the tongues of much of humanity.



Lord, How?

These cries ring out in Lamentations 5:1-5, which clearly reflect the ongoing struggle of many African Americans who “are weary” and feel like they are “given no rest.”(v. 5) Despite all of our achievements, proud moments and milestones, this text reverberates in our collective psyche; we have always lived waiting for the other shoe to drop. Even many in the black middle class have awakened in shock at how much can go wrong no matter how well one prepares; we are given no rest. We can also relate to the lament in verse one, we too say, “Remember O Lord what has befallen us; look and see our disgrace!”

Verse two articulates all that we as a people have conceived, owned, and maintained, which now belongs to others besides us. Everything from property stolen from sharecroppers, to houses lost due to the sub-prime mortgage crisis/robbery. “Our inheritance is turned over to strangers” (v. 2) may also describe our own family shortcomings when adult children irresponsibly lose and relinquish property that they inherited from their parents. Or, how about the industries that our black culture has generated, but which are owned and operated by others besides us? Why is the rap industry operated and owned by others, and not the ones who do the performing and the managing? Is there a connection between this ownership and the debasement of our women? That’s something not only to lament but also to do something about. “Our inheritance is turned over to strangers, our homes to aliens.”

Verses three and four remind us how single parenting has taken its toll on our families, our mothers, sisters and aunts and how, in many cases, the irresponsibility of many fathers has taken its dreadful toll on all of society. Verse four also reminds us that some things never change. Long ago others lamented the misuse of wealth: “We must pay for the water we drink; the wood we get must be bought.” Today, unregulated capitalism has manipulated God’s natural resources in the name of quick profit. Besides water and wood, we have seen wars erupt for the rights to God’s oil, human exploitation over God’s diamonds, and an abundance of produce from God’s earth is commoditized in a way that supply is made low and demand is made high.

Verse five also says, “With a yoke on our necks we are hard driven; we are weary...” This verse reflects the reality of hard working African Americans and so many others. Many work long hours and cannot receive proper health care. Even more in the labor force work so hard that their very health and well-being is put in jeopardy. If these laments were not enough, recently we have seen so many people who have worked for years and were looking forward to receiving retirement pensions, lose them due to a failing stock market or worse there are those who are at the mercy of a faltering social security and Medicare system. As a result of this dismal economy and the economic recession, the U.S. government has begun unfettered bailouts for the wealthy, but the help has yet to reach Main Street, the back streets and the alleys. This is definitely a time to lament in the ears of God.

Celebration

Reverend Nolan Williams, Jr. says in our worship unit for today, “A lament involves the energy to search, not to shut down the quest for truth. It is passion to ask, rather than to rant and rave with already reached conclusions. A lament uses the language of pain, anger, and confusion and moves toward God.” Times are rough and tough but the fact that we can lament means that we are still alive with breath in our body and we will not be silenced. We can cry out against injustice. We can cry out to God until each lament moves from “Nobody knows the trouble I see,” to Glory hallelujah!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: God’s ear; the Pit; the grave; the homes that have been turned over to aliens (Lament.); the orphans (Lament.); the water (Lament.) a heavy yoke on your neck (Lament.);

Sounds: The psalmist crying out; and

Smells: The smell of decaying bodies in the Pit.

III. Sermonic Suggestions

(a) You could possibly title a sermon based on this passage:

“Lamenting and Learning,” or
“Looking at Lament, Inside and Out,” or
“A New Way to Look at Lamenting.”

(b) The following is a possible sermonic move for the end of a sermon about lament:

When the outgoing Presidential administration and Congress agreed that there should be an economic bailout, the front page headlines of the New York Times read, “700 BILLION DOLLAR PACKAGE; THE MOST RADICAL INTERVENTION IN HISTORY.” This may be the most radical economic intervention, but as a child of God I know that the most radical intervention of any type didn’t take place between Washington and Wall Street; it took place on a hill. The Bailout which benefited us most was when Jesus died for us. The most dramatic rescue didn’t happen in 2008, it happened over 2000 years ago on Golgotha’s mighty height.

Notes

*The African American Lectionary thanks the Pastor and members of St. Paul Community Baptist Church of Brooklyn, New York, for the use of images from their 2008 MAAFA Commemoration for this lectionary unit.

1. For more information about MAAFA, see these websites: <http://www.africanholocaust.net>, <http://www.themaafa.com>, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maafa>, and <http://africawithin.com/maafa/slavery.htm> accessed 29 September ,2008

2. Townes, Emilie. Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care. New York, NY: Continuum, 1998. p. 23.