

Victory of the Lamb // December 8, 2019 // Pastor Ben Sadler
Hope series // Theme: Hope changes me // Sermon text: Lamentations 3:19-24

**I remember my affliction and my wandering,
the bitterness and the gall.
I well remember them,
and my soul is downcast within me.
Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:**

**Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him." (Lamentation 3:19-24)**

"It's the most wonderful time of the year." You've heard that tune in the shopping malls and repeated on the radio. But for many of us, it doesn't feel true. In fact, for many *it is the most difficult time of the year*. It's not just that this time of the year can be hard financially. And it's not just that we always seem to be fighting against filling our face with food. But what makes this time so difficult is family.

You see, one of our deepest instincts is to find safety, security, acceptance, and belonging with our friends. We naturally run to our family in times of pain and loss. Some of you grew up in a healthy family. There was someone you could run to for safety, security, acceptance, and belonging.

But that is what makes the holidays so hard. For some of us, that person will not be at the dinner table this year. The person who helped you find safety, security, acceptance and belonging in the past is not here in the present, and so you struggle to find hope in the holidays.

For others, you ran to your family for safety, security, acceptance, and belonging, but unfortunately, they didn't respond. Those you ran to ignored you. They were distracted with their own issues and they pushed you away. And so you grew up believing a lie that you don't really matter.

Then for others, when you ran to your family looking for safety, security, acceptance and belonging, they actually hurt you. You suffered abuse from people in your family, the ones who were supposed to love you and protect you, actually harmed you. And this harm traumatized you.

In his book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel Van Der Kolk explains what trauma and grief and suffering do to our bodies and our brains. Logically, you know that the event that caused you so much pain is in the past, but like the title of the book, your body keeps the score. Your body and your emotions remember what happened and you continue to live in the anxiety, fear, and sadness of the past. Van Der Kolk shares one definition of trauma, **"Traumatic stress is an illness of not being able to be fully alive in the present."** In other words, everyone around you might be singing Christmas carols, eating cookies, and opening presents, but your grief and pain keeps you from being present. Your body's natural response to grief and trauma and suffering keeps you stuck in the past.

And so for many of us, the holidays are very hard, and we struggle to believe that we might experience healing. We lack hope. But that is why we are going through this sermon series called **Hope**. We are going to search the Scriptures to see if we can find hope for the holiday, in the holiday, and through the holidays. So here is the question I want to answer in this sermon, **“How can we begin to experience healing this holiday?”**

To answer this question, we are going to look at a book in the Old Testament called Lamentations. Before we look at the book, let me explain a little of the background. The Israelites are lamenting, mourning over a terrible loss. In the year 587BC, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon marched into Jerusalem. During the siege, the citizens of Jerusalem starved to death as their homes were burned up. Those who were able to survive were carried into captivity. In their rearview mirror they watched their precious temple being destroyed.

But worse than all their loss and pain and suffering was the fact that God seemed to abandon them. The author of Lamentations cries out, **He has walled me in so I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains. Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. He has barred my way with blocks of stone; he has made my paths crooked. (Lamentations 3:7-9)**

It’s horrible to suffer loss, but it’s even worse to feel like we have no God besides. I’ve talked to many people who have suffered trauma. And the worst part is that God doesn’t seem to answer their prayers or care at all.

So when God’s people felt this utter despair, what did they do? They wrote this book. They wrote the book of Lamentations. And they sang out their lament, their cries to God as a community. And as we study this book inspired by the Holy Spirit, we will see one way that we can begin to process and heal.

Now I would like to take the time to read the whole book. The poems express the whole spectrum of our conflicting emotions when we suffer trauma. But we don’t have the time to do that during the worship service. So let me teach you a trick when you are running short on time. When you don’t have time to read a whole book of Hebrew poetry, skip to the center. Hebrew poetry usually follows a method called “centering”, where the main point of the poem is at the center. The center of the book is Lamentations 3.

And in Lamentations 3 we read,

¹⁹ **I remember my affliction and my wandering,
the bitterness and the gall.**

²⁰ **I well remember them,
and my soul is downcast within me.**

The author remembers his affliction and pain. The pain is so real that he feels it and he is emotionally downcast. He is experiencing a deep depression. In fact, the whole book is him crying out to God. Sometimes he recounts in gory detail to pain and torture that he and his people experience. Other times he yells at God in anger. He calls out in mercy. Other times begs God to punish his enemies. This is all part of processing the chaos of his trauma. He is trying to put his story in order. He is trying to find some meaning and purpose.

Even the structure of the book tells us something. Most of the book is written in acrostic poetry according to the Hebrew alphabet. Each line begins with a letter of the alphabet. Do you see? The Hebrews expressed their pain, suffering, grief, and even anger towards God in all its traumatic chaos. And when they did, God brought order to the chaos of their trauma.

If we want to begin to experience hope and healing, we will eventually need to be honest about what we have suffered in the past. So one of the things we need to do is **1. Process our past**. When we suffer grief and loss and trauma, our brains protect us from the full force of our pain, loss, and trauma. Our trauma and grief usually feel like a chaotic, meaningless mess that makes no sense. That's why we need to find a way to put our trauma in the story of our life, with God's help, to bring some order to the chaos.

I don't know how you process your past. The author I mentioned earlier, Van der Kolk, talks about the power of writing down our feelings and emotions. He also mentions the power of theater, acting out and feeling the pain of the past. You might also talk to a trained counselor or therapist. Or you may sing and cry out and lament like the author of Lamentations did. Whatever you do, Van der Kolk explains that we need to process the past so that the disorganized trauma can be put into our story, a story that has a beginning middle and end. Even if we don't fully understand WHY our loss and trauma happened, we need to acknowledge that it did happen.

This is how we as a family have processed our own trauma. Before I tell you this story, I want you to know that I asked my wife about it before I shared it with you. 9 years ago, about this time of the year, we were expecting a child, but my wife had a miscarriage. We were sad and confused. We thought we were doing all the "right things". We know that God is the creator of life. We know that God loves children. Why would he let this child die?

It didn't make sense. And it still doesn't make sense to us to this day. But we have tried to process the event this way. My wife bought this ornament that has a dove and says, "Peace". Somehow in the middle of our pain, God gave us peace. A few years ago, when we were putting up the Christmas tree, we sat our kids down and told them the story of this ornament. We told them about the loss that we suffered as a family. And every year when we put up the tree we remember our past as we put up that ornament.

This is what the Hebrews were doing. They knew their story well. They knew what they experienced. Their exile, their captivity was part of their story. And this part of the story had a beginning, middle and end. But they didn't only look back at the past. When we only review our trauma and grief, we might even get re-traumatized. So the Hebrews didn't just look back at their suffering, the author brings something else to mind.

²¹ **Yet this I call to mind**

and therefore I have hope:

²² **Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,**
for his compassions never fail.

²³ **They are new every morning;**
great is your faithfulness.

The author is paying attention to his thoughts. He knows his trauma well. He thinks about what has happened to him. But he also thinking about God. He is meditating on who God is and what God has promised. As the author thinks about the past event, he believes that God was there. Even though the Babylonians were destroying their temple, torturing their people, causing the women and children to starve, the author believes that God was there. God was there with his love. And although it didn't seem like it at the time, God was restraining the evil of the Babylon. The author says, "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed." The author pictures the evil of this world like a consuming fire, and God's love is like a fire hose. And at some level, God was restraining the full force of this world's wickedness.

I've talked to many people who have suffered abuse and trauma, and quite a few of them talked about the power of seeing God in their pain. They went back to their trauma. They saw themselves as a little boy or a little girl, but this time they imagine God there, holding some of the pain back. They imagined Jesus standing next to them, holding them, crying with them. Knowing that somehow God was present with his compassion, holding back the full force of this world's wickedness helped them process their pain.

I think that is what the author of Lamentations is doing, and I've seen it help others. What if you were to picture your grief and your loss and your trauma, whatever it is. But this time watch it like you are watching a movie. And for the first time, see Jesus weeping with you. See Jesus, holding back some of the pain. See what the author of Lamentations saw, "Because of the Lord's great love, we were not consumed. His compassions never fail, they are new every morning."

As the author processed his past, believing that God was present in this past, he was able to take the next step and begin to live in the present.

He said,

²⁴ **I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion..."**

The author has lost everything. He lost his home, his homeland, his temple, and probably his family. He was carried off to captivity with nothing. But because he processed his past, he could be fully present in the moment. And in the moment, he believed that he still had the Lord. The Lord was still the author of his story. The Lord was still present with him in this moment. And so he reminded his own heart, he spoke to himself, "The Lord is my portion! I've lost most things, but right now, in this moment I still have the Lord."

If we are going to begin to experience healing, we not only need to find a way to **Process our past**, we also need to **Live in the present**. We need to be mindful of what is going on right now. Right now, we are in worship. Right now, God is present with us. Right now, God is surrounding us with his love. He is here. And He is all we truly need.

In a moment, we will take the Lord's Supper. When Jesus first gave the Lord's Supper he said, "Do this in remembrance of me." In other words, Jesus is saying, "Remember what I did for you in the past. Remember how I lived for you. Remember how my body was broken for you. Remember how my blood was poured out to make you part of my family." Then he said, "Take and eat, this is my body. This is my blood." In other words, "right now in this present moment, I am coming to you with my presence. I know the guilt of your past continues to haunt you. All the things that you did and all the things that

were done to you. But I paid for your past. I am here, right now, with my forgiveness and my love and my acceptance. You might have lost everything, but right now”, Jesus is saying, “You have me. I am your portion. I am your inheritance. You have me.”

I want to encourage you to live in the present, not just in worship right now, but throughout this Christmas season. Look at all the symbols of Christmas, the lights, the trees, the presents, they all point us to the baby born in Bethlehem. Live in the present season of Christmas. Live in this moment, when we celebrate his miraculous birth.

To begin to find healing, we need to first process our past, then we need to be fully alive in the present, but there is one more important step that the author shows us when it comes to healing: **Hope in the future**. The author says it this way:

...therefore I will wait for him.”

Literally, the author is saying, “I will hope in him”. “Hope” and “wait” are basically the same word in Hebrew. We wait in hope of a better future. The Hebrew people believed that God was telling a story that started in the Garden of Eden. It started with God’s love, but quickly humanity fell. And all the evil and pain and suffering and death is a consequence of the sin that lives in this world and lives in us. But the Hebrews believed that God chose them. For thousands of years their prophets predicted a Messiah who would be born in Bethlehem. They believed that this Messiah would rule over all the nations. That he would defeat all their enemies and make all things new. They had hope in the future because they believed the Messiah was going to bring a happy ending.

We are waiting for God to fulfill that same hope. But our hope is even more sure than the writer of Lamentations. We know that God has begun to fulfill his promise in the Messiah. We know for a fact that Jesus came the first time on the first Christmas. We know he died. And we know he rose. And so, we wait with full assurance in a future hope. We wait with a sure hope that Jesus will return and resurrected all believers and make this world the way it is supposed to be. He will judge our unrepentant enemies and welcome us into the safety and security of his loving presence. So we will be with the Lord and all those who love the Lord forever. We will begin to experience healing as we hope in the future.

I do believe that this Christmas season can be the most wonderful time of the year. I know our bodies and our brains remember and even play out the pain and suffering of the past. And it can be extremely hard. But this is why we are here. We need each other. We need all the help we can get to process the chaos, the grief, and the trauma of our past. We need all the help we can get to live in the present, to believe that God is here with us right now, with his love. We need all the help we can get to hope in the future, to believe that our very best days are yet to come. Merry Christmas. Amen.