

Text: Isaiah 55: 1-11
Title: Between Lament and Longing
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The images and stories out of Ukraine are heart-wrenching. The televised coverage of war-crimes, indiscriminate bombings, and the pictures of rubble and wreckage are heart-breaking. The lines of women and children walking, waiting for transportation, and seeking safe shelter are overwhelming. The numbers are mind-numbing.

In the 3 weeks since Russia invaded Ukraine some 3 million people have fled the country. In recent history, refugees from Syria, Rwanda, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Iraq have all had similar experiences, but the rate of Ukrainian exodus is unprecedented.

Against that backdrop there are haunting images that I can't shake: a pregnant woman being carried from a bombed out maternity hospital, an elderly woman whose leg was blown off while waiting in line for bread, a basement nursery full of newborns....

You have your own pictures or voices from Ukraine that haunt, but listen to these lines of lament.

Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to foreigners. We have become fatherless; our mothers are widows. We must buy the water we drink; our wood can only be had at a price. Those who pursue us are at our heels; we are weary and find no rest.... We get bread at the risk of our lives because of the sword....

*Women have been ravished...
Princes have been hung up by their hands...
Elders are shown no respect...
Young men have stopped their music....
Joy is gone from our hearts....
Our dancing has turned to mourning.*

Those lines could be cried out today; they're from the fifth chapter of Lamentations – in the Old Testament.

About 500 years before the birth of Jesus, the Promised Land was invaded by the Babylonians and the Israelites were marched off into exile. Torn from their homeland, hear-broken and overwhelmed – they were refugees. And as strangers in a strange land, they raised their voices in lament. The phrasing of Lamentations may feel antiquated; the experience is immediate.

Dear friends, any cursory reading of history, or the events of the day, reveal that suffering, loss, and unspeakable horrors are part of the human experience. And there is little evidence that God's people are spared. Protestant, Catholic, Jew, Muslim, elect,

reprobate, sacred, secular – we all suffer the same. That we think we know who God would spare, bless, or rescue in the present seems short sighted and naïve.

Lament is rightly part of our lot in life.

Maybe one of the reasons the invasion of Ukraine is so unsettling is that we know our veneer of comfort and safety can just as easily be rent asunder. Lament is rightly part of our lot in life.

But there's a second voice in scripture.

There's a counterpoint.

There's a contrapuntal melody.

Our text this morning was composed while the Israelites were in Babylonian exile.

But, rather than lament, it details a vision of these refugees coming home. There was a shifting of the geo-political landscape, the Israelites expected to go home, and this section of Isaiah soars with the poetry of hope. Most of our familiar and favorite passages in Isaiah come from this part of Isaiah.

And so, to those in exile, the prophet lifts up the image of a vender in the marketplace carrying a water jar and barking out for all who are thirsty to come for a drink – at no cost. Those who are hungry and flat-busted-broke are invited to come for wine and milk and the richest fare – at no cost.

To the battered and beleaguered,
to the displaced and destitute,
to the refugee and the ragged he cries out,
“Come, come, come! Listen, listen, listen...”

Isaiah links their homecoming to the promise-keeping activity of God. They will drink without price and eat without money, because God keeps covenant. And, the prophet is so caught up in a kind of poetic imagination that he blends the two – the promises of God will be that which they eat and that which satisfies.....

It's a picture of *shalom* – where everything will be put to rights and God will dwell with his people. And! There's no cost. There's no concern about social strata or ethnicity. There's no need to be dressed in piety. The only requirement is that are you're hungry, thirsty, and longing for home.

Can you imagine women and children walking back into Kyiv and Mariupol and finding tables set with bowls of hot stew, fresh breads, cheeses, salads, cookies and milk, all under safe skies? They'll eat love and security and the very grace of God. Streets will be cleaned, homes rebuilt, songs will fill the air, fear banished, families reunited, and there will be “no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away....”

For Isaiah and the Israelites, the vision of our text was physical.

This was about a plot of land; this was about place; this was about earth-and-blood-and-sweat-and-tears. This was about going home. And it's about the Word of God feeding and filling their deepest longings....

I'd offer that we live in that space. We live in the tension between lament and longing. We know brokenness and we know the hope of God's coming *shalom*. To paraphrase the Psalmist, our tears have been our food day and night, and we yet we hope in the vision of John where the very hand of God wipes away last tears.

We live with chaos and we long for *shalom*.

We suffer and we trust in the covenant-making-activity of God.

We thirst and we believe that one day we'll be satisfied.

We live in the in-between, in the conversation between Lamentations and Isaiah.

Let's pause there for a minute.

Every one of us knows lament; and if we don't, we will. The invasion of Ukraine and the precipice of a world war is a public lament, but grieving the loss of a loved one, navigating a cancer diagnosis, forsaken in a marriage, bearing the weight of depression, living with addiction, abuse, loneliness... are all private experiences of lament.

We could afford to be kinder to one another. We don't know what lament we each carry. Every one of us has a story.

And yet there is this other voice, this other vision, this other image wherein relationships are restored, creation flourishes, and God's blessing overflows in abundance. We live in the dissonance, or tension, or movement, or dialogue between both voices....

Which is why, I think, the next few lines of our Isaiah text are helpful. To exiles headed home Isaiah still writes:

Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near.

Seek the Lord. The verb here is to "inquire after" and the instruction has the sense of continuing to do so. Don't just call once. Inquire after God and keep at it.

That is to say that part of faithfulness is a thirsting for God that will never be fully quenched. We have a taste, but until God comes in fullness we will never be fully satisfied. We come to the table as a foretaste of a banquet. Refugees, we can see a hint of a homecoming through this vale of tears. Our calling is to keep turning toward God.

Debra Rienstra puts it this way:

.....we seek the Lord in the sanctuary, among the people of God. We come to the waters of baptism. We buy bread and wine without cost at the communion table, where we can eat what is good and our souls can delight in the richest of fare.

Even amid our many exiles and desperate longings, we come to glimpse again and again that vision of flourishing that we trust is the true purpose of God. We come to receive the love of the God who longs to bring us home.

That may seem trivial, impotent, and pie-in-the-sky. It may seem like rote religious rigamarole that doesn't impact the real world of bombs, tanks, and mass graves.

But our hope is ultimately in the covenant-keeping activity of God. Our faith is in one who knows lament, and was forsaken even unto death. Our longing is for one resurrected that all creation might be restored to *shalom*.

Isaiah puts it this way:

For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Dear friends, may we...

work for and pray for peace,
find here food and drink without cost,
and seek after the God who will wipe every tear away and make all things new.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.

Amen.