

July 25, 2021 – “Fresh as the Morning, Sure as the Sunrise”

Lamentations 2:11, 13; 3:1-3, 7-9, 16-17, 19-24, 37-38

Robert Hudnut, who once pastored a Presbyterian church in Chicago, Illinois, tells of a conversation he had with a woman. She told him about reading all the latest self-help books from so-called experts, only to find she still had problems that couldn't be shaken. Hudnut found this true of many other people, despite a fix-it society where we are told to live positively or seek therapy or properly manage our grief or take some wonder drug. Whatever the efforts, many still find themselves in the darkness, broken by life.

We are like the father whose son was giving him a bad reputation. Finally he told the boy, "Look, son. I don't care if the basement wall is cracking. Please stop telling people we come from a broken home. "

Despite good intentions and well-wishers, brokenness continues. Robert Hudnut didn't think such brokenness was always bad. So he wrote a book entitled *Meeting God in the Darkness*, a book that sought to show how the negative experiences of life often bring forth the treasures of God. The chapter headings are intriguing. They include the gift of conflict, the gift of denial, the gift of being out of control, the gift of temptation, the gift of guilt, the gift of anger, the gift of alienation, the gift of doubt, the gift of purposelessness, the gift of chance, the gift of illness, the gift of ego, the gift of sin, the gift of despair, the gift of death. If he were writing today, he might even put in a chapter about the gift of pandemics. Hudnut believed the so-called negative, dark experiences of life contain some of the deepest treasures of existence.

The chairman of the Academy of Hospice Physicians once wrote a *Washington Post* editorial countering suicide or euthanasia as ways to deal with the experience of death. He first made the point that

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most of the physical sources of suffering associated with dying can be controlled and relieved through medication. Then he wrote, "My strongest objection to euthanasia concerns not suffering, but the missed opportunity. The transition from life can be every bit as profound, intimate, and precious as the miracle of birth. The surprising fact is that in the midst of their dying, many people are able to experience, not merely comfort, but an increased sense of well-being, which often includes a deep sense of connectedness to others and the world. It is common for hospice clinicians to hear people - - some of whom had previously considered suicide - - reflect that their dying has been among their most meaningful life experiences. " Even the so-called dark experience of death has treasures many fear or fail to tap.

I found this to be true in the deaths of my 96-year-old parents over the last 13 months. My mother went first, peacefully lingering for 14 days without food and water, as we held her hands, stroked her face, sang our faith, and spoke our love. A day or so before she died, she opened her eyes and looked at my father laying beside her in the bed, giving him such a look that he was shivered into grateful joy, describing her beauty like the day he first met her over 75 years ago, she appearing to him without the wrinkles of other older women. As he described the look with tears streaming down his face, we were shivered into a mystery many try to avoid. And when his turn came 7 months later, for about 3 days after an emergency room visit, he breathed with mouth open, not able to respond, even as we touched him, held his hand, and affirmed our love and gratitude for his life.

Finally, as we spoke Psalm 23, prayed the Lord's prayer, and told him it was ok to join mom, he closed his mouth, apparently set his face to the unknown, and a few moments later breathed his life into the breath of all life.

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The Bible writers knew that the negative experiences of life often bring the deep treasures of God. This seems to be the message of the Book of Lamentations. Lamentations was written in approximately 587 BCE, during a time of severe brokenness on the part of the Jewish people. Many Jews had been conquered and carried away into exile at the hands of the Babylonians. They had lost their land, their beloved city of Jerusalem, and their temple. The city and temple were razed to the ground. Those Jews left behind lived with extreme scarcity, with mothers so hungry they ate their own babies.

The Book of Lamentations is a collection of 5 laments regarding this terrible situation. The first 4 laments are poems written as acrostics - - each consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet beginning a sentence. That is why the verse numbers in our English translations are so close together. The last lament is a prayer of 22 lines, suggesting the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Writing 4 laments in the form of a 22-letter acrostic and the last lament as a 22 lined prayer was a way of rehearsing the brokenness of the people in repetitive style, going over the suffering again and again. The very repetition that conveys the weariness and despair of the people also brings relief.

A man who was once going to New York city for a week of screaming at top of his lungs in Primal Scream therapy, was told by a friend that it would be just as productive and much cheaper to shut himself in a room for a weekend, reading the Book of Lamentations.

It is interesting that the book names the brokenness of the Jewish people as resulting from the judgment and anger of God. Such a perspective goes against our modern mindset. But to the ancient

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Jews there was no such thing as secondary causes or extenuating circumstances. Everything came from the hand of God. As Lamentations 3:38-39 puts it, "Good and evil alike take place at his command. Why should we ever complain when we are punished for our sins?" Judgment to the writers of the Bible revealed God's care. If God didn't exhibit rousing and passionate anger, God was indifferent.

Some theological students once wrote a musical *Sure As You're Born*. In it a criminal stands condemned for the murder of his wife by forensic evidence and his own conscience. A chaplain offers comfort that the murder was due to an irresistible impulse, and sings absolution in a pious voice, "I forgive you. " But the criminal will have none of it. If he cannot be held accountable, how can he be forgiven? What is he to be forgiven for? He demands that he be judged, not forgiven, singing that "the anger of God is the measure of God's loving. Unless I am judged, no God is there. "

Now lest we confuse this judgment as something to make us fear of God as a cosmic policeman, we would do well to remember instruction by respected Anglican and Biblical scholar C. H. Dodd. In his work *The Epistle to the Romans* he writes, "The wrath of God does not mean a feeling or attitude in God toward humans, but rather an effect in the realm of objective facts. That is to say, that we can separate ourselves from God if we choose to, but God who is unchangeable remains forever loving."

“The only change resulting from sin is in ourselves and the world. It is this change in us and in our world that is metaphorically called 'the wrath of God' in the Bible. The phrase does not refer to anything that is actually in God's spirit or heart. "

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The Jewish people in the time of Lamentations were lamenting their own sins and mistakes, things that had changed their world into one of devastating brokenness. Through their lamentations they came to face the reality of their own wayward choices. They learned that when we separate ourselves from God there is often darkness, pain, loss, devastation, brokenness. They also had to learn that even when we don't separate ourselves from God, there is often darkness, pain, loss, devastation, brokenness.

The story is told of a very successful man, good at work and active in the community and church. He came from a fine family, went to a choice college, lived in a select neighborhood, supported his family, paid his bills, contributed to charity, and had many friends. But all was not well. His marriage was on the rocks. His business was fragile. His inner life was broken. Fear was consuming him. But somehow he learned to lament, to thank God for any good that came from bad, looking for light amid the dark, even when he did not see the light. He learned that asking "why did this happen to me?" begins our journey into the dark, and admitting "I have tried everything and nothing seems to work" begins our journey into the light. He started to change, and a new calm took over his spirit.

Like this man, we all try various strategies amid the dark of brokenness. But through lamentation we learn that God is the name that comes to us when we realize we cannot always lead ourselves out of the darkness. This is the wisdom of brokenness. In the words of Lamentation 3:22, "The Lord's unfailing love and mercy continue. Fresh as the morning, sure as the sunrise. For the Lord is all I have, and so in God I put my hope. "