

One New Book for the Preacher

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LAMENTATIONS AND THE TEARS OF THE WORLD by Kathleen M. O'Connor.
Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 2002. 156 pages.

Years ago I told the story of Naboth's vineyard to children in worship and was chastised afterward by several adults for exposing children to cruelty. (I even left out the gory bits at the end when Jezebel was thrown onto the pavement from the upstairs palace window, and dogs feasted on her blood.) Ironically, those most critical, who thought I had damaged the psyches of children, were the church members concerned for justice, some of our best 'warriors' in the fight to reform prisons and to advocate for the homeless.

If I read Dr. O'Connor's commentary on Lamentations correctly, she sees the book as a resource for helping the church acknowledge the injustice, pain, and violence in this world, so often hidden in our affluent, consumption-driven, sports and entertainment saturated culture. She wants us to learn, as people of faith, how to weep copious tears for the abused and the oppressed—and even for ourselves, who deny our despair.

Lamentations can assist us. It is a house for sorrow and a school for compassion: "the Bible's most comfortless book opens [for us] the way to comfort"(97).

The commentary is in two parts. Part I, "Commentary: Who Will Comfort You?" is an exposition of Lamentations, introduced by a chapter outlining the critical issues. Part II, "Reflections, A Theology of Witness," is a meditation on ways in which this extended poetic treatment of the destruction of Jerusalem can "not only mean but be" (Archibald MacLeish, "Ars Poetica").

I appreciate O'Connor's summary of current critical approaches. I have only read Lamentations devotionally and have never preached from it. So ordinary exposition is essential, and sheds light upon the author's skillful poetic devices, which heighten the sorrow and abandonment that pervade the book.

Literary variations of the lament form in Hebrew poetry, together with acrostic and alphabetic marking of lines and stanzas, make for a complex set of five poems (chapters) which, either in original or redacted form, mourn God's excessive punishment of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. The sorrow of the people is paramount, with few shreds of hope for a future with God.

I especially appreciated O'Connor's use of a phrase from Arthur Frank in describing the people's plight – not only the physical torment in the destruction of public buildings and homes – but also as "narrative wreckage" (7). The people of Zion lost everything they possessed, and were reduced to the unspeakable horror (cannibalism) of survivors. But equally destructive, they also lost the story of themselves with God, and of God with them. From one perspective, Lamentations is an effort to restore the narrative of a ravaged people whose identity depends upon a relationship with God.

The provocative arguments in O'Connor's commentary are about the consequences of God's missing voice. God never speaks directly in Lamentations, nor

justifies the divine wrath (punishment for breaking the covenant), nor relents in the rape

of daughter Zion. The speakers in the poems describe the horror and cry out piteously. They recall the prophet's warnings and make plain that disobedience led to the devastation. Questions are raised repeatedly: Was the punishment excessive? Did God go far beyond "permissive" destruction to the actual torture and abuse of the elect, who are personified as the daughter, Zion, the faithless covenant partner? And if so, then the timid hope finally expressed in Lamentations is not a justifiable response to sorrow, but indicates "the abused spouse syndrome," in which the abused keeps returning to the abuser hoping it will be different. In theological language we ask: Are we trusting the untrustworthy One? Is our God abusive and ultimately unfaithful?

O'Connor resolves this dilemma in a last lyrical chapter on Second Isaiah, demonstrating how the word poems of that prophet are answers to the bleakness and tentative hope with which Lamentations ends. For in Second Isaiah God has a mighty, saving voice. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins" (Isaiah 40:1 – 2).

What, then, is here for the preacher/teacher? First, O'Connor challenges us to take the laments and "ugly parts" of the lectionary often omitted (as in the imprecatory psalms) and use them in teaching and preaching. If we do this skillfully, we can re-establish the lost connection in the hearts and minds of our hearers between the mercy and judgment of God. Grace has no "cash value" apart from sin. Rescue is not meaningful to those who are trapped in the "safety net" of affluence. Liberal advocates for the poor and prison reform need to hear of God's sure justice. Ahab had grievously abused Naboth at Jezebel's instigation. The story of God with us and of us with God never sidesteps the difficulties. We preachers who avoid the tougher texts do God an injustice, continue the wreckage, and avoid a genuine reconstruction of God's true story with us.

Second, O'Connor offers a more difficult challenge. How can we relate the affluence of American congregations to our abuse of the third world, especially if we live with an addictive consumption that masks a covert despair? I remember a prescient colleague saying thirty-five years ago that he wished he lived in a developing country, or in Eastern Europe, where there was, even then, the beginning of hope for a "new world." We live in the old, decaying, and powerfully dangerous world – ready to ravage anyone and any nation to protect our "anointed-with-oil" standard of living. So what is the gospel to us who depend upon an economic system that "grinds the faces of the poor in the dust?" I do not simply critique a wealth that allows many of us to keep a house in the city, a house in the mountains, and a house at the beach. I mean the economic system that keeps our teaching positions at seminaries endowed, and our brightest and best students on scholarships to study diligently in order to be ordained as Ministers of Word and Sacrament. Should our preaching and teaching begin to challenge the Ahabs on whom we all depend and defend the Naboths whose lands and livelihoods are our disposal? At the very least we could invite tears for the world and for ourselves.

Third, when I preach on Lamentations, I will look to other times and places to see how the church has used this book. If there is a missing voice in this commentary, it is the voice of Christians in other generations. Where are the ecclesiastical references? What do Calvin and Luther say about Lamentations? The worlds in which they lived

daily shed many more tears than the world of American Christianity in the past four decades. What about the early church? What do Irenaeus and Augustine have to say? How have Christians and Jews, who have experienced both narrative and physical wreckage, appropriated Lamentations as a word from the Lord? Such understanding would open a window on the despair that lives below the surface of our lives.

Fourth, and finally, how do we relate Jesus Christ to Lamentations? Almost every year I hear in an ecumenical Good Friday service these words from the stations of the cross: "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like unto my sorrow" (Lamentations 1:12). Here we find a beginning for a Christological approach to the book of sorrows. In addition, we can remember the cry from the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" That derelict word distills and summarizes all the sorrow in the world, including the lamentations of Zion for a lost city, and a lost story with God. Jesus chose to lose his way to God, and God forsook him. He descended into hell. But God raised him from death. So as Second Isaiah provides an answer to the abandonment of the beloved people, so Easter is God's final word on the devastation of death and abandonment, and the beginning of a new narrative.

Perhaps, if we skillfully and faithfully present Lamentations to our congregations, and help them rediscover a narrative of judgement and grace, we can tell the story of Naboth and Ahab to children, and not be afraid of damaging their hearts. Quite the contrary, they will learn of a God who avenges the poor and oppressed, rescues the righteous, and raises the dead. With such a God, how can we fail to make sense of our lives?