

"Singing the Blues in Zion"

Lamentations 1:1-6

How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal. ²She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies. ³Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude; she lives now among the nations and finds no resting place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress. ⁴The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to the festivals; all her gates are desolate, her priests groan; her young girls grieve, and her lot is bitter. ⁵Her foes have become the masters, her enemies prosper, because the LORD has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions; her children have gone away, captives before the foe. ⁶From daughter Zion has departed all her majesty. Her princes have become like stags that find no pasture; they fled without strength before the pursuer (NRSV).

Psychologists have spent decades studying how our *core beliefs* shape *how* we feel and *what* we do: For example, if you believe your future is *bleak*, you're more likely to be *depressed*; (but) if you have a "*growth mindset*" — you think people can *change* — you're more likely to *put effort into what you do and grow*.

The *story* we tell ourselves about the world can shape us in profound ways.

You see, *researchers* have discovered that there are 26 *primal world beliefs* people can hold. They include the beliefs that the world is *good, safe, changing, worth exploring and intentional*.

These beliefs *vary* from person to person, are *automatic* and *deep-seated*, and, like our personality traits, are *stable* over time. They also *cluster together*: If you think the world is *unjust*, you're more likely to also believe it's *unstable and threatening*, whereas if you see the world as *beautiful*, you're likely to believe it's a *meaningful and even funny place*.

(But) what most surprised the researchers, was that these beliefs could powerfully predict our **joys and sorrows**. People who believe the world is *safe, enticing and alive*, for example, are more likely to *show gratitude to others, to be more trusting, to have a growth mind-set and to be happier*. People who see the world as *alive* are more likely to be *spiritual* and find *meaning* in their lives. Those who are *depressed* think the world is *unsafe* — which makes sense. If the world is dangerous, that means there are threats lurking everywhere.

It may be that individuals adopt their *primals* early on, shaped by a combination of *genetics* and *early environmental factors* that we have yet to understand.¹

Let's think about these things in terms of our text from Lamentations 1 this morning.:

We discover how *desolate* and *lonely* is the city. The city (Jerusalem) where there once was the beautiful Temple where the people gathered. To worship has been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE (this was Judah's '9/11' moment). Where once psalms of praise could be heard, now laments of sorrow resound. *Friends* (nations) that once were *hers* (Israel's) have betrayed her and joined with her *enemies* (Babylonians). And so she weeps.

You see, Lamentations was written to *mourn* for the state of Jerusalem after the exile of the *southern kingdom*. Nebuchadnezzar had sacked the city and it now lies desolate. Those who are left are unable to function properly, and the community is in *chaos*.²

But (even in these desperate circumstances) the survivors intuited that *God speaks to us in exile, and God has not abandoned the city*.

Walter Brueggemann, in his article "*Conversations among Exiles*," helps us to see that "*Ancient Israel learned [and helps us] to express sadness, rage, anger, and loss honestly ... [The church] can learn to address these emotions to God for it is God who is terminating our unjust privilege and deceptive certitude.*"³

¹ Emily Esfahani Smith, Is the world an exciting or a terrifying place? Your answer can powerfully shape your life and your political views, new research says, The Washington Post, (Inspired Life), October 2, 2019

² William B. McClain, "*Preaching God's Transformative Justice*," Westminster/John Knox, Louisville, 2012, 411-412.

³ Walter Brueggemann, "*Conversations among Exiles*," Christian Century, July 2-9, 1997, 630-632.

And yet, we are told through the prophet Jeremiah that even in Babylon we are to marry and have children, build houses, plant gardens and eat what they produce, and “*seek welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare*” (Jer. 29:4-7).

In other words, there is *hope*.

This reminds me that *the blues* is one of America’s unique and enduring art forms. Its roots are African, but the compositions were forged in the humid southern landscape of cypress and magnolia trees mingling with Spanish moss. It is more than music: *the blues is a cultural legacy that dares to see the American landscape from the viewpoint of the underside.*

Ralph Ellison states, “*The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness. . . . As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.*”

August Wilson and Zora Neale Hurston, two organic theologians and nontraditional homileticians, capture *the essence of blues speech* and are chroniclers of black religiosity and the healing power of *God-talk* as articulated by people who preach and sing in minor keys.

For Wilson, *speech* wrapped up in the blues ***is the antidote to the blues***. In other words, the only way to get rid of your blues is to *speak* to your blues. In Wilson’s play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, for instance, the character based on blues singer Gertrude “Ma” Rainey speaks of the blues’ *prophetic power to release the individual from spiritual isolation*:

The blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain’t alone. There’s something else in the world. Something’s been added by that song. This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something.

Ma Rainey is saying, “*I refuse to fall into despair.*” This is *Blue Note* preaching. It’s *prophetic* preaching—*preaching about tragedy but refusing to fall into despair.*

Walter Brueggemann (also) says that when we look at the Bible we must “*read, speak, and think as the poet.*” We celebrate all *life* and find the *beauty* in the midst of the magnificent mosaic of human contradiction.

In Psalm 137, (for instance) the psalmist speaks the blues when the words go forth from the mouths of poets who speak with a blues sensibility. “*By the rivers of Babylon, we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung up our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’*”(NIV).

According to Flannery O’Connor, Christian writers are burdened by their knowledge of an *alternative world* because they have encountered a God of *grace and love*. But the world that they look at does not fit the alternative world. The writers know what the world *should be* but are burdened by the divine distance of humanity from divinity. They see “*the grotesque,*” who are out of sync with God, as well as characters who demonstrate the *grace* of God even though they are *distanced* from God. Through this *tension* the writer is drawn to the *grotesque of blues* and finds that God is loose in the world.

Isaiah speaks this same blues sensibility with poetic power and prophetic boldness. “*Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless*” (10:1–2, NIV). The prophet speaks with poetic language and lifts up the grotesque in the world of Israel.

In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman speaks of Jesus as *savior* and *liberator* of those who have their backs against the wall. Obery Hendricks borrows from Thurman and urges us to view Jesus *not solely as the sociological savior of oppressed people, but as a person who lived life as a colonized individual*. Jesus understands the pain of *terrorism* and is acquainted with the structures of disenfranchisement that rob people of their humanity.

In other words, Jesus knows all about our troubles.

According to Otis Moss III, an entire orchestra was birthed “*down by the riverside*” as mothers sang, “*Roll, Jordan, roll.*” A new speech—speech with a

conjuring power—stepped into the light. The *Blue Note* and *blues sensibility* were born in this place of *death* that became the place of *life*. Just as Jesus hung up on the cross and transformed an execution into a celebration, the Blue Note sensibility *conjures life* from death's domain. It turns the gospel back to *Jesus*, the church back to *Christ*, and the preacher back to the *prophets*.⁴

Friends, (to conclude) let's return to the *metaphor* of the *city* that I shared earlier. When we begin to understand that *our fate* is tied to the *fate of the cities*, we will begin to *pray* for Jerusalem, for Port-au-Prince, for New Orleans, for Washington, D.C., for Kabul, and Johannesburg, and all of the cities that have been ravaged and betrayed in whatever form.

When we begin to understand that our future is tied to the future of the city, we will welcome the strangers (foreigners, visitors) and invite them to gather with us around a common table, a community bound by a common Creator, Redeemer, and Host! And the table will be the "*Welcome Table*."

In these *in-between times*, it is a table where all God's children can gather round in one communion, at a common earthly meal as a rehearsal for the heavenly banquet.

⁴ Otis Moss III, *Dance in the dark: Preaching the blues without despair*, Christian Century, November 12, 2015

