

Serving Our Humiliated God

Lamentations 1:1-4 & Jeremiah 29:4-9

Matthew 5:13-16

Even before I was ordained and became a local church pastor, the church in general has been in a steady decline in North America. No one wants to see their church is getting smaller or, even worse, getting closed. So, there has been lots of anxiety, disappointments, and blames over the situations of the church. In most cases the pastor gets blames but once the pastor moves out of the church or moves to another vocation, the people of the church are left to suffer with griefs, the grief of losing members, the grief with changes that they are not prepared to cope with, or the grief of feeling defeated. They may feel that their church is humiliated in their community, and even their God is humiliated. In their minds God should be all mighty and all powerful solving all problems and bringing victories to God's people or to church. About church declining, I try not to explain away the possible reasons, such as young people get busier, shopping malls and stores open seven days a week, or sports and screens are more exciting than Sunday worship. Rather, I try to invite them to see the current situation as it is, and then figure out what's the mission to be a church in the changing contexts. Then, people tell me we need to focus on success stories because there are still growing churches around them. For people who believe in God, it is very hard to see that their church is not successful or victorious. Please keep this current situation of the church in your mind and imagine the total destruction of Jerusalem temple in 586 BCE when prophet Jeremiah was in active ministry. Jerusalem temple was the place where people proudly called 'the house of God.' Jerusalem temple was the church they gathered for worship, fellowship, sacrifices, and celebrations. Jerusalem temple was the symbol of the pride of God's people. They adored it, loved it, and took pride in it. But it was totally destroyed by Babylon empire. What do you think they might have thought, felt, wondered, struggled, or suffered with the destruction of their temple? It was worse than church closings we see nowadays. They were defeated and their God was humiliated. But without the temple, they had to carry on the mission of being God's people. They had to serve their humiliated God in a foreign land, Babylon. The mission of serving God and serving their people still had to go on without the temple.

Psalms 137 sings their laments in Babylon exile. It says, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land? May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy." I wonder they have ever cried in their Jerusalem temple when it was in glory and when they believed their God was powerful and strong. Now they lost the temple, and they cried by the rivers of Babylon. Today's reading from chapter one of Jeremiah's Lamentations describes their current situations. It says, "How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations! She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave." Here, she is the city of Jerusalem and its temple. The power, beauty, and glory are gone. The temple is destroyed and lies on ruins. The people of the city are dragged to Babylon and become despised foreigners or refugees. Some become slaves. How do you think God expects them to live in Babylon as the people of God and what are the mission they still need to carry on in this humiliating time and place?

Prophet Jeremiah speaks out to the people delivering messages from God that they need to settle in the city of Babylon and seek for the peace and prosperity of the city. Jeremiah opposes two of the options

available to the exiles. They should not withdraw and hide from life in the city; nor should they listen to the answers they want to hear – the simple solutions—from the false prophets. Jeremiah refers to false prophets who claim that the exile would be short-lived and that Jerusalem would soon be restored. God's people who are lacking hope in exile want to hear that their suffering will be short and almighty God will restore them soon. But through prophet Jeremiah God speaks to them, "Do not let the false prophets among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them."

When we know our sufferings would not be short and God is not in hurry to rescue us, how do we live as God's people? What do we do? The current coronavirus pandemic does not seem to go away anytime soon even after one and half years of sufferings. The on-going natural disasters of hurricanes, wildfires, or earthquakes do not seem to stop and give us a break. Wars, destructions, and violence seem to never end. Where do we find hope? We may want to give up. We may want to close eyes and ears and hide or we want to follow false prophets who promise quick and simple answers. By rejecting these two temptations, the acceptable alternative becomes lament. In exile prophet Jeremiah cries and laments. The book of Lamentations is the collection of cries of God's people. Withdrawal from the world or accepting simplistic answers reveals human effort or human problems solving, while lament acknowledges who is ultimately in control. In the midst of a crisis, laments points toward God and acknowledges God's sovereignty regardless of the circumstances. When in the eyes of the world our God is humiliated and defeated, we serve our humiliated God with laments. Then, listen to the true prophecies to engage in the changing world. Jeremiah speaks to Israelites in exile to settle in the city of Babylon. His prophesy is to, "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which God has carried you into exile." God gives mission to God's people to continue to live life, even in the midst of shattered dreams and expectations. Babylonians were enemies and Israelites were refugees in that city but God called them to conduct life in all its fullness, even in the midst of a foreign land. They are not to hide from the world but instead seek ways to engage and even contribute. Life continues even as a faith community struggles with its place and identity. The mission of God's people is to be the light of the world where they are living right now.

Today's gospel reading is a part of Jesus' sermon on the mountain. In his sermon Jesus says, "Let me tell you why you are here. You are here to be light, bringing out God in the world. God is not a secret to be kept." Many of you remember the glory days of your church. You may wonder why or what's next? When the glory is gone, we wonder who God is and who we are and why we are here as a faith community. That's the time we read Lamentations and restore hope in God who is humiliated in the eyes of the world. Even without Jerusalem temple, even in the exile, even during the pandemic, even in hopeless darkness, and even when the son of God is crucified and buried, we are called to be the light and to bring out God in the world by crying and lamenting. After we lament, we go out and seek the peace and prosperity of the city, and of the neighborhood. Thanks be to God.