



Trinity 5

THE NEW SHOFAR

We are always welcome in the loving arms of God

Lamentations 3:19-33 - Mark 5:21-43

The Book of Lamentations

²⁰ My soul is bowed down within me.
²¹ But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: ²² The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end;

Lamentations is a collection of five poems focussing on deep and painful suffering, agony so dark and profound it crushes the human soul and destroys the peace and joy of the individual's life. In these short poems the believers beg God for assistance, cry out in their anguish to a God who is *hiding behind heaven's clouds*. In this

acknowledgement of the reality of darkness as an inevitable part of our human existence, they are opened up to the grace and mercy of Almighty God. They are liturgies of faith and enduring hope.

Lamentations was composed during and around the invasion of Judah by the brutal Babylonians, the destruction of the Temple and 597^{B.C} exile. During this period, survivors must have been wondering how they could possibly continue in the face of this massive loss of life, land, Temple and king. Nothing was spared by the invaders. The obvious question to ask was: *Where is the God of the covenant who had given this land to them as their own? Were they an "abandoned" people? What had happened to the eternal covenant God had made with king David?* All of these spiritual struggles find their way into these poems taking the form of outrage, grief, agony and tragedy. Only in experiencing God's absence did they find his presence within them.

*great is your faithfulness.
'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I hope in him.'*

Show us your mercy Lord God!

From our modern western perspective, it is difficult to understand the deep pain, isolation and shame this woman endured every day of her life. Her situation stands in stark contrast to the wider story of Jairus' daughter. She is a woman with no name. Jairus is a synagogue official. She is ritually unclean and so excluded from the human community, while he has a large family supporting him. She will spend the rest of her life isolated, alone and despairing of the hope of love. Jairus is rich but she is poor, having spent all of her money on useless medical remedies.

She is forced to sneak up on Jesus because of her ritual uncleanness. Imagine that! The law is telling them her she is not welcome in the divine presence because of her illness. She has done nothing wrong and yet is isolated from her family and the wider Jewish community and cut off from God. *Where are you God? What have I done? Why does my illness continue? Show me your mercy God – Now!*

The courage to reach out and touch Jesus

Jairus offers us an insight into the way people in the Ancient Near East understood the process of healing. He asks Jesus: *come and lay your hands upon her*. This was the normal understanding. The

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healer had to touch the sick person. Thus his daughter is raised from death by the touch of the hand of Jesus. He takes the initiative to reach out and touch a ritually unclean corpse.

²⁶ *It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.*

A holy person, they believed, was filled with powers that could flow out of them and bring about healing. All they needed to do was to touch the magician's clothing. We can

see this in action in The Book of Acts where people in the crowd try to grab Peter's handkerchief because they believe they will be able to use it to heal people they love. There was even a magical spell to be used *for menstruation, that it should cease* found in the Cairo Geniza texts (c.f. www).

Hence her dilemma. The woman would have understood the dreadful consequences occurring if she touched another person. They too would be ritually unclean. They would need to wash and to wash their clothes before going out of their houses and before engaging God in prayer. If she touched Jesus, he would be made unclean and he may well then lose the power he has to heal and to work miracles. Not only would that impact on others, it might annul her own efforts.

Even if I touch him

The Greek grammar governing the verse describing the woman touching Jesus highlights the central place of the woman reaching out and touching Jesus. It is an extraordinary moment. Contrary to all expected courses of action, she, in her uncleanness, touches Jesus. She has first of all built up enough courage to leave her house, her isolation (albeit after covering her face so she could not be recognized) and fight her way through the very people who were keeping her in her miserable existence. She was not prepared to wallow in her suffering.

²⁵ *The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.*

Everything else she had done up to this point had proved to be inadequate in changing her life. Even the Mosaic Laws, the customs and traditions of Judaism, the science of the doctors and the wisdom of the elders – none of these brought her healing and peace. From where does her hope come?

In Jesus is found the healing power of God – salvation

Note what Jesus does for her. He first of all addresses her as *daughter*. This is a respectful and affectionate way of speaking of women and in this case it also suggests that God welcomes her into the new family of God. Whereas her former faith community kept her “outside”, in Jesus she finds a new home, one based on love and mercy rather than on compliance to the Law.

This woman is *saved* through her faith in Jesus, for taking the courage to overcome her fears, anxieties and the restrictions imposed on her by the wider community. Mark's readers would understand how this woman represents each one of them, for they too have been *set free* through baptism. Their lives are changed through the same faith process – coming to Jesus despite their “unclean”, unworthy lives. As it was with this women, they are no longer on a journey towards death but a pathway to peace, life.

We are now living in a new age – in Christ

In retelling this story, Mark reminds believers of the difference Christ makes to life. Remove the Temple from the people of Israel at the time of the Babylonian exile and they wondered where God was hiding. His Jewish Christian readers were not asking the same questions when the Romans destroyed the Temple and ended their cultic cycle of sacrifices. They had faith in a living God, the Christ who was with them, inviting them to believe and to have courage to reach out and “touch” him.

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