

## **“Longing, Loss and Lamentation”**

**Rev. Mary Gear**

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### **Reading**

“These Days” by Lynn Ungar.

Anyone who tells you not to be afraid  
should have their head examined.  
Cities are burning, hillsides are burning,  
and the dumpster fire of our common life  
is out of control. I wish I could tell you  
when it was going to get better.  
I wish I could promise that better  
was anywhere down this road.  
I miss dancing, bodies in something  
between conversation and flight.  
I miss singing, the way we trusted  
the air that moved between us. I miss  
the casual assumption that everything  
would be all right in the morning.  
These days I am trying to be buoyed  
by the smallest things—  
a ripe tomato, a smattering of rain.  
These days I am trying to remember  
that songs of lamentation  
are still songs.

### **Homily**

(with thanks to Revs. Caitlin Cotter Coillberg, Sara LaWall, and Karen Johnston)

1 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.

2 Bitterly she weeps at night,  
tears are on her cheeks. [Lamentations 1:1-2 (NIV)]

These are the first few lines from the Book of Lamentations in the Jewish Bible. This collection of poems describes a Jerusalem in mourning after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE. Solomon's Temple stood for more than 400 years and was burned to the ground by the Babylonians when they besieged Jerusalem.

The words in the Book of Lamentations are often attributed to Jeremiah, a leading prophet at the time of the temple destruction. These words of poetry emphasize the grief and suffering of the Jews, who were persecuted for their beliefs at that time. It is an attempt to reconcile intense suffering with the justice of God, and longs for restoration of relationship with God, receiving grace and forgiveness. In this poetry, God is silent and the future seems bleak. These vivid descriptions of loss and longing make the destruction of the First Temple a central part of Jewish memory and religious thought, a place to hold the public grief of Jewish experience past, present and future.

We are now in a time of collective mourning, although some deny this reality and we lack many ways to grieve together as a community or as a nation. Some have turned to the arts to express all that we are feeling right now, just as we have in our past—poetry, music, dance, collage, painting. “Songs of lamentation are still songs.” John Prine may be the Jeremiah of modern times, capturing the loss and longing of that poetry from long ago with his words and music: “Just give me something that I can hold on to. To believe in this living is just a hard way to go.” This song has been on my mind and in my heart lately as we experience our own time of loss and longing, when many of us are working hard to find meaning in the suffering, and when the future is uncertain. The art created in this time offers solace to us now—something to hold on to—and will help future generations understand our lamentations.

The word “lamentation” means the passionate expression of grief or sorrow. Today, as we enter a week of uncertainty and anxiety related to the election and rising COVID cases, we offer space to grieve together and focus on healing our spirits. It is in religious community that we gather to grieve together our individual and collective losses. Today in this sacred space together, let us face what has been and what is, and make room for all of the emotions that arise. We hold this space together, for each other. Even though we can't be together in the sanctuary, we are together in spirit.

In this month of Autumn as the days get shorter, when we will experience a pivotal election, Thanksgiving, and a continuing pandemic, our spiritual theme for this month is

healing. I can imagine so many ways to approach this theme: healing bodies and spirits ravaged by the novel coronavirus, healing bodies and spirits ravaged by systemic racism, healing the body of our nation and our democracy, healing the environmental destruction to the body of our Mother Earth.

One of the first steps in healing is awareness of reality, facing what has happened or is happening, then feeling the emotions that arise with that awareness, knowing that they will pass. Those are often feelings of loss, grief, anger and longing.

We begin our time of collective mourning today with lamentation, sharing our grief with a responsive reading, naming what is weighing on our hearts. I will begin with words and you will see some images on your screen. Then I will invite you to enter in the chat what you are lamenting today.

Right now, I invite you to settle in wherever you are. Notice your breath; breathe in, breathe out. Loosen your shoulders and neck. Notice the thoughts passing across your mind and let them go.

This responsive reading has a phrase that we say together which is:

**We grieve together.** Feel free to say that with me out loud now wherever you are.  
**We grieve together.**

And so we begin with our lamentation recognizing the loss of members of our OUUC community.

This year, we have lost five OUUC members: Rob Radford, Billie Williams, Dorothy Mehaffey, Tom Joldersma, Bernie Steckler. May they rest in peace as...

**We grieve together**

As we move out into the wider world, the news cycle brings us images of illness, unemployment, and increasing economic inequality,

**We grieve together**

As we encounter challenges to the voting process and demonization of different opinions,

**We grieve together**

As we mourn the loss of 229,000 people in the US who have died from the novel coronavirus and grieve the lack of a national, coordinated public health response,

**We grieve together**

As we remember past moments of pain, fear, and loss,

**We grieve together**

As we yearn for an end to violence and suffering, especially to black citizens

**We grieve together**

As we yearn for a country where all in need of refuge are welcome,

**We grieve together**

As we yearn for an end to the exploitation of the natural world and an Earth where all beings thrive,

**We grieve together**

As we yearn for greater justice, compassion, and wisdom,

**We grieve together**

We grieve together as we share our losses. Now, I invite you to enter in the chat box what you are lamenting, what you are grieving the loss of. Let's hold space for each other to share. I'll read the sharing as I am able, with apologies if I don't get all of them.

Would you join me one more time as we say together:

**We grieve together.**

Within our lamentation comes a sense of longing, yearning for something better.

Longing for a world with more hope and less despair;

Longing for more happy hearts and fewer hungry mouths.

Longing for a life of more connection and less isolation.

Longing for a government that quells hate and violence, rather than generates it.

Longing for a president that speaks truth.

Longing for a nation that acknowledges its injustices and works to make them right.

Longing for a present / with each of us doing what is ours / to resist racism and all forms of systemic oppression.

Longing for companions to give us courage, that we might be the people these times require to bring about Beloved Community.

As we hold space for each other, I invite you to enter in the chat box what you are longing for. I will read the sharing as I am able, with apologies if I don't get all of them.

Our hearts are overflowing with lamentation and longing. Overflowing into the waters of this community where we hold all that we bring, together.

Let us join our hearts in the spirit of prayer with these words adapted from Sarah LaWall: //

Spirit of Life and Love,  
In this time of uncertainty /  
Of fear and angst /  
Our nation holds its collective breath /  
In this time  
When rhetoric blusters about  
And words are used as weapons /  
Our nation clenches its fists  
Tightens its shoulders  
Eyes squeezed shut  
Some are preparing for a fight /  
May we remember we are a people of resilience /  
We have faced uncertainty before /  
We have weathered storms  
We have been consumed by flames  
We have risen like the phoenix from the ashes /  
And we will again /  
We the people /  
May we remember our shared humanity  
Our universal kinship; our interdependence /  
As we unclench our fists, relax our shoulders and breathe together  
(Notice your body right now; unclench your fists, relax your shoulders, breathe)  
Breathe in love and breathe out peace /  
May we recognize the spark of the divine inside all of us  
All of us...  
Even those we are not quite sure about /  
In this time of uncertainty  
We remember the good will go on  
As we work to move forward together /  
We the people  
Seeking that which unites us /  
With our arms reaching out wide /  
For life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness

May love prevail.

In the name of all that is holy we pray, Amen.

Let us take our lamentation and longing into a time of silence together.