Not an Eraser, but a Song
A Sermon on Lamentations 1 by the Rev. Philip Major
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There isn’t an eraser for the painful part of life. There is only a way of telling your story, of singing your song.

One of my best friends in seminary was a woman named Theresa. Theresa had an easy smile and she was always willing to listen. Theresa and I were placed in a cohort group with the other middle-aged, second-career seminarians during our first year, so we took most of our classes together and met for a collegial small group for ninety minutes every Wednesday.

Theresa was at least 6 inches shorter than me, but there was no doubt I looked up to her. Theresa was from Memphis, Tennessee. She was 10 years older than me, a veteran and a cancer survivor. She had children and grandchildren. She told me stories of the discrimination she experienced as a woman of color living in Massachusetts. In seminary Theresa was studying to be a chaplain. Her dream was to serve as a chaplain in a VA hospital.

One day near the end of our second year I was walking down the hallway of the School of Theology and saw Theresa walking toward me. I hadn’t seen her much that semester. We didn’t have any classes together.

“Theresa! How are you doing?” I exclaimed. She replied, “Oh, I’m good. And I’m a liar.”

Theresa didn’t want to dwell on her problems, but she also needed to tell the truth. “I’m good. And I’m a liar.” Theresa’s cancer was back.

We don’t want to dwell on bad news. Yet if we are going to take any steps forward on this journey we are going to have to tell the truth. The truth often includes stories of grief and betrayal and injury. Telling the truth means examining the wounds we have suffered. Telling the truth means acknowledging the pain we have endured.

That is what is happening in this terrible passage from Lamentations. 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 glorious princess among the nations has become a wretched slave.

This is the story of the destruction of Judah. It is the story of the siege of Jerusalem. It is the story of the destruction of one of the largest, most beautiful places of worship in the ancient world, the Temple of Solomon. It is a story of bitterness.

She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies. Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude. This is the story of the exile in Babylon.

We have heard pieces of the story in recent weeks in our readings from the prophet Jeremiah. The kingdom of Judah was conquered by the armies of Babylon. The king, the priests and other leaders were put in chains and led into exile by the waters of Babylon.

The grief of the prisoners is memorialized in Psalm 137. By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered you, O Jerusalem. As for our harps, we cast them away, high into the trees in the midst of that land. For those who led us away captive asked us for a song, they taunted us: “Your reputation for fine music is known far and wide. Sing us one of those songs that made you so famous.” But how can we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?

These verses of Lamentations and Psalm 137 were first recited or sung in worship services 2500 years ago, in the years just after the release of the prisoners from exile in Babylon. After 50 years in captivity in Babylon the captives and their children were released. Fifty years after the Babylonians conquered Judah, Babylon was conquered by Persia. The Persian king freed the prisoners and granted them permission to reestablish the kingdom of Judah.

The exiles returned to Jerusalem and began the process of rebuilding the Temple. This is when they began singing and reciting these passages of scripture we read and sing today. They were free again. They were allowed to sing again. They built new harps and they composed new songs. They met for worship and they prayed. What were the verses they recited in worship? What did they sing about?

They sang songs about the most terrible experience in their lives and in the lives of their parents. They wrote poems about the destruction of Temple. They told stories of the siege of Jerusalem. They did not tell stories of courage and strength; they told stories of the vicious power of their enemies. They told stories of grief and bitterness. Why?
There is a great power in telling the truth about the grief we have experienced. There is strength in coming to terms with the pain we have suffered. It is a strange thing. The strength of this part of the journey is not an easy strength. It is not for beginners. The power we sometimes find as we grieve is strange and complicated. This is one of the reasons we do everything in our power to protect our young people from tragic experiences. Most young people are not at all ready to process the injuries they might experience.

But each one of us eventually arrives at a place in our journey where we can only move forward by examining the hurt that is inside us. We get to the place Theresa was at. “Oh, I’m good. And I’m a liar.” Theresa would never choose to dwell on, or dwell in the fear and grief she was facing. That would never be her choice. That was not the place she wanted to be. But the only way forward went right through the fear and the grief and the hurt.

This is what our ancestors, the exiles in Babylon, understood. They were filled with joy to return home. They were filled with hope to start the next part of their journey, back in Jerusalem. But they would only move forward with strength by keeping the experience of their grief in the center of their hearts and minds. They would only recover and become stronger by singing songs and telling stories about that injured part inside them that might be healed, but that would never be the same.

There is a false idea we can go back to the way things were before. We can’t go back to the way things were before. The city that was attacked and besieged and destroyed by a cruel invading army might be rebuilt, but it will be forever changed by the experience of its destruction.

The child whose parent dies might be adopted by someone else, but in some way the child, no matter his age, will always be an orphan. The woman who is abused by her partner might leave the abusive relationship. She might create new, healthy, life-giving relationships. But make no mistake, the new relationships will be stronger partly because the woman was forever changed by the pain she experienced. The man whose wife dies might recover from the shock and find love again and be married again. But make no mistake, that man will always be a widow. The woman who works hard at her job and tells the truth about the corruption she says and gets fired by the boss might get another job. But make no mistake, that woman will be the whistleblower for the rest of her life. She will never remove the fact of being someone who was fired for telling the truth.

This is not the way we usually tell the story. We want to pretend that the bad part, the terrible part is somehow erased. That’s not the way it works.

For me, life was like one of those long cable suspension bridges, the kind built for people to walk across a valley or ravine. These suspension bridges are built with two very strong cables, with boards laid across them to walk on.

For me, one of the cables of my bridge was my work. My work was strong. I could always depend on it. The other cable was my family. My family was strong; I could always depend on them. There was an almost endless set of boards that stretched across between the two cables. The boards were my marriage. My marriage was what I walked on every day. It was solid. Each day I woke up and stepped onto the next board in my journey.

Then, one day, the boards were gone. My wife had died. I clung in desperation to the cables of the bridge, to my family and to my work but the boards of my bridge were gone. I could not move forward.

Eventually I understood there was only one way to move forward. I lowered myself down from those cables, down to the ground. I remember the day my feet hit the ground. It wasn’t so far. That was the day I realized God is the ground underneath the bridge. God is the ground below my feet. God is not far away. God is the strength I discovered in the middle of my grief.

My question for you is, what is the story you are telling? What is the grief or the hurt that will never completely leave? The hurt you experienced have been sudden and tragic or it might have built up over years and years. It makes no difference really. The question is, where did you find God in your story? What is the new truth you have discovered? What is the strength you have discovered on your journey?

There is no eraser. There is only a way of telling your story, the whole story. There is only a way of singing the song of your life.

God is with us in our most difficult hour. We may turn our backs on God, but God never turns away from us. So we tell the whole story, the story of pain as well as joy. The story of grief as well as love. God is there with us, in the pain, in the grief. That is why there is a cross in the front and in the center of our place of worship. God knows.