

Speaker 1: God has given us a great grace at the end of my life, and that is to bring on the scene several wonderful, theologically astute people who can easily take my place. First among them is an evangelical pastor for many years in Baltimore who, through his struggles in building a Christian community, has achieved a very broad and deep wisdom. And he comes to me concerned that not enough Catholics are listening to me. And I say, "Why are you worried about the Catholics?" He's worried about the whole ecumenical agenda and knows either all of us get this or none of us are going to get it. So Brian is a superb gift in addition to the teaching of the CAC, and we're happy to welcome him on our faculty.

Speaker 2: 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 provinces has become subject to forced labor. She 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. Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude. She lives now among the nations. She finds no resting place. Her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress. The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to the festivals. All her gates are desolate, her priests grown, her young girls grieve, and her lot is bitter.

This is poetry that was written shortly after 586 BC. It's traditionally attributed to the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was from a small town and he was the son of a priest. Normally, he would've become a priest like his dad, but his sense of divine calling led him not to celebrate and defend the religious and cultural establishment, but rather to stand at the outside edge of the inside and critique it. He warned the people of Jerusalem that their way of life was immoral and self-destructive. In spite of all their religiosity, without greater spiritual unity and strength within, they would not be able to withstand the powerful enemies amassing outside. Jeremiah wept and begged them to repent, and they did not.

In 586, the Babylonians roared in and destroyed and depopulated Jerusalem, nicknamed Zion in the poem. Whoever they didn't kill, they took on an early version of the Trail of Tears, exporting them like cargo so they could serve as slaves for the Babylonians. The work of prophets is to warn, to warn people of the inevitable consequences of their foolish or immoral actions. It will be the end of the world as you know it, the prophets say, unless you rethink your current assumptions, values, and priorities, unless you become ready to change your way of life. And usually the people don't listen.

Jeremiah lived long enough to see the result in 586, and it caused him to write this poem of public lament. Why is public lament so important? Well, imagine you're a Hebrew slave in Babylon. Whenever you think of what you have lost, you weep. Your tears keep alive the folly of your people in not listening to the prophet's warnings. Your tears keep alive your rage against the cruelty and domination of the Babylonians. Your tears keep alive a desire for change, to regain your freedom, to return someday to your homeland.

And guess who doesn't want you to feel that grief? Guess who wants you to accept your new reality and surrender to it forever? Guess who wants you to put on a happy face in public? Guess who wants to defeat you into emotional numbness rather than emotional aliveness? Your oppressors, those who profit from your compliance, those who want you to be happy and well-adjusted. drones in their system. They don't want you to feel your own pain.

Think of the prophets of recent decades from Rachel Carson warning of a silent spring, to Dr. King warning of America's unpaid promissory note coming due, to Cesar Chavez calling us to stop oppressing and exploiting farm workers, to Pope Francis warning us to hear the cries of the earth and the cries of the poor, to Bishop Gene Robinson calling us to see every LGBTQ person as God's beloved child, to Dr. William Barber warning us that our national heart needs a moral defibrillator to shock us out of our coma, to Greta Thunberg warning us that the earth is on fire. The prophets warn us and too few listen. And when the inevitable consequences come, the prophets invite us not to let our opportunity pass by without being named, mourned and lamented.

Father Richard often defines contemplation as meeting all the reality we can bear. To help us meet and bear reality, the prophets say, mourn privately and lament publicly. Turn your heart's lonely grief into the public poetry of liturgy. Express your heartbreak in painting, sculpture and song, and the performative art of protest. Put the whole ugly truth in the curriculum of your textbooks and schools so it is not hidden from your children. Don't let the exploiters make you numb and stupid. Feel the surge of divine grief, the groaning of the Holy Spirit deep within you. And let those groans of loss become the groans of labor so a better world can be born from our failure, beginning with a better you who is still capable of seeing and feeling and meeting all the reality we can bear. Amen.