A Lamentation

A Sermon Offered by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Revelation 7:9-17 ~ Mark 8:31-38 ~ February 25, 2024

I have a photograph in my office – now here, under the “Columba Window.” It’s a picture of us – St. Columba’s in an earlier day: June 9, 1926 to be precise. As church people of that era, we are somber. Ladies with dresses, gents in coat and tie; children, acolytes, priests. We are outdoors. The brass processional cross is bright with shining sun; the stars and stripes held aloft just behind, a wooden hoist in the foreground. Despite our solemn faces, we are gathered for a great occasion. It’s Columba Day! We’re setting in place the chief cornerstone of this church. Everyone in the photograph is white skinned, Caucasian. Except for the two Black men prominent in the center; the two who labor; stone masons at the hoist.

This year we celebrate our 150th anniversary. We take stock, recall our first days in 1874 when we gathered under an oak tree on a hillside in this yet to be developed part of the city. Foundational as it was and is, the laying of the cornerstone is not our beginning; it is a crucial step along the way. The photograph is one of many steps; a picture of us, along the way. It reveals; it conceals.

Our readings give a vision of where we’re headed: of every nation, tribe, and language gathered before the throne – where God will wipe away every tear. Coupled with a poignant moment along the way as Jesus and his disciples set their hearts toward Jerusalem, toward passion, resurrection, death and new life.

Jesus has just affirmed Peter for proclaiming him as Messiah, then rebuked him for wanting to avoid the hard road ahead. Jesus’ disciples, then and now, are a rickety lot. We try. We soar to great heights of courageous love. We plummet into selfish hypocrisy and greed. Jesus gives the hard mysterious teaching to take up our cross; to lose our life, to receive our life. Who knows what Jesus really meant when he said we’re to take up our cross. If it means to live as Jesus did, oriented toward liberation and love, then it includes facing into the truth, naming what binds and what liberates, and doing so with deep love.

In Lent, it means following Jesus into the wilderness where, stripped of all else, we find ourselves with Satan, the wild beasts who menace; and with the angels who minister. Facing and embracing the shadows within. To use language of Kwon and Thompson: As the church, we are invited to cultivate “a spirituality of vulnerability; to nurture a way of living with ourselves, with God, and with others where our deepest wounds are not concealed by but centered in the life of faith.”

Almost four years ago, St. Columba’s committed itself to becoming an antiracist church. When the vestry articulated this commitment, we acknowledged our differing experiences, perspectives, and expectations. We wrote, “this is a journey that we hope all of us will take together.” We’re committed to doing this together.

Along the way, the antiracism taskforce has articulated steps we believe to be key in moving toward God’s beloved community. To begin with truth and truth-telling, move to acknowledgement and lament. To repent, to reconcile, to repair. To name the truths of our past, to live in the present, with hope for the future.

We all know some history about racism in this country. Thanks to the work of parishioner Sondra Mills, we know a bit more about racism here – events that preceded and followed that Columba Day in 1926. Pertinent for our prayers today, the land given for this church was part of a farm, worked by enslaved labor, and was donated by Mr. Murdock, an enslaver. This sanctuary was funded in part by the inheritance of the daughter of that enslaver.

Earlier, following the Civil War, a community of recently emancipated black families built a neighborhood – homes, churches, shops – known as Fort Reno, near the present day Deal School. St. George’s Episcopal Church was formed as a Black mission church of St. Columba’s and our parent parish, St. Alban’s. As white gentrification stretched north up Connecticut Avenue in the early 1900’s, the entire Fort Reno community was displaced. Records reveal that St. Columba’s appropriated for ourselves much of the eminent-domain proceeds owed to its Black mission church. Said plainly, we stole what was due to St. George’s.

The demographics of this neighborhood today – so much of what we enjoy – is the product, in part, of the congregation’s complacency regarding government policies that displaced Black residents of the Tenleytown and Chevy Chase neighborhoods in the 1920s and 1930s. Complacency regarding prevailing racial norms perpetuated attitudes and practices in our parish and civic life that have and do foster racial discrimination. This is true today – relentless instances of racial condescension directed at St. Columba’s Black and Brown parishioners, staff, clergy and visitors. Thoughtless? Perhaps. Yet, pernicious. I hear stories of this near weekly.

What do we do with the truth of our past? The truth of our present? How does knowledge of the past create moral urgency for us to live and act differently in the present? Along the way, the Antiracism Task Force and I believe it is important to stop here, today, to lament. To lament is to grieve, to express sorrow, to give voice to the pain – the pain in our souls, our hearts, our communities. Lamentation is a distinct Biblical genre. Many psalms are laments, most include four elements. (I illustrate from Psalm 13).

1. Turn to address God: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” Lamentation erupts from the wounds and grief within us. In pain, we choose to talk to God.

**2. Bring your complaint.** How long must we perpetuate racial oppression?

How long must we continue divided, torn apart, blind to the beauty and tenderness of one another?

**3. Ask boldly for help.** “Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, ‘I have prevailed.’” O God, we have made such a mess of things. Help us. Create new hearts within us. Lament invites us to dare to hope in God’s promises as we ask for God’s help.

**4. Choose to trust.** This is the destination for our laments. All roads lead here: “But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because God has dealt bountifully with me”

Why lament? Why not repent, reconcile, repair, take action? In good time, these too shall we do along the way. I know – we prefer action. Today, we lament in the face of pains and wrongs too grievous for us to fix. In lament we strip ourselves bare, in the wilderness; to put our selves in God’s hands, God’s care. In the end, lament is always a form of praise. As we lament we affirm our trust in God.

In a moment I will lead us in a litany. I invite you to reflect, what lies heavy on your heart? What hard, sad, broken experience that – if or when you allow it to be present in your heart or mind feels too much to bear? Some hurt you inflicted, witnessed, experienced. Truth is hard. We act not for ourselves alone. We act for future generations. We act for neighbors and the ways our actions may shed light. Fifty years from today, what will future Columban’s see in a photograph of us?

With the Penitential Order in Lent, we begin as we did this morning with confession and absolution. We do not confess our sins in order to receive God’s mercy – not today, not ever. Rather, it is through God’s mercy that we receive grace, receive humility and courage to turn, to confess the truth within us. We are first and always in God’s love; here now.

After we pray, as you leave today, you may wish to visit that cornerstone – right about “there” on 42nd Street. “St. Columba Church – a child of St. Alban’s Parish 1926.” Say a prayer. Lament. Grieve, Hope. Return our hearts to God. Amen.