

Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA

Homily for the First Sunday of Lent
February 17, 2018 (Year A)

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Lamentation asks the big unanswerable questions.

Gen.7:11-18; 8:13, 18-19; 9:9-10, 12-14; 1Pt.:3:18-22; Mk.1:12-15

Lent began early for us this year. We had ashes in December from the huge Thomas wildfire, followed by floods in January. So we have already been lamenting for a couple of months now, as stories emerged of lives lost and homes and livelihoods ravaged. And that was before the tragic and senseless school shooting in Florida this past Wednesday (2/21/2018).

Lamentation is a natural response when bad things happen, as they inevitably will, whether to us individually, or to whole communities or nations, or indeed to our whole planet. Our scriptures give us ample examples of lament, both individual and collective. Some stem from natural causes, like meteorological disasters or personal illness. Others, like war and conflict, are caused by human choices—our own selfishness and folly, or that of others, or a combination of the two. For this reason some laments have a strong note of regret or repentance—but not all do. In any case, they all belong in our human repertoire.

Lamentation scares us often, because it is so raw. It has to be, to serve its purpose. A disaster cannot be prettified or explained away, even if that would be easier on the bystanders. It needs to be expressed in all its tragic horror; it has to be real.

Lamentation asks the big unanswerable questions: Why? What did I (or we) do to deserve this? God, where are you in all this mess? Why have you abandoned me?

Yes, lamentation is raw, but it reassures us that it is right, it is human, to cry out in anguish. A lament gives us words. This may seem like a small thing—our first response to disaster might be a stunned silence, or a wordless wail. But when we find words—our own, or words from our tradition that resonate with the situation—they help us express our pain and grief. That in itself offers a small measure of relief, because it enables us to share our sorrow with others. We gain a measure of comfort from those willing to listen and grieve with us.

A psalm of lament gives us words; it tells us that we are not alone; such grief has been known before. And when others lament with us, we know we are part of a community. This can help to contain a grief that threatens to overwhelm us; it can help us eventually, somehow, to move on. Psalms of lament generally start very “raw” but end with a glimmer of hope: God knows, God hears our cry, and God will answer.

For those not immediately affected by calamity—which is most of us, most of the time—the lament is an invitation, indeed a call, to empathize, to put ourselves in others’ shoes, to remember the places in our world that are hurting, and to think of what we can do to help. The psalms of lament are a “school for the heart,” a school of compassion.

Lent is our yearly invitation to look at, and learn from, this shadow side of life. It is a time to accept our human condition, to em-

brace all of our life, with its sorrows as well as its joys, and to take responsibility for helping our sisters and brothers everywhere.

When Jesus stepped out of the waters of the Jordan in today's gospel, after receiving John's baptism of repentance, it was to embark on his mission of facing up to the human condition in all its complexity. This required discerning how to help us humans live with the dark side of this reality. I think that is what the temptation in the desert was—a process of discernment, focused on how to help humanity in this task, and especially how to model it for us.

Mark's account of the temptation is very brief: Jesus spent 40 days in the desert and was tempted by Satan. Then he plunges right into his life's work. Soon enough he encounters plenty of the minions of Satan, like the unclean spirit that convulsed the afflicted man in the synagogue in Capernaum as we heard not long ago.

Mark does not give us the story that both Matthew and Luke tell of Satan's three tests: magically turning stones into bread to alleviate hunger ("Mr. Fixit"); taking total control over all the kingdoms of the world ("Mr. Control"); or making a death-defying leap from the pinnacle of the temple to prove that "God will save me" ("Mr. Invulnerable"). Jesus will walk the ordinary path of human beings.

To be sure, even in Mark's gospel Jesus will encounter those Satanic temptations down the road. When the crowds were hungry, Jesus did not put on a magic show to provide food; he told his followers to feed them, with the few loaves they had. (That's a lesson for us! It's our job!). The remaining two temptations are evident in the scene when Peter recognized Jesus as the Messiah, presumably in total control over all earthly realms, and when Jesus predicted the awful death that awaited him. When Peter protest-

ed, Jesus suggested, in effect, that Peter was channeling the great evildoer: "Get behind me, Satan!"

After his time in the desert, Mark tells us that Jesus, instead of pursuing these ego-enhancing temptations, walks right back into the human community: as a human being who knows hunger, and will engage his followers in appeasing the hunger of others; as a human being who does not exercise control over others, but seeks to release them from their bonds; as a human being who does not evade suffering or defy death, but tries to alleviate suffering wherever he finds it, and to face death with courage and trust.

Because Jesus lived a fully human life, there were times of lament, times of grief and frustration, alongside the times of joy and companionship with his followers. At the end of his earthly life we will hear of his great lament from the cross: *My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*

These first words of Psalm 22 must have expressed what Jesus truly felt in that desolate moment. We do not know if he continued to recite the psalm, with its vivid images of mockery and its metaphors of attacks by wild animals. We do not know whether anyone in the crowd, perhaps the women standing at a distance, chimed in to pray the psalm with him or for him. We do not know if he, or they, got as far as the more hopeful later verses, which predict that *the lowly will eat and be sated*, and *the far ends of the earth will remember and return to God*.

We do know what his followers learned from Jesus's example: that we can face the shadow side of life with courage; that we can stand in solidarity with those who are suffering and see if there is something else we can do to help; that God is with us even when we cannot discern the divine presence; and that life eventually, somehow, wins out over death.