

The Grief We Share
Psalm 137:1-6 (CEB)
Rev. Amanda Moseng

On this cold November day, I would like you to imagine that you are standing on a beach, watching the waves go in and out. Maybe you have a favorite location you can visualize in your mind. It is beautiful, clear day with no adverse weather in sight. You are on the shoreline, so you can feel the water splashing against your feet as the waves come in. As the waves go out you can see the sand again. The rhythmic nature of the waves is calming and relaxing. Now imagine those same waves, but a storm has blown in. The wind kicks up the waves, making them stronger. These waves are a reminder of how powerful water actually is. These waves are no longer calming but frightening, disorienting, even.

Grief feels like waves that ebb and flow. Sometimes the waves are strong and catch you out of nowhere, other times they are gentler and feel manageable. However, in the past few years these waves of grief have grown stronger because of the rise in changes and loss that have occurred outside the normal confines of mortality and death. The waves keep relentlessly coming and crashing on the shoreline. COVID-19 pandemic. Contentious and divisive political climate. January 6th insurrection. Gun violence. The Uvalde school shooting. The deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arberry. Reproductive rights under attack. War on Ukraine. Floods, hurricanes, wildfires. Economic instability and insecurity. I hate to say that this is just a sampling of everything we have encountered in a matter of roughly four years, but it is. This barely scratches the surface of all of the death, loss, and trauma we have experienced. Before we can even process our grief from one event, another happens. With each wave, we all get a little closer to our limit. We get closer to our collective limit. When will it stop?

Last week Rev. Call discussed our personal, individual experience of grief. This week, we are going to look at the nature of collective grief. Dr. Leia Saltzman, a professor at the Tulane University School of Social Work defines collective trauma as “an event, or series of events, that shatters the experience of safety for a group, or groups of people. These events are different from other forms of traumatic events because of their collective nature. That is, these events are a shared experience that alter the narrative and psyche of a group or community.”¹ Going further, the global increase in access to social media has allowed individuals and groups not directly involved in these traumatic experiences to be impacted by the violence simply by viewing it or reading it online. This is defined as vicarious or secondary trauma. Some of the things that have happened over the past few years may not have happened to us directly, but we are still impacted by it, particularly the more violent and fatal it is.

¹ [https://socialwork.tulane.edu/blog/collective-trauma/#:~:text=People%20internalize%20others%27%20devastating%20experiences,and%20major%20depression%20\(MD\).](https://socialwork.tulane.edu/blog/collective-trauma/#:~:text=People%20internalize%20others%27%20devastating%20experiences,and%20major%20depression%20(MD).)

An article from the American Psychological Association addressing the global trauma, loss, and grief of the COVID-19 pandemic, stated that “the pandemic has not only resulted in loss associated with changes to stabilizing daily routines, supportive social connections, and death due to the virus, but it has also had a debilitating effect on the world economy, limiting society’s sense of security and hope for a future.”² The grief, loss, and trauma associated with the pandemic reach into every aspect of life. Very few places in life have felt safe during these past several years. The compounding effects of grief have left us exhausted. We have been deeply wounded. We are not okay.

Something particularly significant about collective trauma is that it can persist across generations and time.³ “The collective memory of the traumatic event that is transmitted across generations can give rise to family narratives and patterns. These family narratives and patterns are likely to be based on social locations and personal experiences, affecting a family’s sense of security and trust, decades after the original traumatizing events.”⁴ We have yet to see the collective damage that the COVID-19 pandemic will cause. We will see the effects of this pandemic and all that we have experienced for years to come. We are not okay.

We are all processing a deeply traumatic time in history. In the midst of all of it, scripture can be a powerful resource to us. The Bible is replete with stories of suffering, grief, and loss, both as individuals and as a community. What stands out to me the most in terms of communal grief is the experience of exile. I think the grief, loss, and trauma experienced by those in exile. Being carted off to a foreign land. Living among different people with different customs and ways of being. The regret. The longing for home, the longing for what is familiar. The trauma from seeing cities ravaged, violence, and death. The anger over the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, as well as the lives of countless people. They were not okay.

Many Hebrew scholars agree that Psalm 137 was composed after the deportation of the Judahites by the Babylonians. The Southern Kingdom of Judah was sent into Babylonian exile in 586 BCE. The words of this psalm reveal the depth of pain. The experience of exile is fresh and acutely painful. These words become a vehicle of collective emotion. You can feel their pain.

*Alongside Babylon’s streams,
there we sat down,
crying because we remembered Zion.*
2 *We hung our lyres up
in the trees there*
3 *because that’s where our captors asked us to sing;
our tormentors requested songs of joy:*

² <https://www.apa.org/international/global-insights/global-trauma>

³ Marlene F. Watson, et. al. COVID-19 Interconnectedness: Health Inequity, the Climate Crisis, and Collective Trauma.

⁴ Ibid.

*“Sing us a song about Zion!” they said.
4 But how could we possibly sing
the LORD’s song on foreign soil?*

This psalm represents an honest account of a community processing its grief in the presence of God. They sat down alongside Babylon’s streams- sitting was an action associated with mourning. In the midst of their pain, they are being mocked by their tormentors and captors- “Sing us a song about Zion!” Songs of Zion referred to the hymns celebrating God’s presence and protection in Jerusalem. The captors are making fun that here they are in captivity, seemingly away from God’s presence and protection. Where is your God now? We hear the lament as they hang up their lyres and question how they could possibly sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land. It hurts too much, and the grief is too heavy to bear.

Although the pain is fresh and the end is no where in sight, we have the benefit of knowing how this story ends. God promises healing and restoration for God’s people. In Jeremiah 30 we see the Lord proclaiming, “I hear screams of panic and terror, no one is safe... That day is awful, beyond words. A time of unspeakable pain for my people Jacob. But they will be delivered from it... So don’t be afraid, my servant Jacob, declares the Lord, don’t lose hope, Israel... I am with you and will rescue you.” The prophetic books of the Bible, such as Jeremiah, warned of destruction, but also spoke of the hope of restoration. The God of creation who created the world out of nothing has the power to create again in the wake of disaster. God can gather up Judah and all that has been scattered and broken and make them a people again.⁵

This same God brings healing and new life to us today. God steps into the chaos and the brokenness. This does not mean God fixes everything but reminds us that God’s very presence is with us. I think of the disciples, huddled up in a locked room after Jesus was crucified. That was a traumatic experience for the community. They were grieving the death of their friend and leader. They were grieving the loss of the future they had anticipated. In the midst of the fear, grief, and loss, John 20:19 tells us “Jesus came and stood among them. He said, ‘Peace be with you.’” Friends, the Holy One is in our midst. Jesus has stood among us. Jesus has wept with us. Jesus has grieved with us. Jesus has lamented with us. We have never faced any of this on our own. God is with us. Throughout all the grief, loss, trauma, death, violence, and chaos of these past several years, God has been present with us in our pain. God tenderly heals our wounded hearts, lives, and communities. God is able to gather up what has been broken and bring restoration and renewal. God is capable of doing a new thing in our midst. God has been our anchor and source of hope. Hope for a better, brighter future with healing, mercy, and justice.

God is able. And yet, there is healing for us to attend to. The benefit of grief oscillating like waves is that it allows our bodies, hearts, and minds the opportunity to relax and return to

⁵ Joni Sancken, Scripture and Trauma.

baseline, no matter what that looks like. As someone who has had grief as a companion for the past several years, I can attest how good it feels to catch a break from grief. It is like finally being able to breathe deeply and relax. However, we have been bombarded with traumatic events. We have been exposed to pain for a prolonged period of time. We have been functioning with heightened anxiety. This is not sustainable or healthy for us. We can see the negative impacts of this in society. It feels like everyone and everything is on edge. And there is only so much we can do about that, but there are a few things we can do to help. This is a limited list of ideas for how we can process and heal from our grief and trauma and is by no means exhaustive, but I hope it provides something you find helpful.

First, pay attention to what your body is communicating to you. Our bodies are intelligent and intuitive in ways that we do not always consciously realize. Our bodies remember and retain. For example, during the week before the anniversary of my dad's death, my body tends to feel tired and achy, with a general sense of heaviness inside. My body knows the emotional pain I have experienced. It is important to listen to what our bodies are telling us, especially with our prolonged grief and trauma. Allow yourself to rest if that is what you need. Take a nap. Move in a way that feels good to you, whether it is walking, running, yoga, or other form of exercise. Another way to honor your body is through embodiment. Embodiment is using your senses to bring you back to the present moment, much like mindfulness. You can splash cold water on your face, take a taste of something sour, sing or move to music, touch the texture of objects around you, describe the colors you see. Anything that will activate your senses and bring you into the present moment.

Closely connected to embodiment is self-awareness. You can develop this with daily check-ins, where you ask yourself "What am I feeling? What am I experiencing? Where have I been focusing my attention?" Building self-awareness is a key part of being a healthy, whole individual. When you feel strong emotions rising up within you, pause before you react. Try to identify the source of the emotion and why is it making you feel that way.

As Rev. Call shared last week, we do not do mourning well here in our society. But it is critically important that we process our grief and express it in healthy ways. Unprocessed grief will cause us more hurt in the long run. This relates to individuals and communities. The collective grief and trauma we have experienced must be processed together. This looks like being willing to share what you are feeling, preferably in a constructive manner. We give each other permission to have feelings about all of this. Be honest about sharing what has been lost and how the future has changed. It is important for us to talk about it. We create safe space for others to share and we listen well. Seek to learn about the experiences and stories of others and to understand their grief. Finally, I think there is something incredibly powerful and healing about just being together in person. You can go even farther and share a meal. We were created for community; we were created for relationship with one another. The isolation of the

pandemic took a lot of that away from us. To the best of your ability, be with other people. Shared presence is a powerful gift.

We have been through so much and it feels like it is a matter of time until the next catastrophic, terrible thing happens. We have no control over what happens next, but we can control how we respond to what has already happened. We grieve as a community, and we heal as a community. Grief will not go away on its own and there is most certainly more in store for us. So we come together, acknowledging what has been lost and giving permission to ourselves to feel what we feel. We remember how things once were and we open our hearts to the ways God is moving in our midst. We continue to contend for justice, rights, and equality. We do not lose hope, trusting that God is present with us and always has been, healing our wounds and holding us all together in Christ. We are not okay, and that's okay, because we are in this together. And together, we will heal. Thanks be to God. Amen.