

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
To be delivered on February 21, 2016	On the occasion of the Second Sunday in Lent, C

The Fount of Forgiveness

Jesus weeps over Jerusalem. He makes lamentation over the ancient city that has killed the prophets whom God has sent them in the past. God sent the prophets to proclaim God's judgment, not for the purpose of their destruction, but for the purpose of their salvation. How can the people repent and ask for God's forgiveness if they do not first experience judgment? When God looks upon his people, so far from him, so estranged from his holy ways, he cannot help but weep. The lament is a well established form of biblical literature.

Jeremiah wrote, "Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." Jeremiah 31:15

Lamentations 1:1, "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 the provinces has become a vassal."

Weeping. Wailing. Mourning for their disobedience, and lamenting for their refusal to accept his discipline. This is how God responds to the sins of his people whom he loves, whom he longs to be close to, whom he longs to receive once again in his arms, though they continue in their stubborn ways. And Jesus takes up the tears. He weeps over Jerusalem. He weeps for their past rejection of the prophets. He weeps for their present lack of openness to the message of repentance he brings. He weeps as he will soon return to this city to face his own death.

Not only does God weep over his people who turn away from him, but God's people weep and wail as well. Psalm 102, "Hear my prayer, O Lord; let my cry come to you. Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress. Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call." Lamentation is often the beginning of our seeking of God for help. We

come to the depths of our own pain, and loneliness, and despair. We reach the end of our own power to save ourselves. We realize that our constancy is like grass. Psalm 103:15-16 “As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; ¹⁶for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.” We realize that we are but dust, and to dust we shall return. And we weep.

We mourn and lament not only the limits of our own humanity. We raise our voice at our own stupidity, and stubbornness, our pride and our passions, our lack of learning from our own mistakes, our weakness, our greed, our short-sightedness. Our own brokenness and sinfulness is a source of our pain and our grief. We can be our own worst enemy. Realizing that only causes more pain. If we chose to wallow in our sorrow, we would never escape it. If we failed to see the light from above and to lift our eyes towards it, we would sink ever deeper, and finally disappear in darkness. But God does hear our weeping. God does send us a savior. We come to know him often in the oddest, most seemingly random encounters. We meet him in the outstretched hand of a friend, or a stranger, the simplest kindness at an unexpected time. We can miss it easily enough. Ironically though, it is when we are at our lowest that we are most likely to see the savior’s face. When things seem to be going fine, we forget to look for him. When it is all stripped away—the illusion of control, the noise of confusion, the pleasant distractions, the endless temptations—when we are reduced to our simplest self, when we experience the essential loneliness of existence, then are we most open the savior’s call to repent. As we weep for ourselves, for our own depravity and wretchedness, we suddenly find that our perspective aligns with the divine point of view. Until the consummation of the age, Christ is weeping over our sinfulness that separates us from himself. When we weep for the same, we weep not just for

our selfish, unfulfilled desires, but we begin to see that something else is possible. We begin to see as Jesus sees.

The fount of repentance is our tear ducts. Tears transform our longing for comfort and peace from mere self-absorption into an openness to the peace that God continually offers us. When the self has lost all reason think it is the center of the universe, the true center can be perceived, and our life can be put in balance. As long as we think and act like we know the answers, we will continue to fail to hear the voice that calls us to repent. Genuine repentance requires that we first feel the effects of our own sinfulness. When we finally know, and acknowledge with tears, the mess we have made of all the gifts that God has given us—our life, our freedom, our goodness, our creativity, our voice—then, and only then, can we humbly ask to be forgiven. Then, and only then, can we seek our good by seeking the good of others. Then and only then, can we accept the gift that Jesus is dying to give us.

It seems that our tears can provide us with a unique clarity of vision. Through our tears we see most clearly the face of Jesus Christ, our savior. Over our sobs we hear most distinctly his voice calling us to repent. With trembling hands do we finally reach out to accept his strong grasp. Jesus weeps over Jerusalem. He weeps over their past sins. He weeps over all the human sins that have happened since. His weeping has finally been answered by our own. When we weep for the same reason, we long for the same thing. In our savior's tears we find the fount of our forgiveness.

Amen.