

Title: Discerning Our Treasures
Date: 10/2/2022 (Proper 22, Year C)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Lamentations 1:1-6](#); [Psalm 137](#); [2 Timothy 1:1-14](#); [Luke 17:5-10](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/sGOSx1NtGLo?t=1264>

O God, grant us the grace and wisdom
to guard the good treasure entrusted to us,
with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us (based on 2 Timothy 1:14).
Amen.

What is the good treasure that God has entrusted to you?

The bishops of Texas designated today, October 2nd, as theological education Sunday.

No, they weren't giving their priests a blank check to nerd out about today's readings. This may sound strange to you, but I REALLY want to nerd out about Lamentations.

See, at my last church I was in charge of designing the Lenten book study. (I promise I'll come back to the thing the bishops asked us to do!) The book the rector picked was *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* by Dr. Soong-Chan Rah.¹

This was back in the year 2020. Given the grief and trauma caused by the pandemic and highlighted by the murder of George Floyd and others, this book was more appropriate for our times than we could've ever dreamed. AND we didn't make it past week three before everything shut down, including the small groups reading the book.

One of the details about Lamentations is that the first four chapters (out of five) are each composed as an **alphabetic acrostic**.

According to the Introduction to Lamentations in the Oxford Annotated Bible, an acrostic is "a formal scheme in which the initial word of each stanza begins with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet."² If the writer had been writing in English, the first word of the first stanza would begin with "A", the first word of the second stanza would begin with "B", and so on.

The introduction then points out that the poet uses this format because he is not just pouring the unbalanced meter and fragmented lyrics of his poetry into this fixed and highly structured framework.

He is trying to "render the chaos of his world into language...[This is] an attempt to control and contain, and ultimately transform, the suffering and hurt that engulfed Jerusalem and its inhabitants."³

In his book, *Prophetic Lament*, Dr. Rah compares writing in the form of an alphabet acrostic to creating a container for suffering. It allows the expression of suffering to feel

complete without feeling like it's going to go on forever, because the poet is literally listing his laments from A to Z.

When I pray with folks,
I remind them that we can pour everything into God's hands,
every feeling,
every thought,
every deep-seated fear,
every tentative, fragile hope.

God can hold ALL of it;
all of our anger,
all of our frustrations,
all of our grief,
all of our guilt.

Maybe then we can see what we couldn't see before;
hope that we didn't **dare** to hope before.

Dr. Rah also suggests that the church can embody God's shalom, God's peace. He believes that the church can become

“an order of the acrostic in the sea of the chaos of suffering”
and **this** structure creates room for grief, pain and suffering
to be genuinely expressed
because **this** structure
creates a non-anxious and peaceful space.

Ideally, church is place
where we're not worried about being judged,
where we're not worried about being perfect.

Ideally, church is a place
where we can learn to see who we are through the eyes of God,
and to see one another through the eyes of God.

Ideally, church is both a non-anxious and peaceful space
where we can both be fully known and fully loved
just as we are right now
AND where we can think about who we might become,
with the good treasures God entrusted to us.

This takes us back to Theological Education Sunday. One of the goals is to encourage participation in discernment.

Merriam-Webster gives the following three definitions to the word “discern”:

- 1a. to detect with the eyes,
or 1b to detect with senses other than vision;
2. To recognize or identify as separate and distinct;
3. To come to know or recognize mentally.⁴

When we talk about discernment in church, it means doing a little bit of all three. If we want to do something with the good treasures that God has entrusted to us, the first thing we need to do is to figure out **what** those treasures are in the first place!

First, we have to see what is it that we're doing
when we feel a deep sense of joy, of rightness,
a feeling that we are exactly where we need to be.
Where are we when we feel ourselves come alive?

Second, we have to identify these treasures
as separate and distinct within ourselves and from other people.
How do I distinguish what people have said about me,
what people have praised and affirmed,
with what feels right and true **to me**?
Also, I'm not making use of the good treasures
God has entrusted to **me**
when I'm trying to be more like Dave, or like Yesenia.

The goal is to figure out
what it means to be the Peggy that God has created me to be.

Third, we have to name our treasures as our **treasures**, and this includes both what we consider spiritual gifts AND personal flaws. None of us are perfect. None of us will ever be perfect. And God is not asking us to be perfect. God is asking us to be **us**.

What we see as personal flaws...may actually be treasures that have been entrusted to us.

What we call flaws, when paired with our gifts,
might be what allows us to speak to people,
to connect with their fears and grief and uncertainty,
to nurture their fragile hopes,
and to help them see the treasures
that THEY have been entrusted with.

In Dr. Justo L. Gonzalez's commentary on today's passage from the Gospel according to Luke, he points out that "what the Greek says is not 'the size of a mustard seed,' but simply 'like a mustard seed.'"⁵ So, it's about having the same KIND of faith that the mustard seed has.

Wait, a mustard seed can have faith?

He goes on to explain, "The 'faith' of the mustard seed is the certainty of its goal. It 'knows' it is to become a mustard plant. And it does."

The mustard seed knows exactly what it is called to be. It does not try to become a maple tree. It does not try to grow grapes. It puts everything it has into becoming a mustard plant.

Humans, we're a little bit more complicated than that.

God put a Peggy seed in me.

But it's taken me a while to figure out what I am called to be.

Being a priest is my THIRD career. I joke that I've taken the long way 'round, the scenic route. At the age of almost forty-three, I've **finally** figured out what I want to be when I grow up, and this wasn't something I could have figured out on my own.

I didn't grow up Christian. I never even thought about becoming a priest until someone asked me. I kind of assumed they just popped up, fully formed, from behind the altar. I spent a year trying to figure out if I **wanted** to try to figure out if God was calling me to be a priest.

What did other people see in me?

What did **I** see in me?

By then, I knew that I didn't want to translate Buddhist lectures for the rest of my life, but I didn't know what I wanted to do, what I was even qualified to do.

In my first career, I was a generalist. I enjoyed learning new things and picking up new skills quickly. Under the umbrella of a national nonprofit advocacy group, I was a campus organizer, then I worked on recruitment, then budgets, then online organizing. The transition from one position to another made sense at the time, but when I left that organization to find a new job, it seemed that everyone was looking for a specialist who had done one thing for a long time.

I thought I'd screwed up my entire life. I thought I'd picked the wrong major in school and then wasted another six years of my life. All I could see was a dead end, a wall that I just kept hitting my head against.

So, when God led me back to church, I said, "God, I don't know where I'm going, so I'll say yes to everything you put in my way."

Yes to joining the book study, where I read Richard Rohr⁶ and Cynthia Bourgeault⁷ and learned about a way of being Christian that did not look like the version of Christianity taught to me by my evangelical youth group.

Yes to doing EfM (Education for Ministry)⁸, a four-year-program where I not only learned about Bible and church, I learned to **ask questions** about both Bible **and** church, where I was encouraged to apply theology, apply the **framework** of my understanding of God and God's relationship with God's people and God's creation, to how I lived my life.

Yes to being an acolyte, even though I didn't know how to put on all the stuff, and was really afraid of messing up in front of everyone.

Yes to being a greeter, even though I saw myself as more of an introvert.

Yes to being President-elect for Congregational Council, their version of a vestry, even though I saw myself more as the secretary, as more of a second-in-command.

This might sound easy in retrospect, but saying “Yes” was **not** easy at all.

The alternative was to keep staring at that dead end and being depressed about being stuck, to keep banging my head against the wall out of sheer anger and frustration.

So, I said, “Yes,” trusting that God, the people of God, and the Holy Spirit within and around me, would help me see treasures where all I saw was brokenness and flaws, would help me recognize and name ALL of the good treasures that God has entrusted to me.

That has led me here, and that continues to lead me.

This process of discernment, of seeing, identifying, and naming the good treasures I have been entrusted with and figuring out what to do with them is an ongoing process. I am always dancing between that state of fully being who I am AND of becoming even more fully the person God has created me to be.

That Peggy seed? It’s still growing.

Standing here, looking at all of you. I also want to invite us to think about the good treasures we have as a parish, as St. Alban’s, a group of Christians shaped by everyone who has ever sat in this room, and everyone who is sitting here right now. There are so many churches in Austin, there are so many Episcopal churches in Austin.

What are the good treasures that God has entrusted to **us**?

What **are** the good treasures that God has entrusted to us?

Like I said last week, NOT a rhetorical question.

May God guide us, may we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, and may we listen to the Holy Spirit living in us, as we seek and recognize the answers.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.ivpress.com/prophetic-lament>

² Lamentations, New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, Fully Revised Fourth Edition, p.1147

³ Lamentations, New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, Fully Revised Fourth Edition, p.1147

⁴ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discern>

⁵ Gonzalez, Justo L. Luke. p. 200-201.

⁶ The Naked Now

⁷ Wisdom Jesus

⁸ <https://theology.sewanee.edu/education-for-ministry/>