

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: Sin City  
Scripture: Lamentations 1:1-4  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## **Lamentations 1:1-4**

*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.*

*She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies.*

*Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude; she lives now among the nations, and finds no resting-place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress.*

*The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to the festivals; all her gates are desolate, her priests groan; her young girls grieve, and her lot is bitter.*

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I was born in Lynn, Massachusetts, a gritty industrial city north of Boston. So I forever had to hear this little ditty:

"Lynn, Lynn, city of sin, you never come out the way you went in."

I Googled that yesterday, and it connected me to Amazon.com, where it prominently features the sin of Lynn, a book called *CIN: "Lynn, Lynn, the City of Sin, You Never Come Out the Way You Went In."* The book is number 3 million on the Amazon list of bestsellers. So of course I had to check my

book! And since everything is relative, I was thrilled to discover that my book is number 1 million something, all connected by "Lynn, Lynn, city of sin."

The city. How many of you grew up in a city? And we should start with a definition. A city is a big, busy, crowded, complex mix of people and business, the full range of economic strata and activity, a blend of industry and finance and retail. Skyscrapers, mass transit, the full range of cultural life, some professional sports teams, and a tough edge, an attitude, an embattled sense of survival. A city. I thought with Dr. Brian Bodt, the excellent leader of the Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport, with us today, this might be a good Sunday to preach about the city.

I call myself a "city boy." You've heard my million stories of growing up in Queens, New York. My first driving lesson was on Broadway, driving under the "El," the overhead subway in the Bronx. I got kicked out of St. Patrick's Cathedral by a nun for misbehaving. My conversion, my call to ministry, began on the Coney Island Boardwalk. Our family's Easter Dawn service was at JFK Airport. I got my Boy Scout merit badge for tracking and hiking by using the subway system and Central Park. My baseball life took me to Ebbets Field and the Polo Grounds and Yankee Stadium.

On weekends, I went to Greenwich Village to hear Bob Dylan, Frank Zappa, and Jimi Hendrix. I once worked in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, back in the boiling, tumultuous, summer days of the late 60s. I took the subway there, and when I got off the subway, I had a four- or five-block mad dash to the church where I worked. Midmorning, broad daylight, gunfire and fires all around, I'd sprint from one barricade to another, hide behind a car, dash to a mailbox, sprint to a bunch of garbage cans, trail behind a moving vehicle, rush up the stairs into the church. My day was often interrupted by violence in the playground across the street. I was forever running there to break up a fight, bind up the wounds, back down some guy with a zip gun (I still think driving on I-95 is more dangerous).

What I was doing in that church was working with other people who refused to give up on the city or its people. They didn't see New York City as Sodom and Gomorrah, a place of filth and despair, a place of destruction and enemies. They saw the city as home, the people as neighbors, the church as the center. We worked together to bring the Gospel literally door to door, apartment to apartment. Unlike me, their leader, they didn't dash from barricade to barricade, they didn't hide behind mailboxes and garbage cans. They walked proudly down the street, where angels fear to tread, carrying their shopping bags full of free Bibles, full of Good News, believing in a good

life, serving a good and loving God. I learned from them that the city is a place of energy, of strength, of enormous capacity for all that is great.

The city was with my world and my love. My father was a "country boy" from rural Maine, *very* rural Maine. In 1952, however, he moved our little family to New York City to pastor a church ... and never left, pastoring churches in Queens, Brooklyn, and Staten Island for 58 years. He loved it. He loved the rough-and-tumble; he loved the crime and the grime. He and I used to say, "We like to breathe the air we can taste!"

He had a different youth group ministry from what we have. He had a sports empire of baseball, softball, and basketball teams. He lost thousands of dollars when a couple of his young men, drug pushers, jumped bail that he had put up. He lost thousands more paying for the defense of a young murderer. They were his people. He had a front-row seat for the rise and fall of urban America. He would understand today's Scripture. He lived it.

"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.

She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies."  
(Lamentations 1:1-3)

I've actually had a lot of rural and suburban years in my life. My prep school and college couldn't have been more rural, my seminary was real suburban, my first church was way country. But I moved back to the city in the mid-70s, as the city was in steep decline. Remember this famous *DAILY NEWS* headline quote? "Ford to New York: Drop Dead!" Referring to President Gerald Ford and his attitude toward bailing New York City out of its fiscal crisis. Clergy were even quoted saying, "God has abandoned the city."

So I went back. People in my little country church in upstate New York thought I was nuts. I was leaving the peaceful tranquility of small-town America for the craziness of the Big City. The week after I moved to the city, back in the small town that I'd just left, a man took a rifle, shot up a local restaurant, killed a member of my church, killed a police officer, and wounded one of the high school wrestlers I'd coached. Craziness and evil don't know geography, but that doesn't keep folks from hating the city.

Upstate New Yorkers wanted to secede from the city, and one famous politician recommended that the city be ousted from the nation and left to

float out to sea. He was from a family that arrived on Ellis Island, where the city embraced them and fed them with opportunity and energy, educated them right through college, for free, helped them to prosper and succeed ... so they could move to Texas and suggest New York be cut loose.

No wonder the Bible says, "[The city] weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies".

The writer of the Book of Lamentations is Jeremiah, and he's writing about the once great legendary city of his world, Jerusalem. Jeremiah goes on, "...all her gates are desolate, her priests groan; her young girls grieve, and her lot is bitter." and I suppose a lot of people would have agreed with Jeremiah's explanation in verse 5, "The LORD has brought her grief because of her many sins."

People used to say, "Cities are cesspools ... unlivable, ungovernable, Sodom and Gomorrah." People were up in arms over the squeegee man, Times Square, graffiti. I have to confess I always liked the squeegee man. Hustle, initiative, a little intimidation, a little humor. Plus the car I drove always needed splash of sudsy water.

Those were hard days. Jeremiah was writing in 588 B.C., 2,600 years ago, yet his description of urban life was spot-on for the urban world of my lifetime. My Habitat life took me to a lot of hard cities: Bombay, Calcutta, Kinshasa, Nairobi, Port au Prince, Mexico City, Tegucigalpa, Managua – places of squalor, chaos, violence. And I've been to the other side of the tracks in Chicago, Baltimore, Detroit, East St. Louis, New Orleans, and a hundred more.

Folks knew the feeling of Jeremiah's words: "The people fell into enemy hands, there was no one to help. Her enemies laughed at her destruction. For the city has sinned greatly and become unclean. Her filthiness clings to her skirts. Her fall was astounding. All her people groan, 'Look, O, God and consider, for I am despised.'"

Those cities certainly looked as though they'd "fallen into enemy hands." "Filthiness" was everywhere; "people did laugh" at the destruction, the "fall was astounding," and the people felt "despised."

When I worked in and visited those cities, it looked like a war zone. The Lower East Side of Manhattan, Bedford Stuyvesant. Rubble, danger, defeat everywhere. And then comes perhaps the only famous verse from this

mostly unfamous book of the Bible, verse 12, "Is it nothing to you, all ye who pass by?" In other words, doesn't anybody notice? Doesn't anybody care?

Pretty depressing sermon so far. Cities are bad because their people are bad, and they get what they deserve. In my church ministry, I had to deal with the Son of Sam murders. Two of his victims were killed around the corner from my church. We faced the ravages of the crack epidemic. I had church members who suffered on the right side of the "Serpico" police corruption scandal. Homelessness was out of control. What Giuliani later called "quality-of-life issues," seemed beyond repair.

Feel free to read the rest of Lamentations. It doesn't get any better. Near the end, Jeremiah despairs, "The elders are gone from the city gate, the young men have stopped their music, joy is gone from our hearts. You, O, Lord ... why do you forget us? Why do you forsake us so long?" (Lamentation 5:14-20)

So maybe "Drop Dead" is the best answer? Maybe the cities should be cut off and left to rot or float out to sea. Maybe it's all their own fault. I don't buy that. The idea that God sits up there in heaven, indiscriminately punishing and slaughtering people willy-nilly because city people stink, everybody in ancient Jerusalem was evil, everybody in modern-day New York City or Mumbai is worthless. No, I don't buy that. Life is life, people are people, God is love, Jesus died on the cross for the whole world, the Bible says, including the Bronx, including Roxbury, including San Francisco, including Bridgeport.

Growing up, there was an old TV show set in New York City, called "The Naked City." It always began with "There are 8 million stories in this city. This is one of them." So which stories got our attention? The story of the Bridgeport Council of Churches is one story. Churches, pastors, volunteers, and Brian and his people, all choosing to see God's faith in the city, all choosing to be God's hands and feet in the city. This church helped found the Council of Churches. Yes, this quiet, pretty, remote country little church stood with the Council when there was hardly any Council to stand with – just an idea and hope. Your pastors have served on the Council.

Some of the great heroes of this church gave their best: Leete Doty, Dot Oram, Ted Carter, Sydney Watras, just to name a few. And you folks, you have voted with your wallets. We have given hundreds of thousands of dollars to strengthen ministry in Bridgeport. We've been a major player in building 150 Habitat houses. We've fed the hungry and the homeless on the first Monday of every month for 15 straight years. We've been a major

partner with the Council of Churches in their after-school work, their after-prison work, their interfaith work. Bridgeport Rescue Mission, Pivot House, Refocus Outreach Ministry, the Mercy Learning Center. Dealing with addiction, domestic violence, English as a second language, literacy, refugees, religious intolerance. We have allowed our country church in this lovely suburb to be hand in hand with the city.

I've read Jeremiah's Lamentations. I've lived Lamentations, firsthand. But it's not the only story. Brian and I could write our own poem of the city. Not like Jeremiah – more like Woody Guthrie:

"This land is your land  
this land is my land,  
this city is our city  
from Park Avenue to Seaside Park,  
from the compassion of Bridgeport Hospital  
to the fervor of 100 churches and synagogues,  
from soup kitchens to charter schools,  
from men and women  
to kids who thrive on doing a good thing,  
the right thing,  
to be the very best God intended them to be."

Those are the choices we make. We, as Christlike people, we are the "glass is half full" people. We do look at the world through rose-colored glasses. We are, "can-do" folks.

I'll close with a story about my father. In 1967 my father became pastor of the Flatbush-Tompkins Congregational Church, a thriving, influential, historic Brooklyn church. When he started, it was all white, quite wealthy, a couple thousand members. The sanctuary was full of people for worship; the Sunday School was full of kids. My dad stayed there for 24 years. In that time the church dwindled down to next to nothing. People left, moved to Jersey moved to Florida.

"The neighborhood 'changed,'" as folks put it, which meant white people moved out, and blacks, Caribbeans, Hispanics moved in. Stores closed. People put bars on the windows. My mother and father stayed put. They loved it! My father got assaulted in Prospect Park. He got robbed in the church. The parsonage was broken into and robbed. My parents stayed put. They loved it!

They kept preaching the Good News, open to all the change. They kept living the Good News, and they welcomed all the changes. My dad started up his

sports empire to introduce kids to the church. I started a "Coffee House Ministry" there. The church opened up to house the homeless. Neighborhood kids started coming to Sunday School. The sanctuary started to fill up. This old white-haired pastor from very rural Maine built one of the most successful truly integrated churches anywhere, and today, in 2012, it is my father's enduring legacy.

I'm sure Jerusalem was a bad place back when Jeremiah wrote his Lamentations. And I know New York City was a hard place when I went back to Queens and my father was preaching in Brooklyn. I'm not faulting Jeremiah on the negative naysayers of every generation who write the obituaries for cities. I just refuse to go along.

I know everything under the sun is politicized in the upcoming election, and I have to tell you I loved the Clint Eastwood Super Bowl halftime commercial. It's a Chrysler commercial. It's mostly a Detroit commercial. But it's also a commercial about us, about America. Clint Eastwood says, "It's halftime in America. The second half is about to begin. In America, we find our way through tough times, or we make a way. It's halftime in America. The second half is about to begin."

Clint Eastwood is right. He's right about America. He's right about the city. And he's right about us Christians. We don't quit.