

A Moment To Lament

Lamentations 2:18-19a; 3:19-24
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I want to start with a serious question: **How are you doing? How are things with your spirit?**

It's been a good week and a half for some, and not so good for others. Some of you may be filled with joy and optimism, feeling like you have just been released from an extended period of exile. Others of you may be experiencing anxiety, worry, disappointment, despair, even fear, feeling like you have just entered a time of what will be an extended period of exile. It's true, we are not all of one mind here at College Hill, we're perhaps a bit more diverse than at first imagined.

But for those of you who are grieving today, I can relate. In a post from Diana Butler Bass this week she shares that she's *not* disappointed. She says she can deal with disappointment. Rather, she's devastated, concerned on many levels about justice issues in our country, currently and especially going forward.

Again, I can relate. Therefore, I want to explore with you what it means to lament. There is power in lamenting. Hence, we must reclaim this lost tradition, not only privately, but also in public worship. Many of us have cause to lament. Any time we experience loss, no matter what kind of loss it is, we naturally move into a period of grief. Therefore, **we have grief work to do, as individuals and as a congregation.** Some of us are still in the initial stage of denial, some have moved on to anger, then there's bargaining, depression, and acceptance. And the cycle isn't always linear. I'm not sure when, if ever, some of us will get to acceptance, which is when a person learns to live with the loss and acknowledges the reality of it. **Lamenting, however, is a bit different from grieving.** Put most succinctly, **to lament is to cry out to God. It is to share our tears, anger, bitterness, and to pour out all our emotions and feelings and "stuff" to God.**

Five years ago, I had the opportunity to write a series of devotionals for the booklet, *These Days*, published by the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. I was asked if I would write a week of devotionals for their upcoming October-December 2019 issue. The lectionary passages I was assigned were for the first Sunday in October. They included a text from the Old Testament book of Lamentations. I had never preached or even really studied the book of Lamentations. So, I had a lot of work to do. I simply knew the book was a long, bitter lament by those remaining in Jerusalem after it had been conquered by the Babylonians, who destroyed the temple and carried off the elite into exile. For the purposes of this sermon, and as a biblical example of what it means to lament, I think it's best that I just share the devotional I wrote about Lamentations.

Jerusalem has been destroyed by the Babylonians. The city, now a shadow of its former self, lies in desolate ruin, many of its people taken into exile. A lament, in the form of a dirge, is sung as the only way to express the devastation and pain that is so deeply felt by those who remain. A lament, perhaps the most

passionate expression of grief and anguish, originates and cries out from the very depths and core of our being.

We don't talk often enough about the power of lament, especially as a way to share with God our deepest sense of loss, pain, sorrow, mourning, or regret. Even as we ask, "How..." [or "How long..."] we help release to God that grief and anguish, so that it doesn't fester into even more paralyzing pain. Lament is a prayer that ultimately expresses hope and trust in God, who is always with us, and within us, even during times of devastation. **Is there a lament buried within you that needs to be released to God?**

Hear, O God, the laments that lie in the depths of my being. Amen.

When we lament, we draw nearer to God through our cries of anguish and pain. Scriptures, especially the Psalms, are full of examples that reveal we can express the full gamut of our emotions to God – without fear. **The very act of lamenting reveals that our cries are falling on the ears of a loving, listening God who is truly with us in our pain. With God, we don't have to pretend that everything is okay when it's not,** that we just must rush through and get over our pain or get to some kind of instant closure.

Our laments, in effect, reveal our trust in God. And that brings us to a sense of hope. Did you notice in the passage I read from Lamentations that after expressing with gut-wrenching emotion, "Let tears stream down like a torrent day and night!", and "The thought of my affliction...is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me," it eventually leads to the words, "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of God never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in God.'"

That is where we must place our hope – in God. Not in business or religious leaders, certainly not in politicians. And having hope in God applies to however you understand the nature and character of God, the Divine, the Holy One.

So today, many of us lament. We cry out to God our pain in the loss of hoped for results. **Grieving can indeed be a long and arduous process. We will continue to grieve. But today we simply lament, we cry out as an expression of our grief, suffering, and sadness.** So again I ask: **What are you lamenting? And how are you expressing your lament?** In addition to a scream, perhaps your lament may take the form of prayer, or perhaps writing a poem, singing a dirge, listening to a particular song or piece of inspirational music, creating art, or simply by your tears.

Though we must never lose hope, fall into despair, or lash out against others, and while we must live into the call to love all our neighbors, it's enough at this moment to simply pause, and as individuals and together as this community of faith, to cry out to God in lament. **Even the Babylonian Exile didn't last forever.**

There are a few more things I want to share with you. I just finished reading **Brian McLaren's** latest book, released earlier this year, ***Life After Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart***. By the way, McLaren will be our Harold E. Hill Lecture Series speaker next November. He shares the following wisdom.

I want you to **imagine losing interest in the daily deluge of ugliness**, in part because it's boring, in part because it's discouraging and overwhelming, in part because one of the best ways to strengthen it is to pay attention to it, and in part

because one of the best ways to weaken it is to withdraw attention from it. **That doesn't mean denying the ugliness, pretending it's not real, popular, powerful, and deadly. It just means that every time ugliness presents itself, after noticing it, grieving it, and feeling furious about it, you commit yourself to fighting the ugly with the practice of the beautiful and joyful, celebrating and adding to the beauty that abounds, the goodness in the world that is worth fighting for.**

Speaking of what's worth fighting for, I'll close with a couple of quotes from one of my favorite books, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

Frodo, burdened with the responsibility of being the ringbearer, says to his friend Sam, "I can't do this, Sam." Sam responds, in part, "I know. It's all wrong. By rights we shouldn't even be here. But we are... [Like folks in the great stories, they] had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. They kept going. Because they were holding on to something." Frodo asks, "**What are we holding on to, Sam?**" To which Sam responds, "**That there's some good in this world, Mr. Frodo...and it's worth fighting for.**"

Our work to strive for justice continues. In fact, recent events have become a call to action.

And when Frodo shares with the wizard Gandalf, "I wish it need not have happened in my time", Gandalf responds, "So do I, and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

Let us, then, decide what to do with the time that is given us, going forth in courage, determination, perseverance, and resistance when called for, acknowledging that God is with us every step of the way, showering us with grace and love.

Yet on this day, we lament.

Amen.