

Redwoods Presbyterian Church

June 18, 2023

Rev. Keenan Kelsey preaching

“It’s Okay to Lament”

Psalms 22: 1-19, Luke 17: 11-19

God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

These are powerful and painful words of abject distress, the deepest kind of lament. And they are hard. Hard to hear, hard to say.

I imagine many of you stand with Conrad, who was to be liturgist today. When I asked him to read the psalm, he considered, he tried, but in the end, could not say the words. “I don’t want to act like this is something I believe, because I don’t. I won’t grovel and beg for mercy. I do my best and am proud of all the good that I can do.”

I know what he is talking about. We don’t know what to do with lament. It feels uncomfortable, somehow wrong. We are taught to cope and hope and survive and strive for strength and understanding. It is unseemly to grovel.

And yet, and yet...Lamenting runs throughout Scripture. Psalms are the emotional center of the Bible, and over 1/3 of them involve desperate despair—including that horrific cry that condemns an enemy with the curse, “Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” We don’t read this psalm much in church!

Wailing is frequent in the Book of Job: Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, are among the prophets who constantly cry out to God, one whole book, Lamentations, expresses the confusion and suffering felt after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians.

Jesus himself pleaded psalm 22 on the cross: My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me? In the Garden of Gethsemane, he had already prayed “Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me.” At the tomb of Lazarus, he mourned. He wept over the city of Jerusalem. And overturning the moneychanger tables in the temple was lament in action.

If we are angry with God, we are likely to scold ourselves: “I should not feel this way! I am losing my faith!” But we, the children of the Creator, will inevitably face fear, death, loss, pain, even disbelief and doubt. God is not looking for a “stiff upper lip.” Like a good Father, far from feeling abused by our cries, God invites them. Our God cries with us. in our anger, in our fear, in our loneliness, in our hurt, in our confusion.

With this kind of uninhibited prayer, we are seeking God, turning to God, not away from God. searching for some understanding and acceptance, if not peace, in the midst of suffering.

Negativity, injustice, hatred, brokenness, illness, loss, are all part of our lives and part of our world. We are in the throes of national and global abuse, with the lives of democracy, of people and of the planet itself at stake. Sometimes such raw expressions is all we can manage.

And here's the "rest of the story." If we had read the whole of Psalm 22, we would know that the complaints turn into requests: "God, do something! Deliver me! Rescue me! Heal me! Restore me!" And requests turn into realizations: We are not alone. God really is setting things right, even if we don't understand, even if it seems too slow. God does not say, "Do not fear, I will take away all the pain and struggle." Rather, we hear, "You have no need to fear, since I am with you."

St. Ignatius, founder of the Jesuit Order, named this state of despair Desolation. "Desolation," he wrote is a "darkness of the soul, turmoil of the mind, restlessness resulting from disturbances and temptations which lead to loss of faith, loss of hope, and loss of love. It is also desolation when a soul finds itself completely apathetic, tepid, sad, and separated, as it were, from its Creator and Lord."

Today, we might call it depression, a condition that over 75 % percent of the population has experienced. Whether it is the depths of clinical depression or the vagaries of a situational depression, life becomes unmanageable, beyond one's reach, certainly, it feels, even briefly, beyond God's reach.

Lament, Ignatius says, is giving voice to that desolation, or depression. And without that, there is no way through it.

Consider the businessman's wife who was experiencing depression. She began to mope around and be sad, no light in her eyes - no spring in her step. It became so bad that this husband did what any practical, sophisticated person would do. He made an appointment with the psychiatrist. On the appointed day, the doctor sat down with them, and the husband began to talk. It wasn't long before the wise doctor realized what the problem was. Without saying a word, he stood, walked over in front of the woman's chair, signaled her to stand, took her by the hands, looked at her in the eyes for a long time, then gathered into his arms and gave her a big, warm hug. You could see the change come over the woman. Color rose in her face, her eyes looked up and focused. She immediately relaxed. Stepping back, the doctor said to the husband, "See, that's all she needs."

With that, the man said, "Okay, I'll bring her in Tuesdays and Thursdays of each week, but I have to play golf on the other afternoons."

Okay, behind the silliness, there is a truth. The woman in question did not have words or a way to voice her desolation. She had no way to even know what she needed much less ask for it. How many of us don't know how to recognize, much less voice, our depressions? Our fears? Our griefs? Our pains? Do we have the language, the courage, indeed the humility, the willingness to be vulnerable, to express ourselves?

Here is another story, it is less silly because this time it's a true one. As a new pastor, a friend of mine made her very visit to a congregant in a nursing home. She was unprepared for an elderly man who would neither speak to her nor look at her. He simply gazed straight ahead. Her pastoral instincts were good however, so after 15 minutes she began reading psalms of comfort. But those words elicited no response, just the same stony stare. So as a last resort she began reading from the laments. My God my God why have you forsaken me? I cry by day but you do not answer. Or from psalm 102: I eat ashes like bread and mix my drink with tears because of your indignation and anger, because you God have picked me up and tossed me aside.

At those words the stony face softened. For the first time the man looked at his visitor. He said: "Finally, somebody who knows how I feel." That is the value of lament: Biblical lament offers somebody who know how you feel and isn't too polite to say it in God's face.

Lament is complaint, but hardly empty complaint. It is railing to God – telling God how you feel: Anguish about the brokenness of life; communal protest about the presence of evil: And if you stay with it, you will find our gracious compassionate God planting seeds of hope in the soil of exasperation and despair, for a lament is expecting that God not only listens and cares, but that God will come through in the end.

And this, Ignatius declares, will lead to consolation. "Prayers and love are learned in the hour when prayer has become impossible, and your breath has turned to stone."

Remember our ten lepers? They were on a hillside voicing lament. Undoubtedly, they used many of the psalms, including Psalm 22. When they intoned "Jesus, master have mercy on us." It's hard to know what their expectations might have been. Perhaps for some food, or a blessing. But for complete healing? They had a hope born of desperation, but I doubt they had such arrogant expectations. But they were not silent. They voiced their despair. And through their lament, they found the ultimate mercy.

This ultimate mercy is consolation. Consolation is to come nearer to God. "The soul is aroused," Ignatius said, "by an interior movement which causes it to be inflamed with love of its creator and Lord."

Consolation is when our hearts are *drawn* toward God, even if this happens in circumstances that the world would regard as negative. It is a signal that our hearts, at least for that moment, are beating in harmony with the heartbeat of God.

We were created to live with God in a garden, yet we wake every morning in the desert of a fallen world. And with that comes a great need for an adequate and authentic vehicle of expression. Out of that comes a strange sense of spiritual well-being, an awesome feeling of completion, when the soul had unburdened all of its tears.

Consider the 10th leper? He moved beyond being cured of a disease into moving closer to God. In turning and saying thank you, he understood a new relationship with God. We don't know what the Samaritan's life will look like after he leaves Christ. It probably in fact won't be easy, for after all, he was still a Samaritan, a foreigner, traditionally distrusted and excluded. If he hadn't been ill, no way would the other lepers have had dealings with each other. The common tragedy, the mutual misery, drew them together; without it, his friends would undoubtedly desert him. The Samaritan must turn back and face his life. But somehow the Scriptures convey that it will be different, it will have a new quality.

Lament, whether mild or out of control, is the alchemy whereby pain is transmuted, through grace, to something special, to spiritual growth, to a deepened relationship with the Holy.

May it be so. Amen.