

Sermon
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July 7, 2019
Psummer of Psalms: Lament

Letting God Minister to Us

After months of unraveling and betrayals that seemed unimaginable, my marriage came to an end. It was a time of loss upon loss. Some losses were clear; others unfolded over time. Friends graciously let me stay with them over the weekend while my spouse and I sorted out who would live where temporarily. I was so relieved to have that support and space.

On Saturday, when my friends were out with other plans, I decided to take a walk. My grief was making me feel claustrophobic. But I was so “in my head” and not paying attention that I ended up getting lost in the winding streets of their neighborhood. I couldn’t even remember the name of their street, so I just had to hold out for something that looked familiar.

By the time I found my way home, I was exhausted. The physical disorientation I experienced on the walk only compounded the disorientation of my soul. My friends were still not home, which made coming home feel lonelier than when I had left. As I was going up the stairs to my room, I fell to my knees.

“God, I don’t know what to do! Help me! I don’t know what to do!”

I yelled my prayer until my throat was raw. My heart raced and panic seemed to overtake me. I crumpled into my tears.

I was one of the most difficult prayers of lament I’ve ever uttered.

One of the things I love about the Book of Psalms is that it invites us into honesty before God. It gives us permission to express ourselves at our most raw and real and ravaged—individually or as a community. There are psalms of lament about personal pain, such as I was experiencing at the moment, and there are psalms of lament when things are bleak for the people of God, when injustice seems rampant and enemies are closing in.

The psalms help us put language to these deep sorrows. We heard that in Psalm 22 that Dorothy read. Here’s another example, Psalm 13, using Nan Merrill’s paraphrase:

How long, my Beloved?
Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear this pain in my soul, and live with sorrow all the day?
How long will fear rule my life?

Notice my heart and answer me, O my Beloved;
Enlighten me, lest I walk as one dead to life;
Lest my ego fears say, “We have won the day,”
Lest they rejoice in their strength.

The psalmist isn’t afraid to confront God, to cast their anxiety and grief and hopelessness into the lap of the one to whom they pray. They have no fear that God will reject them for voicing the pain in their heart. They don’t apologize for their feelings or feel they need to cower

from God's response. Maybe we don't catch that as well in the translations using the word God or Lord, but notice how calling God Beloved shifts that. A beloved names an intimate relationship.

The psalmist understands and relies on God's desire to be in relationship with us—not only through the good, but also through the bad and the ugly of our lives. God desires to bear witness to the sharpest cries, the loudest wails, and the deepest groans of our existence. God loves us in and through some of the hardest parts of being human—whether we are expressing our personal pain, the pain of a communal grief, or our confessing the pain we have another.

A prayer of lament opens us up to feel when we would rather shut down, trusting that the pain will not ultimately overwhelm us. It opens our eyes to see and respond to inhumanity when we'd rather shut down in shame.

The psalms are the preserved prayers of our spiritual ancestors, and week we talked about trust as an essential component to prayer.

Psalm 13, which I just read, "How long, Beloved?," ends the way that most lament psalms end, with words of trust:

As I trust in your steadfast Love; my heart will rejoice,
For in you is freedom.

I shall sing to the Beloved, who has answered my prayers a thousand fold!

Come, O Beloved, make your home in my heart.

If we look at Psalm 22 that's printed in the bulletin, you'll find this same pattern. After describing how bad the situation is, the writer adds this acknowledgment:

"Shout hallelujah. God has never let you down, never looked the other way when you were being kicked around. God has never wandered off to do God's own thing. God has been right there, listening." (*The Message* paraphrase)

Lament psalms give us the opportunity to consider the very nature of prayer. We in the European West, where individualism is prized and the myth of pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps is so infused with culture, haven't done ourselves any favors when it comes to prayer. We've been taught to prize success in material terms and have a sense of entitlement related to well-being. We have been taught that we should be free of pain and grief. Therefore, if we experience pain and grief, God is not answering my prayers. To feel that God is not responding to prayer, is disconnected from us and our need, leaves us in a spiritually precarious and sometimes place.

That misguided theological thinking comes easily in a culture where we have plenty to distract us from our need of God. We can let intellectualism or success or the ability to purchase more than we need take the place of a relationship with God. It clouds our vision of where God is already at work, here with us.

Theologian Andrew Root writes that when prayer is seen as a way to insure yourself against bad luck, it isn't really prayer at all, but merely "wishful thinking cased in religious language."¹

Wishful thinking as prayer is both dangerous and poor theology. It sets us up to believe that the natural forces of creation need not apply to us, that somehow we ought to be immune from the vulnerabilities of life. This understanding of prayer can cause people to feel that either their faith is inadequate or their God is. It's easy to think of examples: Let's say we pray for

¹ Andrew Root, "Forming a People Who Pray," in *Christian Century* magazine, July 3, 2019, p 20-23.

healing, but we're still sick. Therefore, God didn't answer our prayer. We pray that the life of a loved one be spared, but they die. Therefore, God didn't answer our prayer.

In this type of spirituality, we fail to notice that healing can come for us in the midst of illness, and even in the midst of death. We fail to notice God with us, wanting to help us carry the load.

Going back to my own story of my broken relationship, this wrong-hearted theology would have put me in the position of believing that if only I'd had enough faith my spouse would have remained faithful and my marriage wouldn't have ended. Or, it should be reason to abandon my faith because my pain was proof that God didn't care about me enough to make sure I wouldn't be hurt. On the one hand, I would be left feeling inadequate. On the other, I would have been left abandoned by God. Can you see how spiritually and emotionally damaging that line of thought is?

I found Dr. Root's article about prayer especially helpful when thinking about prayers of lament. He uses the analogy of God as minister. That when we pray, we are calling on God to come and minister to us.

In my difficult time, God arrived and ministered to me through the love and care and shelter of my friends, in my ability to speak and even scream my pain, in the many ways grace showed up for me to get me through a time when life as I knew it ended, in the new life, hope and possibility that eventually showed up.

When we pray, we are calling on God to minister to us. In our intercessory prayers—praying on behalf of others—we are also asking God to engage us in ministering to them as God does.

And God, our Beloved, shows up, if only to hold our head in her lap as we weep. Let us clear the clutter that gets in the way of our seeing that, including the clutter of unhelpful theology. Let us make space for the laments of one another, those known to us and those whose names are unknown. And let us be prompted to hear and respond to those laments, with the same fierce and tender response of the One who loved us into being and will love us beyond our being.

Amen.