

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
August 27, 2023
Jeremiah 9:17–22
Selections from Psalms

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Speak to us, O God. Speak to us in our lives, in our longing, in our sorrows, in our joy, in our sighs, in our frustrations, in our hoping. Speak to us through your words this day. Amen.

Our primary reading comes from the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah experienced many difficulties, and he is credited as the author of the book of Jeremiah, the book of Kings, and the book known as Lamentations. The book of Lamentations is structured as five poems, beginning with Jerusalem depicted as a weeping widow overcome with misery. Some scholars have called Jeremiah the “weeping prophet.” Jeremiah’s job, like all prophets, was to speak truth to power. To tell the king and the kingdom when things were not right, when they were going astray from God’s desires, and to warn of trouble. In our reading from the book of Jeremiah this morning, you will hear the cries of the people for the misery that will befall Jerusalem.

Thus says the LORD of hosts:

Consider and call for the mourning women to come; send for the skilled women to come; let them quickly raise a dirge over us, so that our eyes may run down with tears and our eyelids flow with water. For a sound of wailing is heard from Zion: “How we are ruined! We are utterly shamed because we have left the land, because they have cast down our dwellings.”

Hear, O women, the word of the LORD, and let your ears receive the word of his mouth; teach to your daughters a dirge and each to her neighbor a lament. “Death has come up into our windows; it has entered our palaces to cut off the children from the streets and the young men from the squares.” Speak! Thus says the LORD: “Human corpses shall fall like dung upon the open field, like sheaves behind the reaper, and no one shall gather them.”

As the pandemic wore on into its second year, I began to see a lot of articles that discussed the fatigue that many people were feeling. People were tired. They couldn't think well or make decisions. It all just seemed too much. And there were good reasons it turns out for many of us to feel this way. Our brains were not meant to be in crisis for that long. When everyday tasks like going to the grocery store, school and work, the doctor's office, or to get food from a restaurant became literally life or death decisions, it was too much. We had so many things to think about just to stay healthy. After many months of this, some of us would scream to see my friends and family and hug them.” I am sure more than one of us cried out, “I am so sick of wearing this stupid mask! When will this be over?!?”

About two years into the pandemic, the author and pastor John Pavlovitz wrote a blog post entitled, “You should be weary right now.”ⁱ He wrote that the weariness that many of us felt was confirmation that our hearts were working properly. He said that our weariness was our humanity responding to so much inhumanity around us, that our goodness was still fighting to feel useful. He said our weariness was our internal alarm of empathy to so much brokenness.

For some of us, this weariness may have shown itself in another way, namely rage, or anger. We see things around us and wonder why it is the way that it is, when we know deep in our bones it should not be that

way. We lift up our arms and cry, “Why?” or “How long must this go on?” “Things shouldn’t be this way.”

When we do this, when we are weary or angry and we cry out, “why,” or “how long?” or “where are you God?” we are actually taking part in an ancient spiritual practice of lament. Lament is a prayer, a cry out to God, that allows us to name our pain and the pain of the world. It allows us to honestly share our concern, and perhaps frustration, with God that things are not as God promised or as they should be. Lament gives voice to the numbness we may feel from continued disappointment, grief, pain, and weariness. It is an invitation for God and others to draw close to us in our suffering or for us to draw close to other’s suffering and pain.

The great song book of the Bible, the Psalms, contain example after example of lament. More than a third, or slightly less than half, of all the Psalms offer some form of lament.ⁱⁱ There are different types of lament. Some lament is about confession and repentance. It can be individual lament like in Psalm 25, “For your name’s sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great.” Or they can be communal like Psalm 12, “Help Lord, for no one is faithful anymore, those who are loyal have vanished from the human race.” This type of lament expresses distress at having forgotten God and seeks forgiveness and restoration.

There are those laments that are cries of despair and pain for the current situation and often points to enemies or other sources of a person’s suffering. These types of lament cry out to God about an overwhelming sense of isolation and defeat. Psalm 86 says, “Foes are attacking me, O God, and ruthless people are trying to kill me.” Psalm 10 echoes a similar concern and despair, “Why, O Lord, do you stand so far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” In some ways this despair is a direct protest to God and can be accusatory. Psalm 44 says, “Awake Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not neglect us

forever,” and “You have made us the taunt of our neighbors, the derision and scorn of those around us.” This type of protest to God not only makes accusations but they also demand action from God. One scholar writes, “As a protest, Israel’s lament calls on God to account for the way things are wrong in the world, and demands that God listen and respond – to set right what is wrong, mend what is broken, and bring light to the darkness.”

And like many things in the Christian life, lament is, I think, richer when it is done in community. When it is a shared activity. While some of the Psalms discuss individual lament, even those would have been sung in communal worship. Much like there is an element of the prayer of confession that is individual, and yet we say it together in community.

The reading from Jeremiah 9 demonstrates this communal lament. And even more so, a lament that is intergenerational and learned from one person to another. Jeremiah declares this message from God, “Hear, O women, the word of the LORD, and let your ears receive the word of his mouth; teach to your daughters a dirge and each to her neighbor a lament.” Cole Arthur Riley talks about learning how to lament from an elder and mentor. She writes, “We are born knowing how to cry, but it takes another to teach us how to cry well and with purpose. As we watch our elders cry, we are learning.”ⁱⁱⁱ

There is something freeing about seeing another person, who you know and trust, utter or experience deep emotion. I remember the times I saw one of my parents cry, and it made them more human to me. I recall those times when I have been in bible studies with people that knew one another well and when someone talked about their pain, or their sorrow, or their deep grief how much that opened the conversation and allowed others to utter their own frustrations and pain. Lament can be a

communal outpouring of grief that builds empathy and compassion for others.

Just as it was a revelation to me to see my parents express deep emotion for me, so too am I amazed that the God we worship is open in emotion. Cole Arthur Riley writes, “I can only wonder why we have so many depictions of the cross with Christ looking stoic and resolved and so few with him crying out in pain and abandonment. When I read the story, he does not seem composed; he seems devastated. When we reconstruct a Christ whose very face remains unmoved, how are we to trust that he feels or longs for anything at all? A passionless savior cannot be trusted to save. I have never felt closer to God than when he has tears running down his face. I don’t delight in this, but by this, I know that I am seen.”

I invite you to take a moment to look at the image on the bulletin cover, or the image here on the screen. This face has known pain. This face has known lament. This face has had tears that have not been wiped away. This face cried well and with purpose. Perhaps we can have an understanding or see ourselves in this face.

God sees us, all of us. Even in our tears and lament. Cole Arthur Riley says, “There is no such thing as a lone wail (w-a-i-l).” “There is no such thing as a lone wail. Every howl reverberates off the walls of God’s chest and finds its way back to us, carrying his own tears with it.” And it isn’t that God, when bearing witness to our suffering, is trying to demonstrate or teach us something. I do not believe that God requires our grief or anguish to teach us something or to make a truth known. As I have said before, I do not prescribe to the theology that “everything happens for a reason.” There does not have to be purpose or meaning to our anguish. Sometimes bad things happen, and they are just bad things. Again, Riley writes, “I think when God bears witness to our lament, we discover that we are not calling out to a teacher but inviting God as a

nurturer – a mother who hears her child crying in the night. She wakes, rises, and comes to the place where we lie. She rushes her holy warmth against our flesh and says, *I'm here.*”

And it is more than OK to cry out to God in our anguish. To cry out is not an act of faithlessness, it's a faithful response to the ills and injustices of the world. Tomorrow marks sixty years since the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Over 250,000 people gathered as a collective witness to advocate for civil and economic rights. It was there that the people heard the call for justice through lament and hope. It was there that they heard the dream of a better world because there was belief that a better world was possible.

One writer says, “you don't lament to God if you do not believe that God is there. You don't demand that God do something unless you believe that God can indeed act.”^{iv} Being honest about the state of the world is a faithful act. And, perhaps, the first step toward justice. When we cry out “why” or “where are you God” it's the first step to recognizing that the world is not the way it should be. It is calling the status quo into question. Riley writes, “When we weep for the condition of the world, we become truth-tellers in its defense. People who can say, *This is not good. It is not well.* People who have seen the face of goodness and refuse to call it good and curse by the same name.”

Lament is a beginning. Lament cannot be the only thing, but it is an important thing. It's important because it is honest, and it is a reclamation of the beauty of God. The task of lament is not to convince someone of the brokenness of the world. That is evident. Rather, lament “is to convince [people] of the world's worth in the first place. True lament is not born from that trite sentiment that the world is bad but rather from a deep conviction that it is worthy of goodness.” It's a

reminder of the beauty of God's creation and kin-dom. Lament is a call to God's desire and promises for shalom in the world.

Lament is hopefulness. And by that, I don't mean to suggest that lament gives way quickly to some false positivism that "everything will work out." I don't want to suggest that we not sit with the hard things of life and move quickly to some sentimental idea. But I mean that lament is hope because it is honest. Cole Arthur Riley talks about it this way, Lament is "an innate awareness that what is should not be. As if something is written on our hearts that tells us exactly what we are meant for, and whenever confronted with something contrary to this, we experience a crumbling. And in the rubble, we say, *God, you promised*. We ask, *Why?* And how could we experience such a devastation if we were not on some mysterious plane, hoping for something different. Our hope can be only as deep as our lament is. And our lament as deep as our hope."

We are worthy of our tears. This world is worthy of our anguish and pain. The world is worthy of our concern and our hope. Perhaps it may seem odd to talk about lament on the same day as we celebrate a baptism, but even there, I believe there is honesty. When we baptize a baby, we emphasize God's grace and movement toward us through the person of Jesus Christ and in the power of God's Spirit. In baptism, we hold our hopes and our fears for a child and promise to walk with the child throughout their life in faith, no matter what may come. This is a love that will not let us go – through our laughter and our tears.

There is liturgy from the Church of Scotland and the French Reformed church that articulates the fullness of baptism, the fullness of our life, and the fullness of God's love for us. It says:

Little one, for you Jesus Christ came into the world:
For you he lived and showed God's love;

For you he suffered the darkness of Calvary
And cried at the last, “it is accomplished”;
For you he triumphed over death and rose in newness of life;
For you he ascended to reign at God’s right hand.
All this he did for you, little one,
Though you do not know it yet.
And so the word of scripture is fulfilled;
“We love because God loved us first.”

We are worthy of God’s love. We are worthy of being heard. Our cries for justice are an act of hope. Our tears are worthy to be shed.

I close with a poem by Cole Arthur Riley.

Aren’t your eyelids
Tired of keeping
Prisoners? Those tears
Are precious
Minerals. Lap them up
Like a medicine –
It’s called healing.

Amen.

ⁱ John Pavlovitz, <https://johnpavlovitz.com/2022/03/07/you-should-be-weary-right-now/>

ⁱⁱ Much of this section of the sermon was based off of an article by Rob Muthiah from the January 27, 2021 issue of the Christian Century, which can be found here [The theological work of antiracism needs to include lament | The Christian Century](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Cole Arthur Riley, “This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us.”

^{iv} Rob Muthiah