

Last week we began a new series for the season of Lent: two spiritual practices on the way to the cross: Lament and Forgiveness. As Emma just beautifully sang, lament psalms, which make up more than a 1/3 of the Book of Psalms, were a regular part of Israel's praise and worship. You see authentic faith and worship involves honesty with God and with ourselves, even with raw pain and anger. To think that a Christian has to be happy all the time is a fake spirituality. Life is sometimes unpleasant and scary. To get to praise, we have to start with lament. We offer laments about diseases, depression, anxiety, addiction, discrimination, war, violence, abuse, you name it. "It's this honesty that keeps me turning to the psalms during times of stress and fear and powerlessness. The psalmist's no-spin version of faith isn't trying to sell us anything or force an agenda. They're just straight-up sharing their experience of God. And it's not always positive" (Terri McDowell Ott, *Christian Century*). We offer these laments during this Lenten season to give voice to various struggles and injustices- whether ours or our neighbors- and to point the way ultimately to the cross of Christ. Today we're going to look at the shortest of the lament prayers in the Book of Psalms. Psalm 13. It's the 13th Psalm on the 13th day of March. Let us pray. **PRAY.**

READ.

This weekend my daughter, Bailey, and I took a four-hour road trip. On the way to our destination she would ask every few minutes, "How long do we have to go, Mama? How long? This is the longest trip ever!" She was most definitely letting her complaint be known to someone she trusts. This made me think of lament psalms. Why lament? Because

lament is: communication with God; it broadens our prayer lives; it connects us to the world and to the God who loves it and us; it is an opportunity to confess our faith in the God whose promises are trustworthy. When we lament, we move from suffering to faith. In our faith there is hope. We lament in order to hope. Laments are not just spoken prayers; they are songs as well. Yes, music is one way we can practice laments, as is poetry sung, seen here in the psalms. As some of you may know, blues and other popular music was influenced by African American spirituals. Charles told me last week that he was bringing his sacred steel today, an instrument used with the blues and spirituals. The sacred steel was created because an organ was often too expensive for some churches. Therefore, the sacred steel is a unique sound associated with some of these lament songs. David sang, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," by Thomas Dorsey, who was considered the "father of gospel." He wrote this lament after his own personal tragedies and Mahalia Jackson sang his song years later at the funeral of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Lament has obviously been an important form of expression for our Jewish sisters and brothers in relation to the Holocaust and for other people experiencing genocide (in Cambodia, Rwanda, Sudan, etc.). In the 1960s, the music of Bob Dylan was noted for its prophetic lament over social injustice and war. For example, his famous song about US involvement in Vietnam, 'Blowin' in the Wind'" (Nancy C. Lee, SBL: *Biblical & Contemporary Lament*). There's a big difference though between sad songs and faith-based lament songs. Sad songs "communicate emotion but rarely are they places to look for hope.

In a life of faith, we look to God for deliverance and salvation. We look to God for hope” (*Into the Light: PW Study*,

In lament psalms, the psalmist gives us words to articulate that something is amiss in the relationship, and it must be righted. When I was a chaplain at a Psychiatric hospital and drug and alcohol detox facility, I led Spirituality Groups. One of our practices was to read lament psalms, particularly Psalm 13 because of its brevity and its display of characteristic elements in a lament. The lament starts with **an address to God**, a prayer, establishing the covenant-based relationship between the pray-er and God. Here once again you can see that the speaker establishes the right to expect some action from God. “Clearly, God is expected to intervene actively and powerfully because of previous commitments between the parties. The speaker does not come *de novo* to God, but out of a context of faith and loyalty” (Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*). The second component of a lament psalm is the **complaint or injustice**, which describes as fully as possible the pray-er’s situation of trouble or pain which God is not allowed to ignore- examples: sickness, loneliness or a sense of abandonment, danger before enemies, shame and humiliation, and death. Sometimes, as in today’s psalm, the grievance is expressed in questions. Then there is an expression of trust in God: an assurance of being heard. I call this the turning in the lament, as seen here in the “but I have trusted in your faithful love” (v. 5). Did you see or hear it? The pray-er is aware that their destiny is in God’s hands, as they’re helpless or powerless. The psalmist does not doubt that God can and may

transform their situation. The psalmist here ends their lament with “My heart will rejoice in your salvation. Yes, I will sing to the Lord because he has been good to me” (vv. 5-6). We cry out directly to God because we believe deep down that our relationship with God counts; it matters to God and to us. Even if we do not experience the closeness, we believe that God does care. Even if God seems not to hear, we believe that God is always within shouting distance. In Scripture, God doesn’t say, ‘Do not fear, I will take away all pain and struggle.’ Rather, we hear, ‘Do not fear, for I am with you.

There is a lot of need to lament these days- personally and as a community of faith: the war in Ukraine, inflation, racism, homophobia, climate change, the global pandemic, and the list goes on and on. And sometimes the intellectual knowledge that God is always faithful doesn’t seem to make it to our hearts. Therefore, as we consider suffering- our own and other people’s- we may wonder whether or not God is paying attention. Side note- as I mentioned last week- many of us are uncomfortable speaking our pain, doubt, and anger before God- so start with your neighbor’s laments, if need be. And for persons having trouble engaging God in prayer, the psalms offer plenty of practice in approaching God no matter how one feels. The hope of this Lenten series is not just to learn about laments but to help us reclaim lament as a practice in our prayer life. And in order to do that, we have to start somewhere- we have to practice lament. So let us use the psalmist as our model. Your creations need not be perfect or even excellent- they just need to be from your heart- real- arising from your concerns and

faith in God. Now- I want to be clear- this is an invitation to practice lament. You don't have to. You can write or draw or just sit in prayer with God. When I think of how long, O Lord, I think of the horrific images of innocent people dying from an unnecessary war in Ukraine. I think of people in poverty who deserve dignity and affordable housing but can't access it. Or held financially captive by predatory lenders. How long, O Lord shall we cry for justice and peace? How long? After you finish writing and praying your lament, I invite you to get in groups of 3 or 4 people and pray for one another. You don't need to share your lament...just your name. There is a written prayer already in your insert that you can pray or you can just use your own words to pray that their lament be heard and acted on by God. When you hear me singing, you'll know that this time is winding down.

Sing "O Lord, hear my prayer. O Lord, hear my prayer. When I call, answer me. O Lord, hear my prayer. O Lord, hear my prayer. Come, and listen to me" (Taize). *****The loss of lament has been costly in our faith communities; we have much to gain by recovering it. Yes, Christian faith does proclaim a message of hope, and death and grief are still real. May we remember that it is only after we lament, after we face and express the pain and negativity and get it all out, that healing can begin. In other words, it is only by facing and going through the death that we come to new life, to resurrection. We're still on the road to Jerusalem together with Jesus, as he knowingly heads to the cross. Yet, in our laments there is courageous resilience, a whole-hearted faith, hope and transformation. May it be so, O Lord! May it be so! Amen.