

Lament and the Psalms – a Lent Study



Session 5. Lament as an Act of Love

Listen/Watch – the clip of Hannah Malcolm on Lament an act of Love

***With someone else, discuss what you have heard and how it might relates to seeing Lament as extending beyond individual or even collective grief into being an Act of Love.*

Read Matthew 27:12-47

*** As you read look for references to: Isaiah 53:7, Psalm 109:25, Psalm 35:15, Psalm 71:11, Psalm 22:1, 7, 16, 18, Malachi 4:5, Psalm 69:21*

We must, as Shakespeare says in Macbeth, “*Give sorrow words: the grief that does not speak. Whispers the o'er-fraught heart, and bids it break.*” The Scriptures have a simple, but profound, even paradoxical, answer to give words to sorrow. We’re actually invited to mourn by complaining. Jesus on the cross agonizingly and publicly complained to His Father in the words of Psalm 22: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Matthew 27:46).

Psalm Study

Read Psalm 22

***Reflect on the psalm and discuss your thoughts with someone else bearing in mind what you discovered as you read Matthew 27.*

Structure

Just to note that the heading for this Psalm in my NRSV Bible says:

“To the leader: according to The Deer of the Dawn. A Psalm of David.”

Had you realised that the psalm Jesus quoted while on the cross ends with rejoicing? It’s both a powerful prophetic psalm and also a reminder that we can and should always praise God no matter what our situation.

Psalm 22 divides into two sections, the first addressed as a prayer to God and the second to the people. The change from despair to hope occurs half way through verse 21 – from “*save me*” to “*you have rescued me*”.

Superimposed on this two part structure is also a seven part menorah pattern using a literary device known as a chiasmic pattern.

Verses 1-5 - I feel forsaken, but I know You are trustworthy

Verses 6-11 - I am despised, but You are my God

Verses 12-18 - I am surrounded by animals - I am defeated

Verses 19-21 - But You will rescue me!

Verses 22-26 - I am surrounded by the godly - Praise God!

Verses 27-28 - Everyone should worship God, He rescues the despised

Verses 29-31 - Everyone will worship God - He is trustworthy

Questions

***With someone else, consider the following questions (remember no right or wrong answers, just aids to your discussion and reflection):*

- In this Psalm, what jumps off the page at you?*
- What words does the Psalmist use to describe how he is feeling.*
- How does the Psalmist describe his current experience of God?*
- What has been your experience of suffering through the hostility of others?*

Discussion

In Psalm 22 we’ve already seen elements of the crucifixion of Jesus: His perplexed cry, “*My God, my God*” (v 1); the mocking of the onlookers (v

7); the piercing of His hands and feet (v 16) the casting of lots for His garments (v 18). As Christians, we see Jesus' death on the cross as being the supreme act of love for others ("*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*" John 15:13). In the second half of Psalm 22 we see the pain and anguish of the Crucifixion transformed into the joy and thanksgiving of the Resurrection.

Love demands that with regard to the needs of the afflicted, the pain-bearer is given the opportunity to tell his or her story, to have his or her pain acknowledged. For someone to take time to recognise that '*I am hurting*' is enormously liberating. Indeed, it is vital that the sufferer knows that he or she is heard and no longer alone. The transformative power of a lament is not so much that the person is given answers but rather that, as he or she remembers and relates the suffering, he or she experiences that suffering again in the context of having a hearing.

Lament enables us to articulate our pain and face realities in an honest way understanding that problems in life should not be perceived as signs of failure but as normal and to be expected. Doing this in the company of others, so that the sufferer knows that they are being heard is even better.

In the early church, when life was hard, many Christian songs had the character of laments. Today, as much as ever before, we need to utilise this as we face the hardships that we all experience, personally and communally, as Ackermann says:

"The scriptures have given us a language that can deal with suffering. In the ancient language of lament, we have a way of naming the unnameable and crying out to God and naming situations that are unbearable."

Lament resists a false view of God that presents a comfortable theology but one that ignores pain. As Moltmann reminds us, "*The true God is not recognized by his power and glory in the world, but through his helplessness and death on the cross*". Suffering, and Jesus being abandoned by his Father, is central to Christian theology and the suffering of Christ is the power of God'. Lament reveals that God isn't complacent about suffering, God's not restricted to a dualistic system of retributive

justice, God doesn't view complaint as a lack of faith or hope and God allows criticism. The complainant discovers that God engages with him or her as they complain, but doesn't rebuke or crush in response. Instead, *'pain voiced and processed'* becomes part of a new relationship with God.

It is recognised that it's often difficult for someone who's experienced trauma to find the language to express their pain. Calvin observed this and thus encouraged sufferers to listen to biblical laments and to mimic their words, God has given us the biblical language and practice of lament as a way to express our pain and help us in our suffering. Many people through the ages have found a 'voice' in this way.

Finally, poetry (as found in the psalms) is particularly helpful at times of disorientation as it does not require coherence and closure. As we have seen over the past few weeks, many of the psalms of lament also include thanksgiving or words of hope. Such light in the darkness can help those who suffer as they re-orient their lives. The pain may not disappear but hope starts to return. This happens not because evil has been explained or the situation has been resolved, but because the person in pain has been able to focus on the goodness and love of God, and the relationship with God has been re-established and often strengthened through the suffering. Hope comes from recognising that *'the current situation is not all that God has for me'*, and things can only get better.

The Church and all those who profess themselves as Christian, should recognise the wisdom of collective grief and seek opportunities to practise its right expression, discuss what those might be, and seek opportunities to speak hope in the face of death.

In the words of Walter Brueggemann: *"The prophetic tasks of the Church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair."*

Lament and the Psalms are an old and proven way to do all three of these and I hope that you now understand just a little of how that might be.