

Dwelling in the Word: Mystery of God
September 3, 2017
Lamentations 3:31-39
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What happens when we are not able to sing that song? What happens when we are not able to proclaim “I **know** you’re able and I **know** you can, save through the fire with your mighty hand. But even if You don’t, my hope is you **alone**. I know the sorrow, and I know the hurt would **all** go away if you’d just say the word. But even if you don’t, my hope is you **alone**. You’ve been faithful, you’ve been good **all** my days. I will cling to you come what may.

Because I know you’re able, I know you can. It is well with my soul.”

What about when it is not well with your soul? What about when you are not confident that everything would go away if God just said the word? What about when you are not able to profess that your hope is in God alone? What about when you want to cling to anything besides clinging to God? What about when you are no longer sure who God is, what God can do, and what God cares about? What about when you find yourself sitting in darkness, utterly alone, and not certain that God hears, God cares, that God is present? What happens when you cannot sing these words of faith, trust, and hope?

It appears that the author of our passage in Lamentations chapter three would have also struggled to sing the song “Even If.” Anabaptist Old Testament scholar Wilma Bailey points out that the “The third chapter of Lamentations finds many voices arguing back and forth about how to understand God’s role (as we lament)... There are voices expressing despair, testimonies of God’s goodness, wisdom sayings, and calls for judgment. It runs the gamut from conventional theology to near heresy. This is a community trying to come to grips with pain and suffering”ⁱ and trying to figure out where is God and what is God’s role in all of this.

At parts within this passage we hear the murmurings of the song “Even If” - of quiet steadfast hope, trust, and faith in a God who is able to do all things, and one that cares for God’s people. At other points in this lament I am confident that the author would be nowhere close to singing “Even If” as the music changes to confidence that God is not present, God does not care, God is very distant and impenetrable.

So, which voice within this lament is correct? Which image of God is the accurate image of the God we serve? At which point during the lament was the author speaking his or her understanding of truth and perspective? When were they correct and when were they wrong? Unfortunately, it cannot be reduced to such a simple assessment. We, like the author of Lamentations, have multiple voices in our heads, each spouting off various theological claims and views of God. And, like the author of Lamentations, the diversity of our understanding of God is also revealed within a single prayer of lament. And, this morning I want to tell you that this reality is okay, and that this reality can be very disconcerting.

Offering our prayers of lament to God will challenge and deepen our familiar understandings of God. We will find that in the midst of our anguish, questions begin to bubble up from the wells within us as we find ourselves asking questions to God, about God, and about our faith in God. What do these questions mean? How does this impact our faith? “To begin with, it means that we must acknowledge that there is much about God and God’s purposes that we do not comprehend.”ⁱⁱ It means that we must move towards embracing God as mystery. It does not mean that we become willy-nilly about God and suddenly believe that anything and everything goes for God. Instead, it means that we grasp that we cannot grasp all there is to know and understand about God. It means that we work to keep the perspective that there is a God who created us, redeems us, and sustains us, and we are still not that God.

Now perhaps on one hand that sounds simplistic and easily obtainable. However, in the deep experiences of lamenting it can also be shattering, disorienting, and isolating. Our faith journeys in many ways are preparing us to enter into a deeper relationship with God as we lament to God. And so our theology, our practices, our understandings, our images of God are created during the mundane and experiences of joy. Then the theology, practices, understandings, and image of God are refined during the experiences of waiting in the dark, comforted only with the words of our lament and our questions to and about God.

Eugene Peterson in his translation of *The Message*, translates the second verse of chapter 3 as the author saying “God took me by the hand and walked me into pitch-black darkness.” If asked to assign a color to lamenting, one would often say utter darkness. It is the felt absence of God’s light providing comfort, direction, and presence. As humans we run from the darkness. We are taught to fear the darkness for you can never know what might be lurking just around the corner.

A couple weeks ago we experienced people cheering for the presence of darkness in locations that experienced the total eclipse. I was listening to the radio as those in Oregon were sharing their reactions and reflections of the total eclipse live on the radio. Through the radio I could hear whoops of joy and exclamations of delight as the world suddenly went completely dark. In those moments they began to celebrate what they could experience in the dark - the presence of stars in the middle of the day, the awakening of night noises and creatures.

I do not think that the author of laments though is cheering when they experience their world going suddenly, and completely dark. Instead it is an experience that leads them to feeling disorientated. In my own life when I have experienced darkness in the depths of my being they have not been times that I have whooped and cheered. Instead, they have been some

of the loneliest, most painful, and most grief stricken times in my life. It was not a time that I was ready or desiring the dark, instead it fell down upon me and my only choice was to learning to “walk in the dark.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I vividly remember one such instance from almost 9 years ago when I was flooded with lamenting my heartache to God. From my journal entry during this same time I wrote, “God it hurts so deeply. Why??? God where are you? Where are you at in this? Do you even care? God I thought you promised you would be with us? Why then am I all alone? I don’t know why I was called to be a pastor when I don’t want to even pray right now, nor talk to anyone about God. How can I tell others that God is good, that God is faithful, that God loves unconditionally? I cannot even find the words to describe the pain. I trusted God to hold me, to hold this situation, and all I realize now is that I should have just held it myself. God is here, but God simply does not care. Let the darkness descend.”

It was during these deep months of lamenting that one day I was sitting in the office of my counselor and she asked me to close my eyes and to look deep inside to discern what color I would give to my lamenting. I remember closing my eyes and straining towards the depth of my being with tears running down my face as I told her, “it is all dark, there is no light, no color, only darkness.” So she calmly and lovingly asked me to look again to see if there is even a small light, even a tiny flicker of light. And I was then straining and searching and then finally naming and realizing no, there is no light, it is complete and utter darkness. So Joann asked if I could pray Psalms 23 as words to speak hope and faith for me as I lamented. I could not get past the first sentence – The Lord is my Shepherd. No he is not. I was questioning the very role of God as my shepherd, as one who cared, of one who was involved. There is intense pain of feeling of the

perceived absence of God. However, deeper and greater pain is the perceived understanding that God is there but God just does not care.

When we lament to God we allow our theology, our views of God, and our relationship with God to be challenged and deepened. Not challenged as if we are determining whether or not we should even believe in the first place, however, for some that might be part of that journey. Instead it is allowing our simple, untried faith and views to be refined and deepened. Did I enjoy the months of learning to walk in the darkness? Absolutely not. Do I wish I could go back to the faith and views I held prior to walking in the darkness? Absolutely not. As one author reminds us, “The prayer of lament is a vivid reminder that persons can survive the disintegration of their previously unquestioned theological frameworks. What endures beyond the collapse of the frameworks is the relationship with the living God, a relationship strong enough for the telling of truth.”^{iv}

A critical component that has been stressed in our first two Sundays of this series, and one that I wish to stress again, is **that laments are prayers offered to God**. As Kathleen O’Conner suggests, laments “are prayers that ‘erupt from wounds, burst out of unspeakable pain, and bring it to language... They take anger and despair before God and community. They grieve. They argue. They find fault... (and) Although laments appear disruptive of God’s world, they are acts of fidelity (of loyalty). In vulnerability and honesty, they cling to God and demand for God to see, hear, and act... in the process of harsh complaint and resistance, they also express faith in God in the midst of chaos, doubt, and confusion.”^v We know that life is hard, and a life of faith too includes real struggles, pain, heartache, and grief. As we enter into laments it “becomes clear why lament is by no means faithless prayer but instead the prayer of “a bruised faith, a longing faith, a faith emptied of nearness. The prayer of lament gives voice to those struggling to find

God in the darkness, in the detours... even radical interruptions of... life.^{vi} And as another author describes it, the prayer of lament is “full of tension and paradox. On the one hand, it signals the breakdown of previous ideas about God that have (been founded) on the harsh facts of experience, with the result that God seems utterly hidden and frightening. On the other hand, it expresses a trust in the goodness of God so profound that it continues to cry out for God in the agony of God’s apparent absence and silence and looks for redemption in the midst of God’s terrible hiddenness.^{vii}

Is there hope? Absolutely. And next Sunday Pastor Katie will take us there. This morning though I want to inspire you to learn to walk in the darkness. I won’t go as far as to encourage you to celebrate when the darkness descends. Nor will I tell you that should not feel disorientated, isolated, or such deep and overwhelming pain as you wait in the darkness. Instead I will ask that you allow yourself to fully lament to God, which includes allowing yourself to give voice to the questions to God and to questions about God. As you experience the darkness may you loosely hold your preconceived theological notions and images of God as you allow God’s Spirit to mold them as you deepen your relationship with the very one who created you, redeemed you, and sustains you.

May it be so.

ⁱ Wilma Bailey, *Lamentations: Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Herald Press: Scottsdale, PA), 65.

ⁱⁱ Kathleen D Billman and Daniel L. Migliore, *Rachel's Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* (United Church Press: Cleveland, Ohio), 112.

ⁱⁱⁱ Also name of book by Barbara Brown Taylor.

^{iv} Billman & Migliore, 140.

^v Bob Yoder, *Healthy Youth Grieve: The Good News of Biblical Lament* (Resource Publications: Eugene, Oregon), 21.

^{vi} Billman & Migliore, 112.

^{vii} Billman & Migliore, 114-115.