

LEARNING TO LAMENT

Psalm 13

(sermon idea from H. Mark Abbott, Pastor, Campus Church of Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, WA)

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A pastor tells a story of visiting a hospital.

I didn't know the lady – didn't even know I was going to encounter her. But when I went down the corridor, I saw her. Her head was against the door, and both fists were up beside her face. She was banging on the door: "Let me in, let me in, let me in!" I couldn't imagine someone locking her out of the room. I got there, and it was the chapel door.

I said, "Let me help you." I tried to open the door, but the knob wouldn't turn. It was locked. I stopped a worker, and I said, "The chapel is locked."

She said, "We have to keep it locked. There were some kids in here some time ago, and they trashed the chapel. We had to get all new furniture and paint the room. We can't afford to keep doing that, so we keep it locked."

"Well, find someone with a key."

She came back a bit later with another woman who opened the door for us, and this woman and I went in. I would say she was about forty. She had the look of desperation. I could tell that she hadn't come to the hospital with any planning; she came urgently, she came running. The dress she had on was not typical public wear. She had no shoes, just scuffs. Her hair had not been combed, no makeup. She had the look of desperation. She had the voice of desperation. I can't tell you if she was screaming or crying or moaning or what it was, but it was desperation. Strange sound. I heard some of her words. "I know he's going to die, I know he's going to die, I know he's going to die."

"Who?" I asked.

"My husband."

"What's the matter?"

"He's had a heart attack."

"Can I get you some water?"

“No,” she said.

I told her I was a pastor and I said, “Can I pray with you?”

And she said, “Please.”

The pastor said, “I started to pray for her and her husband, and she interrupted me. She didn’t just interrupt me; she took over. She started praying herself and stopped my prayer. I think maybe I was too quiet or too slow or saying the wrong thing or something. Anyway, my prayer wasn’t there, and she knew it. So she said, ‘Lord, this is not the time to take my husband. You know that better than I do, he’s not ready. Never prays, never goes to church or anything. He’s not ready, not a good time to take him. Don’t take him now. And what about me? If I have to raise these kids, what am I going to do? I don’t have any skills, can’t find any work. I quit school to marry him. If I’d have known you were going to take him, I’d have stayed in school.’ She was really talking to God. ‘And what about the kids? They don’t mind me now with him around. If he’s gone, they’ll be wild as bucks. What about the kids? This is not the time to take my husband.’ Whew.”

The pastor said he stayed as long as he felt useful. He went back the next morning, and she had on a nice dress; she had on shoes; she had combed her hair. She looked fine. She was in the hallway outside intensive care. Before he could ask, she said, “He’s better.” She smiled and said, “I’m sorry about that crazy woman yesterday.”

I said, “Well, you weren’t crazy.”

She said, “I guess the Lord heard one of us.”

The pastor said, “He heard you.”

She was desperate. She had God by the lapels, both hands, and was screaming in God’s face: “I don’t think you’re listening!” That’s desperation. (Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, p. 110-111)

When you look at the song book of the ancient people of God, there are certainly some songs of happiness, some songs of thanksgiving, songs that say, “Shout joyfully to God, all the earth; Sing the glory of His name; Make His praise glorious. Say to God, ‘How awesome are thy works.’” (Psalm 66)

There are songs that say, “I love the Lord because He hears my voice and my prayers, because He has leaned His ear towards me” (Psalm 116).

But there are some psalms that read very differently than this. In fact, there are some songs that say, “I used to have a voice of joy.” Psalm 42:4 says, “...For I used to go along with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God, with the voice of joy and thanksgiving...” But that’s not the way the psalmist is any longer in Psalm 42. Now he says, “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for God.” He thirsts for God, thirsts for the living God, because

his tears have been his food day and night. He wonders (verse 3) and all around him wonder, “Where is my God?” “He’s forgotten me,” he says in Psalm 42. “God has forgotten me.”

Yes, there are, indeed, some songs in the ancient song book that call for joy and praise to God. But there are some of the songs that sound like the woman praying in the hospital – sound like you’re grabbing God by the lapels and sharing with God exactly what you’re thinking because you know He understands your heart already.

There are summer songs. “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord...”

But there are also winter songs. “Out of the depths I have cried to you, O Lord.”

Those times when the psalmist feels that God has forgotten him. In Psalm 77, the psalmist says, “God, you have rejected me.”

Those times when it seems as if God is not listening. “I cry out. I’ve cried out by day, and I cry out at night. Let my prayer come before Thee. Lean your ear to me” (Psalm 88). In fact, the psalmist is saying that even in the midst of worship, the directions are there in Psalm 88 for just the tune you’re supposed to use when you sing this song of complaint to God in worship. “God, I’m crying out day and night, but you’re not listening.”

In Psalm 99, the psalmist says to God, “Don’t be silent.”

These prayers of lament are the prayers of a tormented soul, a troubled heart, a tortured mind. Crying out to God and, yet, God does not answer. Crying out to God, and God does not listen. And so you sing the winter song, the song of Psalm 130. “Out of the depths have I cried to you, O Lord.”

In fact, Jesus himself gave the prayer of lament on the cross. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The psalmist continues, “Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?” (Psalm 22).

These are winter songs.

Athanasius, a fourth century church leader, said that the psalms “become like a mirror to the person singing them.” The psalms reflect our deepest feelings – all of them. And sometimes those deepest feelings are not bright and cheery. David and the other psalmists lamented their sins. The psalmists also lamented the tragedies happening around them. They protested the troubles of human life. They lamented their enemies, the success of their enemies – they expressed anger against their enemies to God.

The psalmists knew how to lament.

We need to learn to lament.

Someone once said that true religion in America is a religion of optimism and denial. You can turn on your television, even this morning, and you'll see a preacher standing before you giving you the "be happy" sermon. All is joy in his sermon, every single Sunday.

But I've got news for him. All of life is not joy. Life is despair. And life is death. And life is chaos. And life is sorrow. And life is confusion. And life is the torture of the soul.

Sometimes the most popular preachers are the preachers of the power of positive thought. But those preachers have not heard the soul of the psalmist.

We, sometimes, are made to feel shamed by these positive pulpiteers – embarrassed by our darker feelings. We feel we need to cover them up. But the psalmist not only shared them, he shared them in the moment of worship with the congregation.

I. How long...?

In the first part of this lament in Psalm 13, this song of the soul, David openly and honestly questions God four times. Four times the anguished question is flung godward: "How long, O Lord?" "How long, O Lord?" "How long, O Lord?" "How long?"

Coupled with the "How long, O Lord?" there is a companion question, detailing the pain and distress of the prayer.

Look at verse 1.

How long are you going to forget me? Forever?

How long are you going to hide your face from me?

How long, O Lord, am I going to have this painful, sorrowful soul?

How long is my enemy going to do better than I?

Along with this song of the soul, there are others. Psalm 10 asks, "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" Psalm 22 says, "O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night and am not silent."

There is even some open anger toward enemies in these songs. "May those who seek my life be disgraced and put to shame; may those who plot my ruin be turned back in dismay" (Psalm 35). "Smash their teeth, O Lord!" cries another song.

It's open, honest venting of our heart to God.

All of life is a mixture of joy and sorrow.

Think of the most joyous event in scripture – the Christmas story. The angel declares with joy, "Fear not, for, behold, I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all people everywhere; for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the King." How could there be any sorrow in the message of baby Jesus, the message of joy?

Matthew tells us about the magi from the east, who follow a star to Jesus. They stop in Jerusalem to ask directions to where the new king of the Jews is born. But Herod is already the “King of the Jews.” Herod is a wild man. He’s paranoid. He is paranoid about anybody else being called king, even if it’s only a baby. So Herod calls the Bible scholars together and finds out where the prophets said such a king would be born.

“Why, King Herod, your majesty, the King is to be born in nearby Bethlehem.” King Herod calls the magi to him, puts on his most pious face, and tells them that he, too, would like to bow down before the newborn baby. “So please, do come back and tell me when you find him.”

The magi disobey the king and return to their own country by another route. Herod flies into a fit of rage. He orders all the baby boys in the region of Bethlehem two years old and under slaughtered. And there are cries in the Christmas story – cries of sorrowing mothers lifted to God. And Matthew reports this horrible evil. He quotes the prophet Jeremiah – the lamenting prophet, the crying prophet, the weeping prophet Jeremiah. “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, Because they are no more” (Matthew 2:18). Can’t you hear the mother peppering God with questions? “How long, O Lord, will this kind of evil continue unchecked? How long will I feel this pain and sorrow in my heart?”

Somehow, that doesn’t seem like a Christmas carol, does it? But it is a real part of the Christmas story. All of life is a balance of joy and sorrow.

Ann Weems is a Christian author. Pastor Mark Abbot tells her story. She loses her 21-year-old son in tragic circumstances. She is devastated. “The stars fell from the sky,” she writes. Caring people offer what help they can, but she feels she will never be comforted over this huge loss. One of her friends is a Bible scholar who is writing a commentary on the weeping prophet, on Jeremiah. He suggests that as a part of her grief, as a part of her mourning, she write down her own psalm, her own song of a sorrowful soul. Write down a song that is painful, a song that is honest, a song that asks God the questions. Ann writes, “O God, what am I going to do? He’s gone, and I’m left. With an empty pit in my life.... How could you have allowed this to happen? I thought you protected your own! You are the power. Why didn’t you use it? You are the glory. But there was no glory in his death. You are justice and mercy. Yet there was no justice, no mercy for him....”

Sometimes a lament is the only way to pray. How else should you pray when you get the news that your husband or your wife is leaving you? How else do you pray when we see a loved one caught by cancer or robbed of their mind by Alzheimers? How else do you pray when your petitions for healing seem to go unanswered? How else do we pray when an innocent child is abused? How better to pray when life seems to have spiraled out of control and you’re sinking into depression. When you’re applying for the job, but the calls just are not coming. When the pregnancy test doesn’t deliver the news you are looking for.

Sometimes we just feel so obligated to clean up our prayers. Do you think God doesn’t know your mind already? Oh, always be respectful, never dishonor God, but always be honest.

II. Look on me...

This Psalm 13 has a second movement where David honestly lays his need before God. “Look on me, or consider and answer me, O Lord my God (verse 3); enlighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.”

What is going on here? Is the psalmist ill? Is he threatened by death? Maybe so. He continues, “My enemy will say, ‘I have overcome him,’ and my foes will rejoice when I fall.”

I don’t know what’s bothering David, but whatever it is, he lays it openly and honestly and fully before God.

You see, in the midst of lament, in the midst of the sorrow of the soul, there is a deep desire, a desperation to turn toward God and hope that He is there, to hope that He is listening, to hope that He has not forgotten you. “O God, you’ve got to help me. There is nobody else I can turn to. O God, what am I going to do?”

That’s where the psalmist is in all of these songs. Maybe you’re there today, too.

What is it for you this morning? Is the lament the sorrow from your marriage? Have there been medical tests, and now you wait? Is it a relationship that’s broken? Is it employment that is unsure? What is it for you this morning that you need to lay before the throne of God?

III. I will sing...

There is a final movement in David’s lament. David returns to trust in the midst of trouble – that’s the third movement. David sings – notice at the end, he comes around – “But I have trusted in your lovingkindness; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because He has dealt bountifully with me.”

I will sing to the Lord because He has been good to me.

Remember, I told you about Ann Weems who had a son who passed away? Remember her questions? “God, how could you have allowed this to happen? I thought you protected your own? You are the power; why didn’t you use it?”

Listen to the conclusion of her song. “O Holy One, I am confident that you will save me.... You are the power and the glory. You are justice and mercy. You are my God forever.”

I’ve got to be honest with you. Sometimes the psalms aren’t as tidy as Psalm 13. Sometimes they don’t progress that neatly from despair to comfort, from chaos to organization. In fact, Psalm 22 alternates back and forth between the poet’s trouble and his trust.

Life’s that way, isn’t it? Sometimes we have despair, and then we have confidence, and then we have despair again. The prayer of the lament, the song of the soul, is the asking of questions, finding comfort, and then finding trouble again to find comfort again.

I don't know where you are this morning, but if prayers of thanks are hard this morning, if songs of joy are hard this morning, it may be time to lament for a while – time to sing a winter song.

In Psalm 42, the psalmist says, “Lord, I want to hope in you again.” Isn't that what you want this morning – those who have sorrowful souls, isn't that what you want this morning? You want to hope in God again.

“Hope in God,” he says, “for I, again, shall praise Him.”

Even the weeping prophet of Lamentations finally declares, “God, your steadfast love never ceases.... Great is thy faithfulness.”

Does God seem far away to you this morning? Does God seem to refuse to answer? Is God silent? Do you feel like God has rejected you, that His favor no longer shines down upon you? If so, then you feel like David, then you feel like Jeremiah.

Listen to Psalm 42.

As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So my soul pants for Thee, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God;
When shall I come and appear before God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
While they say to me all day long, “Where is your God?”
These things I remember and I pour out my soul within me.
For I used to go along with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God,
With the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

Why are you in despair, O my soul?
And why have you become disturbed within me?
Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him
For the help of His presence.

I will say to God my rock, “Why have You forgotten me?
Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?”
As a shattering of my bones, my adversaries revile me,
While they say to me all day long, “Where is your God?”
Why are you in despair, O my soul?
And why have you become disturbed within me?
Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him,
The help of my countenance and my God.

O God, we come to you today with broken hearts, some with broken bodies, some with broken minds and emotions. We come to you with honesty. We come to you just like we are. We come

without pretense. We come without cover-up. We come in the depths of our sorrow. O God, we cry to you to hear our prayer and to know we want to sing the songs of joy again.