

## “Listening in Lament”

Psalm 137:1-6

June 7, 2020

Twelve weeks ago, on March 15, in this eerily empty sanctuary, a small group of staff gathered to lead a live-streamed worship service. Only days before, we had been planning for a typical Sunday service—sanctuary choir, acolytes, children gathered on the chancel steps, members, and guests seated in these pews. But the rapidly unfolding news of a global pandemic upended those plans with swift speed. That morning, I sat next to Chris Palmer, one of our Lake Fellows, on the chancel preparing for a service unlike any of us had ever experienced before, perhaps unlike any this nearly two-hundred-year-old church had witnessed. I leaned over to Chris and said, “I can’t wait for the sanctuary to be filled on Easter Sunday—can you imagine the celebration we will have?” Of course, we did celebrate Easter at Second Presbyterian Church, and in all of our homes and hearts, but we did so the way we’ve been doing many things these days...at a distance. When Easter passed, I looked to Pentecost as that potential day of joyful reunion, and now that has come and gone as well. I’ve been struggling with the reality of physical distance and I’ve been longing to be with you all in person. True to my nature as a dogged optimist and a three on the Enneagram, I’ve been searching the calendar for the next possible date.

This week, though, I finally came to terms with the futility of that grasping. In prayer and conversation with trusted friends, I discovered that my unspoken, even subconscious strategy for coping with my lack of control has been to cast my hope into the future. As I’ve circled dates on the calendar, I’ve been neglecting the most important day of all. This one. Today.

This morning, March 15th seems lightyears ago. Today, the sense of unity in common efforts that seemed pervasive in the early days of the pandemic has vanished, leaving me to wonder if it was ever more than a fantasy afforded to those least impacted. Today, we cannot dream about the future of hope until we name the pain of the present. We cannot leap ahead without facing the fierce urgency of now. We have witnessed the worst of who we are; we’ve seen it on video...again. Our theological

tradition names it total depravity. There are other names. Inhumanity. Hatred. Evil. An atrocity that took the life of one man, George Floyd, an act not separate from but deeply rooted in a culture of anti-black violence and racism. For there are other names. Breonna Taylor. Ahmaud Arbery. A litany of loss too lengthy to list.

Today, we have the God-given responsibility to reflect as a community of how we are called to respond as followers of Jesus Christ. What is the unique role of the church...of our church...at *this* time? As I’ve meditated on that question for myself and for us at Second Church, my heart has been drawn to three Christian practices that might shape our living in these days. I offer them this morning not because they are comprehensive but because they are a place to begin. I share them not as a seasoned expert but as a fellow traveler seeking a path toward hope.

### *Lament*

This morning, we heard the words of Psalm 137, written for God’s people held captive in the land of Babylon. Exiled, deported, displaced, forced to live as refugees in a foreign land under the absolute dominion of the Babylonian Empire. These words are the cry of people who have experienced and witnessed violence against themselves and their community. They voice the lament of the oppressed who weep amidst inexplicable loss. The question lingers in our minds, “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”

One of my seminary professors, Kathleen O’Connor, has devoted much of her writing to the power of lament. Dr. O’Connor writes, “Lamentations can be a resource for reclaiming our humanity, for breaking through our denial, personal and social, and for teaching us compassion...lamentation protests conditions that prevent human thriving and this resistance may finally prepare the way for healing.”<sup>1</sup>

This is our first practice. We are called to listen to the voices of lament this day. Not to rush past them or drown them or change the channel or seek another story.

We must listen to the laments, especially those that make us uncomfortable, without adding our own words or correcting the cries of others. Listen to the anguish and look for the hope in the face of a young girl holding a sign to declare that her life matters. Listen. For many of us, this means widening the circle of voices that we hear and from which we learn. In one of our creeds, the Brief Statement of Faith, we Presbyterians commit to “hearing the voices of peoples long silenced.” In listening to lament, we ask ourselves which voices have been silenced in our lives? I believe that we have to listen, really listen, to the lament of others—particularly to voices of people of color within this congregation, in our city, and beyond and even when that listening is painful. To listen is the first duty of love. Listening with the kind of empathy that awakens us to pain is a sure sign of the Spirit’s presence. As one member of this faith community wrote yesterday, “It makes a world of difference to be humble enough to seek understanding.”

### *Repent*

So, let us listen in lament. And then let us speak honest words of genuine repentance. There are questions that have been unwilling to let go of me all week long. What do I want to be able to remember about how I lived in this moment? What stories do I want to be able to tell my sons about how I used the time that I was given, the voice that I was granted? I’ve come to believe that, whatever else I do, it must start with the practice of repentance. There are stories we don’t want to tell, and we need to tell.

I was in middle school. We were riding the bus home from school on a Friday afternoon, a group of kids at the back of the bus. I said something about school on Monday and one of my classmates said, “We don’t have school Monday—it’s Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.” At that mention, another classmate chuckled and said, “That’s right. And if they would have killed four more of them we could have the whole week off.” I remember the thumping in my chest and the heat on my ears as I heard the laughter that filled the back of the bus. I knew these words were full of hate. I knew they were wrong. I said nothing. To this day, remembering the moment brings me shame.

Each week in our worship, we acknowledge our brokenness and our need for forgiveness. We are a people well-acquainted with the power of sin. And this moment calls us to repentance. Repentance of our personal brokenness—the hatred we harbor, the racist language

that we have used, or the ways in which we have remained silent when we were called to speak, and we knew it. The first step of repentance is to name the sin. The freedom of forgiveness comes only after the hard work of repentance. We must name our brokenness before we can make meaningful change.

But meaningful change is what we must make. And this change must extend beyond the individuality of our own words and actions. The Apostle Paul writes that all creation is groaning under the weight of sin and certainly this is true in our time. The institutional and historic racism that perpetuates systemic inequality is sin. And when we listen, and when we lament, we are led to personal and communal repentance.

### *Witness*

Last Sunday, Brian Blount, the president of Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, published a piece titled, “Witness Now, Before it is Too Late...” Dr. Blount, who preached from the book of Revelation in this pulpit two years ago begins, “If white Christians were to ask me, a black Christian, what they should do in response to the spiral of racially sparked violence into which we are rapidly and inevitably descending, I have pondered the response I would give.” He points to Revelation, written against the backdrop of a world possessed by systemic evil, where the single question is whether the church will worship Rome or Jesus Christ. For Christians, Blount writes, “It was not Rome’s empire but [Christ’s] resurrected Reign that should be revered and realized. Jesus spilled his blood in an effort to inaugurate that Reign. He did his part. Our Christian part is to *witness* to the reign of the resurrected Jesus in the way we speak our words and live our lives.”

The essay closes with a clear call to white Christians: “You need to witness. Not just spiritually. Tangibly. Not just with well-intentioned prayer. With concrete action. Not just from the pulpit and in the sanctuary. Out in the world, on the streets of your cities, in the corridors of your power. No, this evil of enduring American racism is not just a Christian problem. But for a people who claim to follow a Jesus who died on a cross for all people, and whom we claim reigns in heaven interceding with God for all people, it is an evil we must especially engage. We cannot claim to witness to this risen Christ and simultaneously allow our country’s descent into this racial abyss. We Christian people can make a difference. We must help defeat this draconian, systemic evil. By our

witness. Before it is too late.”<sup>ii</sup>

Lament. Repent. Witness. Scriptural practices bathed in prayer, core to who we are, essential for this moment. Essential, but perhaps not sufficient—to respond to the call of this moment *and* sustain these practices in the time to come, we who follow Jesus Christ must value the kingdom he died to establish above all else. We must work for the redemption his sacrifice made real. We must receive the gift of salvation that rescues us from the evil that has us in its grip. We must view this Kairos moment as a call from God. This is our work to do, to do together. This is our moment to wake from sleep. The moment of redemption. Jesus insisted that the kingdom of God is among us...will we make it visible in our words and actions, or will we deny it by our silence and our complacency?

Second Presbyterian Church, we have a voice and we have a choice. This work is woven into who you are as a community of faith. You know how to partner with others to make meaningful change. You know how to listen across differences and find common ground. You know how to organize, to mobilize, to give, and to lead. This moment begs for moral leadership that people of faith rooted in the stories and values of scripture can uniquely provide. Into a vacuum of empathic vision, we offer the deep wells of spiritual connection and prophetic witness. And so, we will bring what we have. We will build and renew partnerships. We will stand together. We will stand against callous indifference and deeply entrenched bigotry and hatred. We will be brave and vulnerable enough to admit that bigotry and hatred hide even in the corners of our own hearts. We will shine God’s light in these places and repent.

We will stand beneath the cross of Jesus, whose life is a witness to the power of love, whose death displayed the cruelty of which we are capable, and whose resurrection proclaims the message of redemption. It will take all of us and it will take time to make this redemption visible. But we cannot sit on the sidelines as God’s clear commands are broken, God’s beloved children are killed, God’s dream of justice is denied.

There will be a reckoning. The question will be asked, when the moment found you, when the opportunity was

before you, how did you respond? What did you say? What did you do? May the record show that we were found bearing witness to the God whose grace covers this world, whose sovereign will is that justice will roll like waters through our land. May we report to our children that we prayed without ceasing *and* put our prayers into motion. Maybe it can be different this time. Maybe we get to decide.

Deep in my heart, I believe that we are called, and we are equipped to make visible the reign of God in our lament, in our repentance, in our witness. By God’s grace, with Christ’s constant presence, through the Spirit that lives within and among us, let us respond to the clear call of this moment. Before it is too late. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Kathleen M. O’Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*. Orbis Books, 2004.

<sup>ii</sup> [https://www.upsem.edu/newsroom/statement-from-president-blount-on-the-death-of-george-floyd/?fbclid=IwAR0pETfZBanho4wvxDXL31o7bDneUldNxR0NgQShTVR1IRln\\_LoZ5Vp0bhA](https://www.upsem.edu/newsroom/statement-from-president-blount-on-the-death-of-george-floyd/?fbclid=IwAR0pETfZBanho4wvxDXL31o7bDneUldNxR0NgQShTVR1IRln_LoZ5Vp0bhA)