

“Reading the Psalms: Lament”

Psalm 13

June 13, 2021

Over the next five Sundays at Second, we'll be living in the Book of Psalms, exploring the themes and message of this ancient book of hymns that has been so meaningful to people of faith over many centuries. We will explore Psalms that lift up the wonder of creation, sing passionate praise to God, provide practical wisdom for faithful living, shed light and broadcast hope in the face of despair.

There is a wonderfully rich diversity in this vast collection of poems written by and for the community of faith. Still, as I have read many of the Psalms again in recent weeks, it has occurred to me that there is one common feature that holds this compilation together. The Psalms are prayers—every one of them. They belong in worship. They take for granted that there is a God who listens and responds, who is an active dialogue partner and companion on life's journey.

This dialogical assumption is a stretch for many for us. Rarely do we have a clear sense that God is speaking, and we are more than a little skeptical of those who claim to hear from God regularly—like our four-year-old who tells me that God told him he should eat another donut. For the rest of us, reading these ancient Psalms might leave us disheartened. Why has God stopped speaking? When did the conversation end? It's a question that pastors encounter often, when clichéd greeting-card answers fail to touch the depth of pain that life can evoke. When God's silence is deafening. Why pray if there is no discernible answer, no change in the conditions that confront us, no clear sign of divine response?

As I read the Psalms and take in the breadth of their honest and unfiltered expression, I find many contemporary theologies of prayer anemic by

comparison. Much of what passes for prayer turns God into a divine Santa Claus. We ask for what we want. We expect God to make it happen. Like adding an item to our Amazon cart, we make our selections and wait anxiously for delivery. And, when our needs or wants are not met precisely, on our schedule, with free shipping, we assume that God is absent or nonexistent or that our prayers are defective. We need a deeper doctrine here.

What if prayer is not a wish list but an invitation to listen, a practice of holy conversation, in which each partner is vulnerable to the other?. The prayers I read in scripture are rooted in a deep and intimate *relationship* with the God who created the world and who knows each of us better than we know ourselves. We pray because we know and love the God to whom we pray. We pray, like our faith ancestors, because we are part of this ongoing dialogue. The promise implicit in every Psalm is that God is neither absent nor distant, but fully present in every part of our human lives. This makes for candid and unvarnished expression.

The prayer that we call Psalm 13 begins with a series of heart-wrenching questions: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day long?”

I wonder, have you ever prayed this prayer? Have you ever wondered how long the pain will last, how much longer the uncertainty will go on? Have you ever asked why the innocent suffer? Have you ever cried out to God with doubt and anger? I have. I have reached the end of my rope of faith. I have lost patience with God's inexplicable absence. I have become angry at pain I do not understand

and cruelty I cannot accept. I have wondered how long such conditions will be permitted to persist and whether God has simply forgotten us.

If you have as well, then I'd suggest we are in good company. This book of poetic prayers contains forty-two psalms of lament. Each one offers an unfiltered, unedited picture of the relationship between God and God's people in moments of doubt, pain, and despair. Moving beyond pious platitudes to the realities of human life, beyond the catechism to vulnerable confession, these prayers open a deeper understanding of our relationship with God. My professor Kathleen O'Connor taught me years ago that the language of lament has power because it involves truth-telling. We tell God the truth of our lives, of our world, of our pain and brokenness. We trust that God can hear our deepest cries as well as our loudest praise.

Several months ago, an elder in our congregation directed to me a piece by Emma Goldberg with the ominous title, "The New Words for Our New Misery." It is a fascinating exploration into the linguistic impact of times of crisis, the new forms of communication, patterns of speech, and vocabulary that emerge against the backdrop of individual and communal grief. As one whose vocation involves crafting language and using words, I was fascinated by this side effect of the pandemic and by the creation of sadly needed terms like, "Doomscrolling," "travel-shaming," and "Zoom fatigue." Such language demonstrates the universal human need to give voice to our experiences, to share our fears, to give testimony and bear witness. This is why we need the Psalms of lament; they have the ability to comfort us in ways that full solar spirituality cannot, to show us that God, who took on flesh and suffered the depths of human pain, can handle the complexity and messiness of life. I remember meeting with a young person struggling with the painful loss of a relationship. Together, we read through some psalms of lament and I watched his eyes widen. Finally, he said, "Can I pray like *this*?" Oh yes...this too is prayer—an act of defiant faith.

The Psalms give witness to a deeply personal conversation with an approachable God. But the Book of Psalms is also a communal witness to the dialogue among the people of God. The Psalms speak to God. They also speak to one another, providing challenge and support, encouragement and testing, call and response. This is how the community of faith functions as well. None of us can carry the weight of belief all by ourselves. We need others who bear witness to our pain, who walk alongside us, who hold us up. Sometimes, we are strong and can be steady support for others in need. Other times, we are weak and lean on the community in order to stand. Sometimes, we cry out in the words of Psalm 13: "How long?"; other times we are among those who can respond with the hopeful words of Psalm 23: "Surely goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives." The life of faith is not a predictable path of steadily growing certainty. There are mountains and there are valleys. Our faith is unflinching one moment and all but absent the next. This is what it means to be human. We need each other.

Most of you know that I believe genuine community is not optional for people of faith. I believe it because I have lived it. I have seen the power of communal lament giving way to borrowed hope. When I was twelve years old, I left school early one day to attend the funeral of Edmund Cooper, an elderly member of our church, who had battled cancer for some time. Edmund and his wife, Miss Lena, were like grandparents to my siblings and me. We spent many afternoons at their home, playing dominoes or chasing each other in the yard. Miss Lena was a person who always radiated the joy of faith. But not that day. I'll never forget watching from the back of the sanctuary as the organ played and Miss Lena walked down the aisle all alone, her gaze on the floor, sobbing. I had never seen her cry, and it made me anxious and fearful. I wanted to escape that heavy place. Throughout the service, she appeared inconsolable, the weeping was unceasing and her shoulders shook with grief. After the service, I ran to my father's office to hide. Later,

when I finally walked into the fellowship hall, I saw something I will never forget. As our church family gathered for the traditional cookies and punch, I saw Miss Lena on a metal folding chair in the corner. She was not alone. She was not weeping. She was surrounded by her church grandchildren, some of whom were well over forty years old. She was laughing and smiling and kissing cheeks, just as she always had. The grief was real. It had not suddenly disappeared. But, in those moments, Miss Lena was lifted by a community of faith to trust again God's steadfast love. Those whom she had loved and blessed now believed *for* her in a future she could not yet see. It was beautiful. It was sacred.

In a powerful eulogy for a dear friend, the writer George Saunders spoke these words: "The disaster of his loss will fade, and be replaced by the realization of what a miracle it was that he ever existed in the first place. For now, there's just grief. Grief is, in a sense, the bill that comes due for love."

The gift of these ancient Psalms is the permission they give us to grieve and to love, to raise our voices and, through tears, claim our trust in a God who hears, who remembers, who knows the pain of loss, who walks with us through the valley, who gives us one another. This is the message of the Psalms. This is our faith and our hope. Our hearts *shall* rejoice in God's salvation. We *will* sing to the Lord. Amen.