

THE HEALING POWER OF LAMENT

Psalm 42

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I spent seven years of my childhood in a small town in southeast Kansas. From the time I was six until I was thirteen, I rode my bike everywhere in town all summer long, I caught lightning bugs in jars late on summer nights. During the school year I walked to school with friends. Imagine a Norman Rockwell painting set in Kansas, and you get the picture. I can't believe how naive I was or how idealistic my vision of life. I knew about the big problems in the world. I heard, every night on the news in fact, the names of the young men killed in Viet Nam. I remember sitting in a classroom when the voice over the loudspeaker told us that Martin Luther King had been assassinated. I observed my mother cry as we watched the train cross the country carrying Bobby Kennedy's body. But those problems seemed far removed from me.

No one talked about mental illness or depression, addiction or alcoholism. I don't even remember that any of my friend's parents divorced. I was aware that some people had more money than others, but we didn't talk about homelessness or bankruptcy.

Gradually I began to see life more realistically. I learned that not only are challenges in our personal lives common, they are unavoidable. We don't all have the same challenges, of course, but no one makes it to adulthood in an idyllic state. Problems with relationships, health, jobs, accidents — everyone has something.

And the problems of the world that used to seem so far away now are at our doorstep. We all know someone who's been affected by the opiate epidemic. We know that if there is an environmental crisis anywhere, it changes the climate for everyone on

the globe. There are no longer places that feel safe and places that feel dangerous, for horrible crimes have happened everywhere.

We all face obstacles in our personal lives and we are all aware of national and global issues that seem daunting. The question is, “What do we do with these thoughts and feelings, the constant realization that life is hard?”

There are two common reactions.

One response is to lash out in anger. If there are so many problems in the world, it must be someone’s fault, right? Let’s blame someone. Let’s blame the other side of the political aisle. Let’s blame young people or let’s blame the generation before us. Nasty Facebook posts and rants on Twitter seethe with anger. Sometimes the anger is more like complaining - a relentless negative tirade about how life is bad and getting worse. That’s one common response.

And the other is to withdraw. Life’s hard? Let’s pretend we don’t notice. We can’t do anything about most of the world’s problems anyway, so let’s just make our own lives as comfortable and pleasurable as possible for as long as we can. Let’s watch Netflix, shop, go out to brunch and Happy Hour and dinner, redecorate our homes...anything to anesthetize us from the unpleasantness around us.

Neither of these reactions proves helpful in the long run. We are quickly discovering that, while it might feel like a release to express your anger and it can even be fun to verbally spar with someone online, the end result is that our entire nation seems to be on a short fuse. Road rage is worse, colleagues and family members are snapping at each other more often, and none of our problems are improving. Ignoring them and hoping they’ll just disappear doesn’t solve anything either. One biblical scholar writes this about her family of origin: “My expressive, loving family practiced denial. Anger was forbid-

den, sorrow was ignored, and there was a culture of silence about hard things. From generation to generation, we practiced denial: we looked on the bright side, walked on the sunny side, and remembered that tomorrow is another day. [But] death went un-grieved, anger lurked but did not speak, and broken dreams were barely noticed. Some of us lost great chunks of ourselves along the way.” Some of you may relate to that.

The Bible gives us a third option. The Bible doesn't so much TELL us what to do as SHOW us in many examples. The Bible gives us the word “lament”. “Lament” is both a noun and a verb. A lament is defined as a passionate expression of grief or sorrow. “To lament” is to mourn or grieve. There is literature of lament in several places in the Bible, most notably in the Psalms, like Psalm 42 which Joy read for us this morning.

The language of lament is raw and honest. If you are lamenting in the Bible, you're letting God know everything you're thinking and feeling; you don't try to be polite. You don't attempt to hold anything back. You let it all out. Psalms of lament verbalize the most painful, difficult experiences of life. “Why is this happening? Where are you, God? This isn't fair! I feel like you've abandoned us; you're nowhere to be found.” Even Jesus laments. When he is on the cross, suffering in excruciating physical pain, feeling utterly deserted, he quotes Psalm 22 and says, “My God, why have you forsaken me?”

This third way gives us a healthy alternative to the language of bitterness and hatred on the one hand, and the behavior of escapism on the other. Lament seems appropriate and authentic as a response to the hardest parts of life.

I went to my first Indians game of the year on Friday night to hear Doug and Jim Kitora and David Graves and other members of the Cleveland Pops chorus sing the National Anthem. They needed to be there early, to practice, so I was the first person

seated in my section. I saw all the pregame festivities, including a pregame parade in which families with children fighting cancer made their way around the perimeter of the stadium. They walked slowly, as you can imagine, and some were in wheelchairs. Because there were so few people in their seats, I had a good view and I was looking closely and thinking about these lives. I have known families on that journey, of course, and so I know something of what it's like. The trips to treatment, the toll the disease takes on everyone in the family - in different ways. The stress on the parents' marriage. The financial burden. The questions, "Why us? What did we do to deserve this?" And first and foremost the desperate longing for the beloved child to survive. It's enough to make you cry, or lament. Is there a better response than to say to God, "This is too much to bear and we hate it and we just need to let you know that." Now maybe you think it's not right to talk to God that way, for some of us have the idea that we have to be polite to God...but I'm telling you, it's here in the pages of the Bible. People let God have it in the Bible, and those parts didn't get edited out! It's worth paying attention to.

Lament is a powerful prayer in the face of tragedy. And it's a prayer that DOES something. When we speak in the language of lament, we aren't speaking into a void. We're not tweeting and wondering if anyone will notice. We're speaking to God, and God IS listening. Lament changes us and allows us to move through grief.

We don't know what the problem is exactly, in Psalm 42. The complaint is vague and there are varying theories. Is the person who wrote the psalm upset about a military enemy? Is it a physical problem? This is a person with pain in his life and he expresses it with emotion. Listen again to the first few lines:

As a deer longs for flowing streams,

so my soul longs for you, O God.

² My soul thirsts for God,

for the living God.

When shall I come and behold

the face of God?

³ My tears have been my food

day and night,

while people say to me continually,

“Where is your God?”

And later, the psalmist writes:

“I say to God, my rock,

“Why have you forgotten me?”

This is typical lament language. Most people of faith, if they're honest, will tell you that there are times in their lives when they just don't feel the presence of God. Some moments are spiritual highs, mountaintop moments we call them...but just as real are the valleys, or the deserts, the dry periods of loneliness.

The writer of Psalm 42 isn't happy about the perceived absence of God in his life. He describes this spiritual struggle, and then, at the end of the psalm, he writes this:

“Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.”

Every single lament psalm ends with a word of reassurance. It may be brief, it may not be as eloquent as the words of anguish, but there is a word of hope. This is the

power of lament. After we have expressed our disappointment, our doubt, our fears, we discover that God is still there. God hasn't taken away our problems, but God is hanging in there with us. And slowly, we have started our way back to praise, back to life.

I'm a big believer in the power of positive thinking and building resilience. But willpower isn't enough in the face of certain kinds of tragedy. We need the language to express the things we don't even want to admit are happening. Because only when we articulate them can we face them. Only when we are honest with God do we realize God's presence. And then we can draw on God's strength to help us cope and rise above.

Grief isn't something you can get around. You have to go through it. And you find that it is the painful experiences of life that teach you the most, that bring out your compassion and empathy. You discover that when you are vulnerable about the fact that your life hasn't been easy, it is then that others are drawn to you.

We have a lot to grieve right now...you don't have to look far to come up with a list of critical problems in our own backyard, our community, our nation, this precious planet. But grieving isn't the last word. After the grieving, the mourning, the expressions of lament comes the awareness that we still have a relationship with the God who equips us for action. There is life after every loss. New life that might be more tender but also more real. And there is work for us to do together.