



Bishop Jeff: Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

Well, here we are celebrating, as best we can, Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday of the church year. Unbelievable as it seems to me, next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent when we will begin to liturgically prepare for the celebration of the birth of the Christ child.

As I began to think about today, I sensed a need in the church to turn a page. 2020 has been a most difficult year, and our lives today are much different than they were just eight months ago. Just! I've never known eight months to pass so quickly.

Christ the King Sunday, also known as the Reign of Christ, is a natural time to turn a page. A new church year gives us the opportunity for a fresh start. The problem with that is, that we're still trying to cope with an ongoing pandemic. The cause of so many of our current issues. What I sensed was a need for communal lament, but also a need for communal hope.

During this pandemic, we've all experienced loss and grief. Some of us have experienced fear. Some of us have experienced impatience and anger. Those are all normal reactions to the kind of chaos that has become a part of our daily lives. We can, and I think we should, lament together to express our grief and sorrow. And then, I'm praying that we can turn the page to find something positive, helpful, and lifegiving.

I'm praying that we can have our hope restored.

Now, this task seemed overwhelming to me, especially for one sermon, so I have asked Pastor Janet Hunt, who serves First Lutheran Church in DeKalb to help me do some reflecting today.

Now, let me make a full disclosure. Pastor Hunt is my pastor and has been a personal friend of mine and my wife's for a very long time. I tell you that so that when I slip and call her Janet, instead of pastor, you know that I mean no disrespect.

You should also know that we are recording this sermon before the November 3rd election, so we don't know the outcome or the aftermath.

So pastor, welcome. Thank you for being willing to think with me today.

Pastor Janet: It's a privilege. Thanks for inviting me.

Bishop Jeff: So, can I start by asking a question?

Pastor Janet: Yes.



Bishop Jeff: What are you grieving? What are you grieving in your life and in your ministry these days?

Pastor Janet: Well, that list is long. As we've talked about, and as I listened to others reflecting on the same. But I think, Bishop, I would start today with a story that brought it home to me a couple of days ago.

Last Wednesday morning, I did a graveside committal for an individual from our congregation who died. And as I got to the cemetery, and stepped up behind the hearse, as we always do to accompany the body in the casket to his resting place. The deceased's grandson was standing there, one of the pallbearers. And I looked up at this young man and I asked him how he was. And he said, "I'm doing fine."

And I kind of did a double-take. I looked at him again, and I said out loud, "Kyle, you look just like your grandpa."

And he said, "Yeah... and my mom."

Now I knew this but wasn't carrying it as he was that day. Kyle's mother had died about a decade ago when he was yet a young man. And in that moment, all I could think to say was, "Boy, it sure piles on, doesn't it?"

And then, of course, we accompanied Bill, his grandpa, to the grave there.

But as I stood with that, and not only in that moment but in the in the days since, it seems to me that this young man's experience is a metaphor for all of ours. It's piling on. And in the same way for him, just as he stepped at that graveside on Wednesday, he didn't just step there with his Grampa carried in his heart but also with his mother.

And for you and I, human beings living through this now, each one of these losses hooks another one. So, we're grieving. All of us are grieving.

So, what am I grieving? My goodness, I know the countless who are sick. I checked our county website today, just a little while ago, and the numbers have literally tripled in the last few weeks.

Currently, I'm praying for three people who are waiting for test results, and that's just the ones I know about. There are hundreds of thousands who died.

Personally, I sat in a Facebook live service for an uncle. I couldn't be at the funeral. We grieve those personal losses.

And then the fact that there are so many we can't even comprehend them, right? How do you comprehend 230,000, and by the time this video is shared, who knows how many, right?

I'm grateful for what this time has kind of a torn open in the world for us to see. I'm grateful that we see it, but the fissures, the brokenness of the society around us. Around race and culture, and economics, and all of it. And the brokenness I see in the families, and congregations, and communities, I grieve that.

And I grieve the fact that we can't even lament together. We can't even do it like we've always done it. And it wasn't perfect, but it *was* at least side by side.

So that's part of my list. I'm sure you could add.

Bishop Jeff: Yeah, I think like you, there are so many losses and so much to grieve right now.

My son, daughter-in-law, and grandchild live in Iowa. And we have not felt good about going to Iowa, and they haven't felt good about it. So, we haven't seen this this one-year-old grandchild for months. And it's just it's so hard. And every single Sunday that I am not in church? I'm worshipping online, or I'm watching a sermon that I've produced myself. But to not be with God's people....

And I've said in a thousand sermons that I think God created me to worship, to be with God's people and hear God's word in a group setting. It's been gone. It's missing. So it's just hard.

I gotta tell you that I've been living these days with, really clinging to that third stanza of *A Mighty Fortress*. You know,

Though hordes of devils fill the land, all threat'ning to devour us, we tremble not unmoved we stand, they cannot overpower us. Let this world's tyrant rage; in battle we'll engage! His might is doomed to fail, God's judgment must prevail! One little word subdues him.

And I count that as gospel!

Pastor Janet: Yeah, those Devils. I mean, hoards of devils! What an interesting metaphor, but you could name them, right?

Bishop Jeff: Absolutely

Pastor Janet: The pandemic. The sense of despair within us, the racism that so marks our culture, on and on, the devil. I mean there's hordes of them.

Bishop Jeff: Right. You know, I've often said that I love the Psalms, because there's always a Psalm there that's going to fit my mood. You can read one that's appropriate to any day and how you're feeling on that day.

Thinking back to my seminary days, did you ever have Jim Limburg for a class?

Pastor Janet: I actually did. On the Psalms!

Bishop Jeff: Oh, really? I didn't. I never had him for a class, but I've got a book of his on the Psalms.

Pastor Janet: As do I. Yeah.

Bishop Jeff: Yeah. For those of you that didn't know or don't know, he was an Old Testament professor at Luther seminary, and he wrote this about the Psalms, "The Psalms are the response of God's people. Of all the books of the Bible, they are most directly the people's book. But what shape does that response take? Since the Psalms come from the midst of the lives of real people, we would expect them to reflect the joy and the sorrow, which mark the two poles of human existence."

I'm really glad that Psalm 13 was chosen for this service because it's a lament Psalm.

Do you want to reflect a little bit about the value of Psalms in your life?

Pastor Janet: You know, there are so many. There are some you just have memorized, right? I mean who can't almost say along with you the 23rd Psalm, or the 121st Psalm, or the 46th Psalm in one paraphrase or another?

But really the beauty of all them is, as these scholars remind us, is that is that they continue to speak. And as you said, you can find something for this occasion, and Psalm 13 does it. It does it in a succinct way, more efficiently than I would, probably. But it names it all. So, we turn to that as the hymn book of another people, but it's also ours. It speaks words we can't always even find.

Bishop Jeff: There are many lament psalms in the scriptures. Some are individual laments such as Psalm 13. I hope everybody noticed the "I" language there: "Will you forget me..." "How long will I..."

And then there are those communal laments that were probably written in response to particular community disasters or national events.

I won't ask you if you remember the name Hermann Gunkel from seminary. I didn't. In fact, I had to look him up, but he was a German Old Testament scholar in the early 20th century who wrote extensively on the Psalms. I think he was actually the one who introduced form criticism to biblical scholarship. This is what he wrote about community laments,

One does not always sing praises and give thanks; there is also a time to grieve and lament. Alongside the happy festivals of rejoicing in the community stand days of lamentation. When crop failure, pestilence, and danger from the enemy afflicted the people, such a day of lamentation was observed. On such occasion all the people would assemble at the sanctuary, tear their clothes, fast, weep, lament, and sound the trumpet. In this manner a passionate people would implore their God to have mercy upon them. This description is taken from the book of Joel, whose first two chapters contain an actual liturgy which has to do with a disastrous locust plague.

It occurs to me that we have not had an official day of mourning for all those who have died from COVID-19. Perhaps we will, someday, after this virus has been tamed, if not conquered.

Do you recall any days of mourning?

Pastor Janet: Well, I think the one that comes to mind obviously first, probably, is 9-11. I can remember sitting glued to the television weeping. Watching that play out.

Bishop Jeff: For hours!

Pastor Janet: Hours, yeah. The photographs up, remember they put the... oh my gosh! Never forget it.

Hurricane Katrina was another occasion like that where you just watched, kind of in despair, how that played out. You know, in more recent years, the shooting at Newtown. I recall picking up the phone that day from a former kindergarten teacher here who, the first words out of her mouth were, "Pastor, they're killing the babies now!" Oh my gosh!

Or Mother Emanuel Church is another one where your heart just breaks. Remembering the powerful and often unnecessary grief, it seems, with all of these that we have lived through. And on and on. I know there are many.

Bishop Jeff: Yeah, I visited Mother Emanuel Church, and it was another one of those breathless moments in my life. I could just hardly breathe.

You know, I'm even old enough to remember John Kennedy being assassinated and the day of mourning, I think it was like 4 days, actually, after he was assassinated. And then everyone knows that 1968 was a formative year in my life, and I think back to Martin Luther King Jr. being assassinated, and then Bobby Kennedy just a few weeks later. Those are hard times, but those are times when it seemed like the whole community was in sorrow together.

Pastor Janet: Yeah.

Bishop Jeff: You know the good thing about lament psalms is that they don't leave you wallowing in sorrow or self-pity. They always they always end on a high note, with a statement of trust and hope. Did you notice that in Psalm 13?

Pastor Janet: Oh absolutely.

Bishop Jeff: "My heart shall rejoice in your Salvation. I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me."

You know, I did a little research, and I was reminded that a lament psalm always has four parts. Well, I counted five, because there's an address there at the beginning, but apparently that's optional. Not all the lament psalms have that address. But they have a complaint, which names the problem. They've got a request for God's help. They've got an affirmation of trust. And then to conclude it, either praise or a promise to praise God.

So, I've been thinking a lot about lament, you know? Maybe we all have. And this need, that I think we have, to turn the page to trust, and hope, and praise, as we enter a new church year.

So, what I'd like to do is try to have us create a lament psalm. So what do you think that we need to consider before we do that?

Pastor Janet: You know, the first thing, I think I would offer, Bishop, is I think it is important to think about this as communal lament. Because, if I get so caught in my own grief and my own losses, then it's easier to forget that the person next to me is grieving also. So there is, I think, there's value in saying that we're in this together, even though our experiences may be somewhat different. I think that's important.

The other piece I noticed as I was reading through this particular psalm again today, is the powerful familiarity of it. The psalmist clearly is in relationship with God, and calls God by name, and is calling God out, "How long?" Right? How long are we gonna wait? Now that's powerful stuff that reminds us that we are in exactly that kind of relationship in this time of lament.

Bishop Jeff: Yes. That's so true.

You just said, "it's important to do communal lament," and so, when I tried working on a lament psalm of my own here, it came out as an individual psalm. But I vacillated back and forth. I wanted to say, "we," and then I thought, well, a lot of this is "I."

So, do you want to hear what I've got?

Pastor Janet: Please!

Bishop Jeff: OK. Remember, the parts are address, complaint, request, affirmation of trust, and then praise.

Oh, and then, in the old days (*laughs*), liturgically in the old days, do you remember in some of the daily offices, once you've shared the psalm, you would Christianize it by adding the Gloria patri? Glory to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And there's arguments about whether or not that's a fair thing to do to something from the Old Testament. I did that here, so you can tell me if I failed at my task here.

So this is my psalm:

Lord God, creator of all, have mercy on me and hear my prayer.

My world is in chaos. I don't understand what is happening. I have friends who are not well. Cancer, dementia, lupus, so many diseases. And, coronavirus. This pandemic gets worse and worse. People are sick. People are unemployed. Wearing masks has become a political issue. How am I to understand?

I have friends who don't agree with me politically so they think we cannot be friends. No one seems to care about the things I care about. My grandson will never enjoy the warmth of sunshine without a coat of sunscreen. There are people who are hungry while food is thrown away. In a land of plenty, people are homeless. Why, Lord?

Why have you not given me the wisdom that I need? Why have you not stepped in and healed us and made us whole?

Yet, I can only place my trust in you, Lord. There is nowhere else for me to turn. I know you grieve for your children and your creation. You have mercy on us in our sorrow.

I praise you, Lord God. I thank you for your Son, Jesus. I am most grateful to know that I will live with you for eternity. I thank you for your Holy Spirit, who can change hearts, including my own. May it be so.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

An individual lament.

Pastor Janet: But one that is shared by millions.

Bishop Jeff: And so, when we read Psalm 13, which is an individual lament, we can certainly read that.

And you and I were talking a little bit earlier, and Psalm 13 is just so succinct and beautifully stated, and then mine is just kind of verbose, by comparison.

Pastor Janet: But only to Psalm 13, because there are others that say it with more words.

Bishop Jeff: Yeah, true.

Pastor Janet: Yeah, I think it works.

Bishop Jeff: What did you come up with?

Pastor Janet: Nothing nearly as polished, how's that? Yeah, not at all. I think, and particularly now that I've heard yours, I think, "Well, there it is."

I think the pieces I, perhaps would have included, because it's just where my heart is. I probably would have said, "Lord it just keeps piling on." And, "The grief is weighing down." And I think I would add in something about, "God, make yourself known when I can't yet see you."

Bishop Jeff: Ah, yeah.

Pastor Janet: In this dark time, that'd be part of my plea. And I wonder if, at the end, I might have simply recounted the ancient stories which have carried the people of Israel and carry us today. "You are you are the God who liberated the enslaved...."

Bishop Jeff: Which is what many of the psalms do, yeah.

Pastor Janet: "You are the one who brought the exiles home again...."

Bishop Jeff: It helps give the basis for the hope. Because we know what God has done in the past.

Pastor Janet: Right! And those are the stories I think we can richly live in today. In a way, in my ministry, I am not certain that's true for all pastors in all places, but in my ministry, I don't know if I've ever needed to as I do now.

Bishop Jeff: Yeah.

Pastor Janet: Or that it's, you know, like we're between Good Friday and Easter, right?

Bishop Jeff: Right.

Pastor Janet: But we're still on early Saturday. So that's part of my yearning, is, "God make yourself known. Show me why I shouldn't be done with this yet."

Bishop Jeff: I also think that, as we compose our own psalms today, it's OK to filter through the history of our salvation. Saying, we do live at a time when we know Jesus has come. I wasn't exactly sure how to do that, but I chose to thank God for the salvation I know through Christ.

Pastor Janet: ...for what will yet be, right? For what is, and for what will yet be for us. Absolutely. We do it all the time, don't we? That's the proclamation every Sunday?

Bishop Jeff: I hope so!

Pastor Janet: Right? Yeah. But it's a journey, I expect, for anybody listening in today: pastor, layperson, leader in the congregation. I'm just guessing. At least it's been true for me. Every week, it's a journey from that lament to hope again. So that by Sunday morning, or whenever we're recording or offering what we have, we are living in it deeply enough that we have something powerful and important to share.

But I do want to acknowledge that. Every week I'm finding that I'm going right through it again.

Bishop Jeff: So I think that what we've done is provided a sample, and then we've provided some guidance.

First of all, Pastor, I want to thank you for helping me think this through today.

And now I'd like to invite people across the synod to write their own lament psalms. And if you want to share them with us, you're going to find a post on the Bishop Jeff Clements Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/bishopjeffclements>), on Christ the King Sunday, where you're welcome to add your own psalm.

And there is no judgment with this at all. It can be short. It could be long. And it doesn't have to be flowery or poetic. Just from your heart. And so, if you want to share that, I'd be more than happy to have you do that.

Thanks Janet, so much.

Pastor Janet: You're welcome. Thanks for including me.

The video of this sermon will be viewable by noon on Sunday, November 22 at <https://nisynod.org/podcasts/media/2020-11-09-christ-the-king-sunday>