

## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**May 17, 2020- The 7th Sunday of Easter and Ascension Sunday**

Luke 24:44-53, Psalm 22: 1-11

### PRAYING FROM THE RIGGING

#### INTRODUCTION TO PSALM 22:

This morning's Old Testament lesson comes from the first 11 verses of Psalm 22. There are many types of Psalms or songs in the book of Psalms which was the hymnbook of our Israelite mothers and fathers of faith. One type is Psalms of Lament.

In Psalms of Lament the author is completely honest with God, and names their deepest despair, sorrow, fear and anger at God. I think it's wonderfully surprising that there are more Psalms of Lament than any other kind of Psalm in the Old Testament. Psalms of Lament invite us to tell God absolutely everything, not just our joys and thanksgivings, but also our anger, our despair, our hurt, and our sorrows.

The opening words of Psalm 22 may sound familiar to you because these are the words Jesus used in his prayer from the cross. Even in his dying, Jesus was teaching us that God wants to hear everything that we are feeling, even our Psalms of Lament. **Psalm 22: 1-11**

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There are times in my life as your pastor that it becomes more and more clear that a Sunday sermon needs to go in a certain direction, no matter what day it is in the Church Calendar. This morning's sermon is shaped by conversations I've had with some of you, and with friends, and with myself, over the last couple weeks.

What I've been hearing in those conversations, and in my own journey, are songs and prayers of lament:

I've been hearing people questioning where God is, in this time of world pandemic, questioning God's love as their family is facing great hardship, questioning what is happening to our world, and how God is responding.

And often when people question where God is, and what God is thinking, and what God is doing, there an almost instantaneous feeling of guilt and wanting to take the words back, and feeling like you need to apologize to God for saying something so awful.

Being a pastor for many years has taught me that people get angry and upset at God all the time. I've also learned that most people never tell God how angry and upset they are, or how lost they feel.

It usually takes a lot of courage just to tell me that they thought they might be angry at God.

The fear that almost everyone has is that if they ever really tell God everything they are feeling, God will be angry at them or disappointed in them, or want to send them to a very warm place, and that would just make things worse.

But if there was ever a season for Psalms of Lament, it is now during this world pandemic. If there was ever a time to be in prayer, telling God everything we are feeling, it is now in this season of Covid19.

The lie has been out there for too long. The lie that says Christians don't get angry at God, or question God.

The Psalms of Lament stand up to that lie, and these words of Scripture show us over and over again that people do get angry and question God, and God listens.

God listens with love.

God always listens.

It means something that these words are part of Bible. It means there is truth in them; and Psalms of Lament are one of the ways God's beloved people pray.

Psalm 22, and the over 50 other Psalms of Lament like it, remind us that God longs to hear everything that we are thinking and feeling. Absolutely everything, even our anger, our despair, our questions, and our grief. Listen to the words of these songs and prayers from just a few of the Psalms of Lament:

How long, O Lord? (79:5)

How long must your servant endure? (119:84)

Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? (10:1)

I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me? (42:9)

Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever! (44:23)

And finally, one of my favorite Psalms, Psalm 13:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?" (13:1-2)

Our need for giving voice to our own prayers of Lament often come out of the most painful, broken, sorrow-filled, or fear-filled times in our lives.

These prayers come out of those times in life that come to many of us, when what has happened has shaken us to our core.

Or we've been shaken so deeply that we aren't even sure who God is anymore, and we want God to show up and do something.

And yet, it is in those times that we are most confused or angry and upset with God, that we often become the most silent in front of God.

We want to scream at the heavens: "God, where were you? God how could you let this happen? Don't you love us anymore God? Don't you care what happens?"

And just as we want to cry out to God, we slap our hands over our mouths and we get quiet.

Someone somewhere told us the lie that we shouldn't ever be angry with God, or question God, and we believed them.

Please hear me this morning. This is a lie. The truth is that faithful Christians get angry with God, Christians despair, Christians question where God has gone.

And the Psalms of Lament say to us:

uncover your mouth, uncover your heart and tell it all to God who is listening with love.

The Psalms of Lament remind us that when we tell God exactly how we're feeling: God won't be ashamed of us, or be disappointed in us, or get angry at us, or walk away. God won't say: "snap out of it, get over yourself, who do you think you are?"

We aren't protecting God from how we feel when we choose silence. If anything, we are hurting ourselves with our silence because we are holding in all that confusion, fear, despair and

anger.

We won't be punished for our feelings of uncertainty, loss and despair. They are part of our human experience and our human expression.

We were created by God and gifted to feel the full range of human emotions.

We are invited by our God of love to share all those feelings with God in prayer.

God is always listening!

One of my favorite pictures of someone praying a Psalm of Lament comes from the movie Forrest Gump. Through the years I have shared this story with you several times, including just last year in Lent, but sometimes a good story just needs to be told again and again.

As you may remember the movie focuses on the life of a simple man, Forrest Gump, who in some pretty crazy coincidences bumps into a lot of American history of the 60's and 70's, including the Vietnam War. In the jungles of Vietnam, in an act of heroism, he saves his commanding officer Lieutenant Dan, who really didn't want to be saved because he was so injured.

While in the hospital Lieutenant Dan promises that if Forrest ever became a shrimp boat captain then he will be his first mate on the shrimping boat.

This comes to pass and Lieutenant Dan arrives at Forrest's boat, a double amputee, both legs missing below the knee, living life drunk more often than sober, and violently angry at Forrest for saving him,

and thereby forcing him to live, when he lost his legs in Vietnam.

Lieutenant Dan is angry at life, at Forrest, and angry at God.

Forrest and Lieutenant Dan begin shrimping, but all they seem to be able to catch is old boots, old army helmets, and garbage. After several days of this Dan turns to Forrest and asks: "Where is this God of yours?"

And we hear Forrest narrating: "It's funny Lieutenant Dan said that because right then, God showed up."

At this point in the movie a terrifying, powerful hurricane hits the boat, and they are still way out to sea. Forrest says: "Now me, I was scared, but Lieutenant Dan, he was mad!" Forrest struggles to keep the boat upright and we begin to hear the shouting of Lieutenant Dan, who has pulled himself, hand over hand, up into the rigging of the shrimp boat.

He is up to the very top of the rigging, shouting to God at the top of his lungs. The hurricane winds and rain batter against him and his shouts to God echo out through the noise of the storm: "You'll never sink this boat! Come on, you call this a storm? It's time for a showdown, you and me. I'm right here. Come and get me! You'll never sink this boat!"

His pain and rage and despair are shouted to God in the storm.

When the storm ends, Forrest's boat the Jenny is the only shrimping boat that survives the hurricane because they were out at sea. With no competition, shrimping is suddenly much easier, and Bubba Gump Shrimp is born.

Forrest finishes telling this part of his story with these words: "Let me tell you something about Lieutenant Dan...He never actually said so, but I think he made his peace with God."

Forest Gump, 1994

This scene from the movie is a perfect example of someone praying an honest Psalm of Lament to God,

really speaking absolutely everything they are feeling from their heart.

No filters, no niceties, instead speaking exactly what is true.

In that truth-telling, there is a deeper connection with God.

If you begin to read the Psalms of Lament, and maybe use some of their words for some of your own prayers, you will notice an important part of these Psalms. We talked about this last year during Lent as we worked our way through Donald Postema's book *Space for God*.

Postema writes that in his own times of questioning God, and shouting at God and struggling with God, at some level it feels like a "lack of faith, (an) indication (of) my distance from God. It seems to call for repentance."

"But (he writes) though I think that way, I don't feel that way. When I struggle, it feels like I am close to God, as close as when I argue with my family or friends, as when my two sons used to wrestle together. It feels like God is close—

just as God was close to Jacob when he wrestled 'with God ~~and men.~~' (Gen. 32:28);

or to Job when he complained (Job 2:7-10; 3:1-5, 11-13; 10:8-9);

or to Jeremiah when he challenged God (Jeremiah 15:15-16,18; 20:7-8, 10,13,15,18);

or to Hannah when she cried out (I Samuel 1)

or to the psalmist when he protested "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" in Psalm 22.

Then Postema asks this wonderful question:

"Were those people who wrestled with God far from God?

Or does their struggling show how close to God they were?"

Postema, Donald, *Space for God, The Study and Practice of Prayer and Spirituality*,  
2nd Edition, Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 1983, 1997, p. 136)

This morning I invite you to get close to God.

I invite you into the faithful, honest, Christian, world of prayers of Lament.

I invite you to trust that the ever-present love of God is for you.

God is always listening to all that we need to say!

So, go ahead, and climb up into the rigging,

be there in the midst of the storm,

take your hand away from your mouth, uncover the depths of your heart,

and tell it all to our God who is listening with love.

And like Lieutenant Dan in the rigging,

and Jacob by the Jabbok River,

and Job and Hannah

and Jesus on the cross,

you will be met by God, and there will in time, be peace.

## **Bidding Prayer for Pastoral Prayer**