

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

October 13, 2024, 21st Sunday After Pentecost/28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Hebrews 4:12-16, Job 23:1-9, 16-17

SAYING IT ALL AT THE THRONE OF GRACE

INTRODUCTION TO JOB 23:1-9, 16-17

This morning's Old Testament Lesson is from Job 23:1-9,16-17, it can be found on page pp. 471-472 of the Old Testament. This morning's lesson is a perfect example of a Psalm or prayer of Lament; a time of saying exactly what you feel to God's listening heart. These prayers of lament and sorrow and anger that are throughout the Bible, and especially in the Psalms, invite us to tell God all that is on our hearts. Listen for the Word of God as Job tells God exactly what he is feeling:

This morning's sermon may not be for you, at least not right now. Or it may be just what you need to hear. Or you may be listening to this morning's sermon and realize you are supposed to tell someone else about it. So, I invite you to enter into the world of Psalms and prayers of Lament because they really are for all of us. These prayers of lament are times when the writers spoke their anger and sorrow and disillusionment to God, with all the honesty of their hearts.

Being a pastor for over 35 years has taught me that people get angry and upset at God all the time. Being a pastor for this long has also taught me that most people never tell God how angry 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.

So, through the years I have heard whispered confessions from many people, whispered because of the fear that they were angry at God once or twice, but they still feel really bad about it, or still feel scared about it, or they still feel ashamed about it.

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

The Psalms and prayers of Lament, including this morning's reading from Job stand up to that lie, and these words of Scripture show us over and over again that people do get angry with 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. In fact in the 150 Psalms, the majority are Psalms of Lament.

Job begins his challenge to God with these words: "Today also my complaint is bitter; God's hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find God, that I might come even to God's dwelling! I would lay my case before God and fill my mouth with arguments." I don't know about you but it gives me courage to say all that I've felt during Long Covid when I have this image of Job stomping into God's house, his arguments ready to be spewed out at God from his broken heart. You can trust me that I have done a lot of stomping into God's house in the last nearly 3 years of this disease of Long Covid. Its not always comfortable to be that honest with God initially, but it sure feels good to get all that anger and sorrow and confusion out and feel God's loving response.

Psalm 22 one of the other scripture readings for today begins with these words: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my

groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night but find no rest.” In this Psalm we hear Jesus’ words from the cross, and we are given permission to voice all the pain and sorrow we are feeling. Even Jesus used a Psalm of Lament to tell God everything he was feeling. Psalm 22 and Jesus using it remind us that God longs to hear everything that we are thinking and feeling. Absolutely everything, even our anger, our despair and our grief.

Our need for giving voice to our own prayers of Lament, and sorrow, and despair often come out of the most painful, broken, sorrow-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 me anymore God? Don’t you care what happens?” Just as we want to cry out to God, we slap our hands over our mouths and we get quiet.

Someone somewhere told us that we shouldn’t ever be angry with God and we believed them. It’s a lie. The truth is that Christians get angry with God, Christians despair, Christians question where God has gone.

And the Psalms and prayers of Lament say to us: uncover your mouth, uncover your heart and tell it all to God who is listening with love.

Psalm 22 and Job 23 and the many other Psalms like it give us permission to let the anger, the frustration and the despair out. Their words give us words to pray:

God, where were you?

How long Oh Lord, will you forget me forever?

God how could you let this happen?

Don’t you love us anymore God, have you forgotten about me?

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

The Psalms and prayers of Lament remind us that when we tell God exactly how we’re feeling: God won’t be ashamed of us, or get angry at us, or walk away.

God won’t say: “snap out of it, get over to yourself, who do you think you are?”

In verse 6 of Job 23, Job says: “Would God contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me”

Job says, God doesn’t blast us with mighty divine power, God pays attention and listens.

We aren’t protecting God from how we feel when we choose silence. If anything, we are hurting ourselves with our silence.

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

Into those feelings of anger, loss and despair the words we heard this morning from Hebrews 4:16 can be our guide:

“Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

With boldness let us take the faithful risk of telling God exactly what we’re thinking and feeling.

We couldn't stand in better company, even Jesus himself used these words when he cried out to God from the cross.

When we cry out: "where have you gone, God?" it isn't a statement of no faith, but of deep faith--

faith that is willing to let it all get out:
the grief, the despair, and the loss
We say to God: "You have been faithful in the past,
but right now, it feels like you are gone.
Why have you abandoned me, why am I alone?"

What's important to realize is that lamenting to God is not the same as cursing God. There is a difference.

Our prayers of lament and deep despair aren't prayers to curse God for not showing up, for allowing this happen to us or to someone we love,
but to tell God how we feel, because we trust God.

Even in our anger we believe that God
is the one "who is involved in all that happens.

Even and especially in our lamenting we are still believing that
"God is the One who is able to protect" and save us.

Our God is the God who shows up!"

(See: Griggs, Donald. *Praying and Teaching the Psalms*, Nashville: Abingdon Pres, 1984, p. 85)

One book I read this week says that the Psalms of Lament in the Bible have three basic characteristics that can guide us in our own praying of our truth.

First, "nothing is withheld from God." Nothing. Period. What a relief that we can say everything we need to say to our God!

Second, prayers of lament blend anger and despair with the belief that God is "the One who creates, judges, loves, forgives, heals, helps and redeems the people. We can pray everything to God with "confidence and hope, believing that God will respond to the present" situation, just as God has been faithful in the past.

It is exactly because we have trusted God in the past that we can believe that even in this present awful time, God will hear our prayers, with all the emotions they hold, and God will respond.

And the third characteristic: in almost every prayer of lament in the Bible the pray-er has a specific request for God to do something specific.

In Psalm 22 we hear this request in verse 11: "Do not be far from me, for the trouble is near and there is no one to help." And Job was trying to understand why such horrible things had happened to him and his children, to his servants, livestock, and land. We can pray for specifics because our very present God is listening specifically to us and the concerns of our lives. All the concerns.

(Griggs, Donald. *Discovering the Psalms—Passion, Promise & Praise*, Pittsburg: The Kerygma Program, 1993,

pp 67-68)

I'd also like to say that if you have prayers of lament and despair that are brewing inside you, but it feels too scary to say them to God alone, I would be honored to sit with you at your home or in my office as you tell God all that you are feeling. Sometimes it helps to have someone sitting with you for the big truth telling, and I would be happy to be with you.

I am thankful for Psalms of lament because they give us permission to be ourselves with our God who loves us completely, in all our varied emotions. Job and the author of Psalm 22 has given us a gift for life, because they show us the path of lamenting. A path that Jesus walked, a path that our mothers and fathers of faith have walked, a path that we can walk.

Even more, I am thankful that we are loved by Jesus, who as the author of Hebrews tells us: is our “great high priest,” who, because he lived a human life is able to sympathize with us. Our God chose to take on human flesh to show us how much we are understood and loved and how “mercy and grace” wait for us each time we approach our God.

As we sing our next hymn, may you hear the words of the refrain as God’s words to you this day, and God’s words to all who, with boldness, pray prayers of lament, telling God all that they are feeling and experiencing:

Our God says to us in this hymn:

Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you each by name.

Come and follow me, and I will bring you home; I love you and you are mine.

(Hymn #77 I Will Come to You/You Are Mine)

(NOTE: *Interpretation Psalms*, pg. 109. Lamenting occurs “...when the unity of faith and experience is broken.”)