

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

April 7, 2019, The 5th Sunday of Lent

Jeremiah 20: 7-9, 13-15, 18, Genesis 32:22-32, Mark 15:33-37

SPACE FOR GOD: WRESTLING WITH GOD

A Sermon Series Based on Donald Postema's *Space for God*

Donald Postema, with whom we are spending Lent writes this: "A woman who was dying of cancer told me she got angry at times. I asked whether she ever got angry at God. After some hesitation she admitted that she did. 'Did you ever tell God?' (I asked) We spent time talking about that, realizing that some of God's dearest servants got angry with God. After she died, her son told me how helpful it had been for her to express her anger at God and to God." (Postema, p. 136)

During this season of Lent Donald Postema's book *Space for God* is inviting us into prayers and conversations with our God: Prayers of belonging, prayers of thanksgiving, and this morning we are being invited into a challenging kind of prayer that some Christians might try to tell you aren't even prayers, but they'd be wrong.

This woman's struggles and frustrations and anger at God are very common, but most people often don't let themselves admit these feelings to themselves, let alone to God. Postema writes: "Our first response to such feelings is to hide them from God in the belief that they have no place in our spiritual life. In so doing, however, we limit our relationship with God to pious moments or sentimental hours. Our spiritual life then loses strength and power and quickly becomes divorced from the issues that really matter." (Postema, quoting Henri Nouwen, p. 136)

He continues: "we all have probably questioned God at some time—even if only for a moment. Whenever I do that—protest against God, shout 'Why!' at God, get angry with the divine Majesty, struggle with God about the direction of my life or about the seeming unconcern—
—I think it is a lack of faith, indication my distance from God. It seems to call for repentance.

But 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] (Ps 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 136)

One of my absolute favorite pictures of someone wrestling with God and coming closer to God comes from the movie *Forrest Gump*. While the movie is 25 years old, it still has lots of ways to speak to us. 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 an act of heroism, he saves his commanding officer Lieutenant Dan, who really didn't want to be saved.

Those of you that have seen the movie may remember when Lieutenant Dan keeps his promise, that if Forrest ever became a shrimp boat captain then he would be his first mate on the shrimping boat.

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 Forest for saving him and thereby forcing him to live when he lost his legs in Vietnam.

He is angry at life 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 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 at God at the top of his lungs. The hurricane winds and rain batter against him and his shouts at 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.

The storm ends, Forrest's boat the Jenny is the only one 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."

This scene from the movie is a perfect example of someone wrestling with God, really speaking absolutely everything they are feeling from their heart.

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

In the Bible we find this kind of wrestling not only in stories, but also in what are called the Psalms of Lament in the Bible. The Psalms of Lament are filled with strong emotions, telling God exactly what life is like. "Nothing is held back from God in these Psalms." (Griggs, Donald, *Praying and Teaching the Psalms*, 25-1.1f)

They are filled with complaints, anger, despair, rage, and a very bold honesty.

What I have found most amazing in learning about Psalms of Lament is that in the book of Psalms there are more Psalms of Lament than any other kind of Psalm. Scholars say there are about 10 types of Psalms. Out of 150 psalms, 53 are Psalms of Lament. Over one third are filled with people's cried to God. And as one author puts it: "Prayers of (wrestling and) lament are the least common of the prayers expressed by the contemporary believer. Today, we are more likely to curse God when things go [wrong] awry." (Griggs, p. 85, *Praying and Teaching the Psalms*)

What a relief that instead of cursing God and walking away, we can tell God exactly what we are feeling and thinking and experiencing.

But there are a lot of “religious” voices telling us that we should never be angry at God, we should never yell at God, we should hold the anger in. And yet these Psalms are part of a biblical tradition of complaining to God, raging against God, and wrestling with God. We see this in Jacob wrestling with God until dawn, Job complaining and lamenting to God, and both Jonah and Jeremiah the prophets, rebelling against what God wants them to do. And then the voices of these Psalms of Lament join in. I want to read you individual lines from some of these Psalms so you get a feeling for the level of honesty they hold.

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

How long will you be angry with your people's prayers? (80:4)

How long will your wrath burn like fire? (89:46)

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)

Over and over again the Psalms of Lament and the stories of God's people in the Old and New Testament show us that it is OK to be angry at our God. It is OK to wrestle with God.

It is OK to question God's choices, it is OK to say life is hard and I don't know how to stand it! These Psalms and stories show us that what God really wants is our honesty, no matter what we are feeling, God invites us to wrestle with God.

God wants us to be like Lieutenant Dan, climbing the rigging of the shrimping boat and shouting our pain into the storm of life, telling God exactly how it is.

And please hear me very clearly, honesty about our anger, our pain, and our disillusionment isn't a sign of doubt! It is a sign of faith. It's a sign that we trust God enough to tell it like it is! It's a sign that we trust God to listen to us through all the range of our God-given emotions. It's a sign we, in Forrest's words, trust "God to show up" and we expect God to listen, because it is a promise God has given to us all.

The Bible also gives us the gift of hearing Jesus' words of wrestling with God on the Mount of Olives before he was arrested. Jesus knew that crucifixion and death were coming and he begged God to let the cup of suffering pass him by. He begged for another outcome if it was God's will.

It seems to me that Jesus' Psalm of Lament from the cross is somehow embedded in our DNA as people of faith. It is a cry that haunts us and echoes in us, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me." (Psalm 22)

Jesus on the cross invites us to wrestle with God, to say absolutely everything that needs to be said.

Times of wrestling with God and psalms and prayers of lament have filled my office as I've met with people over the years. These are achingly painful, and very necessary times of really telling God what is happening. When people share these stories in my office, and name their anger or disillusionment or frustration or rage at God, I believe I am with them on holy ground and our living God is present as they pray out ALL the feelings of their hearts:

How can I trust in God when my husband, my wife died like that?

How could God let a baby die from SIDS, from a miscarriage, from complications at birth?
 Where was God when my father was raping me?
 Where was God when my mother committed suicide?
 Where is God in the nursing home when my wife doesn't even recognize me anymore?
 Why doesn't God care about the starving children, the war, the racism, the hate?
 Where was God when my sister was killed?
 when the gang shot my neighbor?
 when the drunk driver killed my child?
 Why did God create me like this, when so many people hate me?
 Why did I get cancer, why has God forgotten me to this disease?

Our compassionate God invites us to get all the feelings of our hearts out in prayer to God. We do not need to hide any part of ourselves or our feelings from our God.

It may feel like wrestling,
 it may feel too honest,
 it may not feel religious enough,
 and yet it is just as much true prayer as our prayers of thanksgiving, or our prayers for someone we love.

There are times that you will want to pray and wrestle alone with God, there are times when you need a companion for the journey. If you need someone to be with you as say what really needs to be said, my door is open.

Donald Postema captures the unexpected gift of wrestling and truth-telling with this story: "At the dinner table one night I was being rather harsh and irritable with the family. At last one of my teenage sons said, 'Dad, why don't you just shut up!' And then he cried.

For some reason I accepted his admonition—maybe because he was right.

He could risk those words because we had a more basic relationship. Instead of alienating us, his outburst brought us closer together. It put our communication on a deeper and more mature level." (Postema, p. 137)

Something happens in voicing a lament, in wrestling with God, in speaking all we hold inside. There is often a turn, an asking for help, a remembering what God had done in other times, and a pledge to continue to be God's person, a deep feeling of relief and calm when what's been bottled up inside is finally released.

This reality is seen over and over again in the Psalms of Lament. Something happens when we are truly honest with our God.

Our expressions of anger and fierce wrestling don't push us away from God, they bring us closer to God.

Or in the words of Forrest Gump, Lieutenant Dan shouted from the rigging of the shrimping boat, and then he "made his peace with God."

These Bible stories of people wrestling with God, even Jesus wrestling with God, and the Psalms of Lament won't speak to us in every season of our lives. But they remind us that when we are angry and upset with God, and with life, we can name exactly what we are feeling to our listening God of Love.

So, I invite you to leave this time of worship committed to being Christians who will climb the riggings, and shout out into the storm when it is time for a good healthy conversation with God. Because God promises that in the midst of

the pain, the rage, the confusion, the loss, and the grief,
God will show up, God will listen, and God will love us, no matter how big the storm,
because “we belong to God!”

Postema, Donald, *Space for God, The Study and Practice of Prayer and Spirituality, 2nd Edition*,
Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 1983, 1997, p. 33-50

cf: 03-02-09, Psalms of Lament