

July 31, 2022 Sunday Order of Worship
Trinity UMC Rev. Geri Hamlen
Holy Spirit/Pentecost Season
'Psalms of Lament'

We have been exploring Psalms this summer, through the month of July. Remembering that they are ancient songs of worship...I like to call the Psalms: God's favorite play list down through the ages. There are 150 Psalms so in these 5 weeks we have barely scratched the surface. Some of you may remember the evening prayer service that I offered my first 3 years here at Trinity on Wednesday nights after the Community Meal. We read one Psalm each night, from beginning to end...sometimes just excerpts because some of them are really long. That took 3 years!

At monasteries and convents all over the world, the Psalms are read every day and they are here in the Bible for you whenever you want to draw closer to God. Because they are written as conversations with God.

When you read the Psalms, you can think of them...

as invitations from those who came before us to share with God where you are at and what you need.

Some of the Psalms are an invitation for you to ask for God's Help and strength.

Some are an invitation to Praise God and to express your joy for all things bright and beautiful.

Some of the Psalms are an invitation to reach out for God's comfort in your times of trial.

Some are a reminder that we all fall short and God is always glad to hear our Remorse and eager to offer us healing and forgiveness.

On this last Sunday in July, I want to be sure that you know that the Psalms are not just about you and the circle of circumstances that surround you. Some of the Psalms, like Psalm 130, also address the bigger and even national and even global situations. There's a lot of stuff in the world that's pretty messed up. And the Psalms of Lament invite us to cry out to God when there are situations and circumstances that only God can impact in a good sort of way because they are so far beyond our individual capacity to change or fix or heal.

Psalm 130 this morning is a Lament Psalm that starts off sounding like it could be about someone's personal problems but by the end, you will hear, it's a lament for Israel itself, for the damage done by the nation.

You can help me with this...

Scripture Reading Psalm 130 UMH page 848

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!

Lord, hear my voice!

**Let your ears be attentive to the voice of
my supplications!**

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?

**But there is forgiveness with you,
that you may be worshiped.**

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
in the Lord's word I hope.

**my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.**

O Israel, hope in the Lord!

For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
with the Lord is plenteous redemption

And the Lord will redeem Israel from all iniquities.

These are the Living Words of God for God's blessed people.

Thanks be to God.

Message 'Psalms of Lament: Mourning to Dancing?'

Christian worship all over the world and down through the centuries and millennium, share many things in common. Prayers and songs and preaching and Bible reading. After years of going to church, you can walk into just about any worship service anywhere and at least kind of sort of know what's going on.

Did I ever tell you about the 3 weeks I spent in the Soviet Union, in 1989, before perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Empire. It was kind of a college graduation gift that I gave to myself—going as a chaperone with the Simpson College 3 week Study Abroad program. It was amazing...train rides and opera and museums and literary discussions with university students who were practicing their English. Always escorted by State approved tour guides and chaperones.

One Sunday we got to go to a Russian Orthodox church in Moscow. It was one of those old, stone, high-ceiling cathedrals. Kind of dark and a little musty and no chairs. Can you imagine? The small choir sang and their voices echoed through the open space. I stood there trying to grasp what might be going on and wouldn't you know, at one point everyone started speaking in unison and somehow, I don't know exactly, I knew that they were saying the Lord's Prayer...I double-checked with the tour guide and she nodded. I was just amazed that I could hear the prayer Jesus taught us in the Russian language and know it for what it was. That's the closest I've come to a Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues and being understood kind of experience.

The thing to remember is that So much of our ritual and ceremony has been passed down from generation to generation, century to century, travelling across geographical borders and denominational differences. And it's familiar because, all of it, to some degree, is based on the worship practices described to us in the Bible.

But somewhere along the way, lamentation, got brushed aside. We don't have a time and a place in our order of worship or even in the Methodist Book of Worship, for Lamenting in a ritual, every Sunday sort of way. There are probably a lot of reasons for

that but it's still surprising because the act of Lamenting is deeply Biblical. Lament is mentioned first in the book of Genesis in relation to the burial of Abraham. It is first mentioned as part of Temple practices from the time of the priest Samuel...that little boy who heard God calling in the night and was taught to say...Here I am Lord.

The story of Esther describes how her Uncle Mordecai went into deep lamentation when he found out that the king had signed off on an execution order to kill all the Jews in the kingdom. Esther 4:1 'When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly.'

The prophet Jeremiah was a great one for Lamentation and even that most reluctant of prophets, Jonah, carried a message to the king of Nineveh who went into lamentation and repentance, requiring that all human beings and animals even shall be covered with sackcloth and they shall cry mightily to God.'

Then the Prophet Joel 1:13 cried out to the priests:

Put on sackcloth and **lament**, you priests; wail, you ministers of the altar. Come, pass the night in sackcloth, you ministers of my God!

That's pretty compelling stuff but in my life experience, in the various mainline denominations where I've been...Not so much lamenting at all. You may think...well, that's Old Testament stuff so no wonder we don't do that lamentation thing. But let me assure you: There is plenty going on in the life of Jesus and those first centuries after that could justify ritualized lamentation in our churches.

Who remembers how it was on Palm Sunday: Luke 19:41 ⁴¹ As Jesus came near and saw the city of Jerusalem, he wept over it, ⁴² saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ Indeed, the days will come upon you when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴ They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God."^[a]

Jesus grieved and lamented the fate of the city and knew that it was beyond his ability to save the people from the destruction of the Jerusalem temple that would and did come just a few decades after his death. Yes, Jesus looked and he wept.

How many of you have been brought to tears as you look around? As you Hear or watch or read the news? We get hardened perhaps. We have to protect ourselves from overload. But it creeps up on us...the sadness and pain of seeing unhappy changes and terrible injustice and knowing that we can't, all by ourselves, do very much to change the tide of history as it's playing out right now.

I confess...The pope apologizing to the indigenous people of Canada brought me to tears on Tuesday when I met with a group in town here that is trying to grow our understanding about the cruelty of one group of people towards another. That someone in the position of the Pope would go on bended knee to ask forgiveness for the terrible damage done in previous decades and centuries somehow makes the harm done even more real.

But it doesn't have to be a big topic item like that. I'm sometimes surprised when I get more emotional than I expected. Last week...I went to Taco Bell. My favorite Chalupa Supreme, that used to cost \$3.08 is now up to \$4.79 or something like that and I felt tear coming to my eyes. Not just because the price is so high but because that was just one more reminder of how much things have changed and so quickly. The sadness was inside me and the chalupa brought it to the surface.

Maybe some you too? Maybe we are all lamenting underneath...but we just don't have a place to show it. And I know I know that most of us don't want to get too overly dramatic about stuff...but there may be a time and a place...if not at church, maybe by ourselves or with a group of like-minded people...when lamenting is a good and appropriate thing to do.

Dr. Dan Allender who works with people who have survived abusive and violent situations explains that lament is not just complaining and criticizing and grumbling. He writes:

A lament involves even deeper emotion because a lament is truly asking, seeking, and knocking to comprehend the heart of God. A lament involves the energy to search, not to shut down the quest for truth. It is passion to ask, rather than to rant and rave with already reached conclusions. A lament uses the language of pain, anger, and confusion and moves toward God.¹

Yes, the Psalms invite us to move closer to God as we put into words, as best we can, the pain we feel for those who are suffering.

Of course, Our Church calendar does include the season of Lent which could be a time for lament. Those six weeks before Easter, as we travel with Jesus to the cross, are a reminder for us that there are indeed, then and now, dark and destructive forces that would wipe out the light if they could. During Lent, we watch and remember helplessly...it's beyond our ability to change the outcome...that Jesus walks right into the heart of religious and political and economic darkness and is hung on the cross to die.

Our Lenten practices, and even when it's not Lent, can include lament for the ways in which the world did not and does not see God come to life in this world, in our history, for our lives through Jesus. We can lament that the love and kindness of Jesus gets forgotten in the scramble to make a living, in the grumbling that comes with discomfort and inconvenience. We can weep with Jesus over the pain and injustice and tragedies of our cities and their poor and persecuted. We can harness our energy to cry out to God to do something about the cruelty and the selfishness and the willfull ignoring of those who suffer in our community and even, in our church.

And we can remember, always, that the cross is not the end of the story. Yes, Jesus dies the worst possible kind of death, on a day when birds were singing and sunflowers were blooming. But he did not die forever. Because on the third day, he rose again and has promised to be with us always. That is the source of our hope and freedom, on the other side of lamentation.

Our lamentations are not the end of the story either but they can give us the energy and the hope to keep moving towards the celebration of Resurrection and new life that Easter promises. They can release enough of our pain so that we can again look and see the sunflowers, and hear the birds and feel the breath of the Holy Spirit in the summer breezes.

I suspect that Lament is not a standardized part of our worship experience because we don't want to be reminded too often about how awful things can be in this world. But remember this...there would be no Easter without the crucifixion. There would be no need for redemption if we were perfect. There would be no joy if everything was fine just the way it is.

There's something about tears of sorrow and pain and lament that prepares us for the joy and celebration of God's goodness and kindness and love. There's something about speaking the truth about our pain and sorrow for the world that turns our mourning into dancing because we can and do affirm...God has the power and the will and the love to tend to all of this. Jesus is not overwhelmed by news of cruelty, terror and war. He carried the full weight of the suffering of a broken world when he hung on the cross and he continues, to this day to carry us and our suffering.

Let the Psalms be an invitation for you to also lament. Remembering always that God hears the cries of God's people and our faith is well placed in God's steadfast love and presence among us, now and forever. Thank God for the sunflowers! Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Oh Holy Spirit of the Living God, you know our hearts and our minds.

You know the people we love and pray for and we trust that you will offer to them the healing and the comfort and the strength that they need.

You also know what hurts us and the grief and fear that we experience.

You know better than we, the harm that is being done, the betrayal and violence in the world. The lies and the greed and the damage to the nations and communities and to people who are overwhelmed by forces so much greater than they, or we, can even comprehend.

We don't want to live in ignorance of these painful truths and realities but they are a burden too great for any of us to carry alone.

We lament the evil of this world and turn to you and each other for comfort, for strength and for hope.

Even as we cry out to you, we affirm your strength as we witness it in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. You are the God of Love and the God of power.

Even as we turn away from the pain of the world, when it gets to be too much, so do we always turn towards you, knowing that you will continue to offer us opportunities for truth-telling, justice-making and healing in the places where we walk and live. Give us the guidance and the courage to act where we can and to pray, offer hope, stay faithful in the situations that continue to be so far beyond our control.

We ask this in the name of Jesus who taught us to Pray: **The Lord's Prayer**

Benediction Colossians 3: 12 – 17

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ^[a] rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ^[a] dwell in you richly... and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.^[a] ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

^{i i} Hill, Daniel, White Awake: An Honest Look at what it Means to be White, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2020? p. 114.