

Where do we go?
Menno Mennonite Church
Outdoor Worship
July 19, 2020

Purpose: to explore the work of lament in the context of faith.

Message: Full faith allows us to lament the world of what is even as we reach out to God within it.

Scripture: Psalm 22:1-19

Suggestion for response song: *Great is thy faithfulness*

Synopsis: When we look at the breadth of the Psalms, we have to spend time with the notion of disorientation. The Psalms carry in them the wholeness of life, including those moments of disappointment and crisis which, sometimes, we struggle to work into the framework of faith. Instead of having our moments of struggle existing as denying faith, we are invited to bring our lives—all of them—before a God ready to hear, listen, and act, even if that action sometimes is that of being present to us and providing for us. We need our capacity to lament, to be disoriented from God to allow us to time and again come back to God, trusting God's faithful presence at the end of all things.

Psalm 22:1-19

1-2 22 God, God ... my God!
Why did you dump me
miles from nowhere?
Doubled up with pain, I call to God
all the day long. No answer. Nothing.

I keep at it all night, tossing and turning.

3-5 And you! Are you indifferent, above it all,
leaning back on the cushions of Israel's praise?

We know you were there for our parents:
they cried for your help and you gave it;
they trusted and lived a good life.

6-8 And here I am, a nothing—an earthworm,
something to step on, to squash.

Everyone pokes fun at me;
they make faces at me, they shake their heads:

“Let's see how God handles this one;
since God likes him so much, let *him* help him!”

9-11 And to think you were midwife at my birth,
setting me at my mother's breasts!

When I left the womb you cradled me;
since the moment of birth you've been my God.

Then you moved far away
and trouble moved in next door.

I need a neighbor.

12-13 Herds of bulls come at me,
the raging bulls stampede,

Horns lowered, nostrils flaring,
like a herd of buffalo on the move.

14-15 I'm a bucket kicked over and spilled,
every joint in my body has been pulled apart.

My heart is a blob
of melted wax in my gut.

I'm dry as a bone,

my tongue black and swollen.

They have laid me out for burial
in the dirt.

16-18 Now packs of wild dogs come at me;
thugs gang up on me.

They pin me down hand and foot,
and lock me in a cage—a bag

Of bones in a cage, stared at
by every passerby.

They take my wallet and the shirt off my back,
and then throw dice for my clothes.

19-21 You, God—don't put off my rescue!
Hurry and help me!

Lament doesn't come easy. It's bad enough that we get here by way of the stuff of life that we would just as soon do without—the pain, the mess, the frustration, feeling as though we are abandoned by God. No body wants to be there. Nobody looks to grieve, to have the disappointments of life actually, your know, disappoint you. But then you have to deal with it, to work through it and make sense of it all. We all know people who have come to moments of crisis, moments where the lamentable things of life come to call and find it far easier and way more sensible to abandon the project of faith entirely rather than to do the work of Lament. It doesn't come easy because we don't know what to do with it or how to proceed with it. In communicating with Caleeb this week in choosing songs and what not, I will admit to a small smile on my face when it was time to say “and oh yes—we are going to be talking about lament and disorientation this week.” Because we have loads of material that fits precisely the theme. Lament might be one of the churchy words that we talk about in places like this and situations like this, but that does not mean that we have the slightest idea what to do with it. We would much rather keep a stiff upper lip when our pain is involved, figuring that the last thing that God would ever want to hear about is our pain.

Yet we keep finding ourselves in the midst of pain. When I look at the world, and what we face from time to time, I am called to lament. I find myself dis-oriented from what makes sense and looks right to me. Could you have imagined that we would have ended up here 6 months ago? Our lives sometimes involve that which we wish they didn't. The world disappoints us, our plans fall apart; our best hopes go disappointed, our deepest prayers can seemingly go unanswered, and love is, by its very definition, an emotion that will lead in the end to pain, no matter is it is 3 days or 30 years. Because when we love someone, something, it will invariably mean that we will, in time, lose that which we love best. Our loves might be thought immortal, but we, ultimately, are not. And that makes us angry. It makes us inconsolably sad. It causes us grief. When we feel blessed in life, when we experience goodness and wholeness, we turn to God in praise and thanksgiving. But what happens when we experience just the opposite? What happens when the world all seems wrong? Dare we dismantle the caution tape and take even this—the nasty, distasteful, angering stuff of life-- to God? Does God want that part of our world, our lives too? Is this stuff safe for church? For faith? For living?

However you answer that, it would seem that we must. Our Bible is full FULL of stories and psalms of people expressing their anger to God. Of people shouting out in fear. Of people

doubting whether God is even listening. Job wonders in pain and heartbreak: "Why did I not perish at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?" (Job 3:11). The Psalms wonders aloud if it wouldn't have been better if the children of Israel hadn't been taken out and bashed against the rocks (Psalm 137—the same Psalm from which we derive *By the Waters of Babylon*). We see laments in the books of the prophets and minor prophets, such as Jeremiah who cries: "Why is my pain continuous, my wound incurable...?" (15:18) and Habakkuk: "...my legs tremble beneath me. I await the day of distress that will come upon the people who attack us" (3:16). Jesus even laments, praying in the Garden "Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me..." (Mark 14:36) only to be find himself in a matter of days crying the words of Psalm of our Psalm this mornnignx "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me...?" A true lament is not complaining or whining, grumbling about the inconveniences of life; bemoaning the inconveniences of faith. It is a full-blown body-known cry, the three year old tantrum (as only a eart broken three year old can manage). It. Is. Not. Fair. We all have been here. We all know this. Try as we might to avoid this point, it remains part of life as it always has. Over one third of the psalms are laments. It would seem they are here to stay. Sometimes we are just not oriented to praise, and the best thing we can do is lament.

Yet, despite this, we don't do lament well or easily. Really, it isn't my purpose to ruin a perfectly lovely, sunny day with gloom and doom, but we have to know that even in the most agreeable of circumstances, this too can be part of our world, our lives. We keep it to ourselves for precisely that reason—we don't want to ruin everyone good time with that which we don't know what to do with. We have built a church where competency is far more valued than real human honesty. We have constrained our theology into a small box that insists that God is Good (all the time) is the one and only response possible, and has a hard time dealing with the "yeah, but" of the world as it is. We even go so far as to accepting the lie that if bad things happen to us reasonably good people we somehow earned it by not doing whatever enough to keep God happy. We reason that is we keep ourselves happy before God, pretending that the life of faith can only be one where we are oriented unquestionably to faith, blindly following along, hoping that no one finds out that there might be something darker out there. To be clear, I am not saying that we all ought to be depressed, over rought, or despairing—far from it. What I am saying is that if and when you happen to be, it is OK with God, and it should be OK for the church.

Disorientation—feeling like one is moving away from God—is a part of the spiritual life. Sometimes it isn't so much leaving God as it is changing that which has worked but no longer does. Sometimes the issue isn't so much wondering after God as it is wondering after the way of the world. We hesitate to lament because we fear what comes next. We assume that it is the slippery slope to no faith at all.

But there is another way to think about it. Michael D. Guinan, a Franciscan Brother expresses it well: "Perhaps it is not lamenting, but the failure to lament that expresses a lack of faith." Lament corrects a false, naïve and overly rationalistic view of faith. He goes on to explain: "In the Scriptures, faith is not simply an intellectual assent to some statement about God. It is the trusting of our entire selves to God. At times, we do experience God's absence; we do feel alone and confused, and we doubt."

I wonder: what is faith, really, if we are not allowed to hold our disorientation within it? Doubt is not opposed to faith; despair is. Lament is not a failure of faith, but an act of faith. We cry out directly to God in our deepest moments of despair because deep down we know that our relationship with God counts; it counts to us and it counts to God, and it is in relationship that we will be heard. The story is told of a Rabbi visiting a doctor who had lost his brother to illness. Being an atheist, he railed at the Rabbi "How I envy you. For all my medical knowledge, there was nothing I could do to heal my brother. I don't anyone to blame for that fact but myself. I can't blame someone I know does not exist." Sometimes, even when we are mad at God, we can know that God does not leave us alone.

I recognize that we struggle with this. It all a bit heady for the middle of harvest and all a bit dismal for a bright blue sky. But despite all this, I do want you to hear this today. If you find yourself in disorientation right now, know that it is ok. Allow it for yourself, for the world. Lament fully and completely—noisily if you must. But know that you are not alone within this. God remains with you—I can't tell you where, I can't tell you how, but the Spirit remains. Know too that we are with you—your brothers and sisters, walking as we can even in these times.

If this isn't where you are right now—that's OK too. But know that the day may and will come where you do come to this point. There is no need to fear it. There is no need to dance around it. Sometimes the only way through our disorientation is to keep feeling along until we reach the other side, where-ever that might be.

Ours is a faith based on the fact that death holds no victory over us. That resurrection is real. We live deaths large and small all the time in our lives. And that causes us to lament. Our faith does not promise immunity to the realities of life; far from it. It only promises presence and life there after, even when all seems dead. God took on human form and dwelt among us. Laughed with us. Cried with us. Lived ALL of life with us, and knows us better than we can ever now. No lament, no anger, no frustration, no grief, no memory, no death, no life, no disappointment, no-nothing can EVER separate us from God's love; nothing can stop God's resurrecting power. And God's love creates all things anew, even where we least expect them to sprout up again. Resurrection may not come when and where we want it, healing on demand. But it does come in big ways and small. Seldom does it come in the way we anticipate, or on our schedule but it does come. In all shapes and sizes, and brings us back, no matter how far we have traveled in the process.

Our churches need not be the happiest places around; not all the time. But full faith demands that they be the most honest that they can be. Allowing ourselves to lament allows us to lay all of our lives before the God who knows us best. May we know God's grace in all things, lamenting that which we must, watching always for God's resurrection, healing still.