

Trusting Lament

Menno Mennonite Church

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Purpose: To consider the working of lament in sitting with the discomforts of life.

Message: Even when the challenges of life feel great, we are securely welcomed in Lament by God.

Scripture: Job 23:1-9; 16-17

Synopsis: There seems something dangerous in speaking of the disagreeable elements of life. In church, as much of life, we are far more inclined to chose the easy elements of life rather than the true necessary ones. We take in the advice that to be Godly, we must not dwell with the challenges of life, but are better suited to deny their existence all together. The advice we receive from many quarters would invites us to focus on the positive elements of the world, and to simply deny what is real to us as well.

While that is, at times, reasonable advice, spiritually it is not that which is required of us by the God who hears, even when that God would seems to be hidden. Our realistic struggle is welcomed by God as a faithful response to the challenges of life.

Job 23:1-9; 16-17

23 Job said in reply:

²Today again my complaint is bitter;
My strength is spent on account of my groaning.

³Would that I knew how to reach Him,
How to get to His dwelling-place.

⁴I would set out my case before Him
And fill my mouth with arguments.

⁵I would learn what answers He had for me
And know how He would reply to me.

⁶Would He contend with me overbearingly?
Surely He would not accuse me!

⁷There the upright would be cleared by Him,
And I would escape forever from my judge.

⁸But if I go East—He is not there;
West—I still do not perceive Him;
⁹North—since He is concealed, I do not behold Him;
South—He is hidden, and I cannot see Him.

¹⁶God has made me fainthearted;
Shaddai has terrified me.

¹⁷Yet I am not cut off by the darkness;
He has concealed the thick gloom from me.

There is a fine line between adventure and the epically bad. It is one that we tread often without a whole lot of thought, spare the passing thought for were I to go this way and not that, I would end up having a rather bad day. I remember one such occasion when my brother and I thought to take a back packing trip on the spur of the moment. This meant that we threw the ordinary, ho hum elements like planning and forethought to the wind and embraced the experience with the full bravado that a college sophomore and High School Junior could manage. We had hiked, we had our second hand gear that we had never actually tested, and we had about 72 hours of free time, so why not jump in the car, drive to the woods and see what happens. All of which was, indeed great fun until, as seems to be a somewhat regular feature of expeditions of this type, things started to go sideways. Muddling through turned out to mean that our unplanned route did not have the feature or stops that we had anticipated, our unplanned meals of canned stew and such overlooked the minor detail of a can opener (and the multi-tool version being an exercise in futility), and our untested gear turned out to leak like sieve in the driving rain of Shenandoah National Park. All in clothing that was catastrophically unfit for the job as well. We quickly crossed the line between challenging hike to the mental equivalent of a death march, with the good spirits and mutual patience to match. Never was a night spent sleeping in a 1980's Honda CRX been more welcome (not much for morale, but at least it is dry). What was an easy lark quickly went off the rails and we have the scars to show for it. What had been the exciting ideal of a lark in the woods did not stand up to our nonchalance, and we were the worst for it.

Bitterness for us tuns in much the same way. It occurs when that which was sweet turns sour, when the delightful becomes distasteful and pleasure descends to pain. As such we have all, to one degree or another, experienced this transformation along the way. That we have valued most has fallen short; our loves have ended in good or ill; we have lost. While I am in no means comparing a weekend's discomforts to the loses and real pains of life by any stretch of the imagination, the analogy holds. What we meant to be the pleasures of life do not always turn out that way, turning by the merest of changes in circumstances. Sometimes, it is precisely because the things of life hold such value to us that losing them, seeing them change, altering their path can give us great pain. As I consider who I speak to from week to week, I am often given to imagining your relative positions, both known and imagined, in considering how certain words might land in particular ears. While I cannot imagine who or what or why, I know that there are

those with us this morning who are sad. To you I want to say what is not often said in church: You have permission to be sad. It is good and holy and OK, and what's more, it is OK to be sad with God. More on this in just a bit.

Sitting with Job, as we are, it is important to connect to some important elements of the text that make it unique. First, that while the book has 42 chapters, we have long since left behind the action. The stuff that happens to Job—the action verbs—are in the first 2 chapters. Everything else is sitting in the echoing consequences of these events, with Job sitting and processing these things with his friends, fiercely debating the stuff of “so why”. The story happens not in action but in the progression of thought and development of response over time that Job has to these circumstances. Which brings us to the other oddity here. Most stories of deliverance, healing, and restoration the Bible gives us cuts right to the point—this happens and then poof; everything changes. Mark's gospel is well known for inserting “then immediately...” as he recounts miracle after miracle. We might imagine the context of some of those healed, but we don't ever sit with their struggle. Here we do, and as such, it is worth sitting with as Job copes the best he can along the way.

We began our sitting with these stories with a bit of action between Job and his wife. Remember how she expressed the pain and sorrow of it all, only to have Job snap at her and call her to only be faithful in a time of difficulty? We never hear from her again, spare in there echoes we hear throughout Job's process. He is not immune to the despair of the situation, but time and again has his resolve to endure and carry his lot tested as he considers his condition, his inability to either change it or be relieved from it, compounded by the well meant but ill placed musings of his friends who are far more inclined to diagnose a problem than to simply sit and be with one that suffers.

It is far easier to offer words of encouragement in the face of disaster than to live faithfully through it. We often say words meant to comfort that nevertheless feel more like additional burden than relief not because we are mean but because it is all we can think of. We don't like to sit with the rawness of lament because it feels so far outside the normal range of rational emotions. We don't allow sadness in our midst, especially in church, because it is too closely akin to a sense of failing in the primary duty of being a Christian (as many of us have been taught): to be happy, upbeat and positive. While we allow the narrow corridor and time

frame for grief at the particular times, by in large we just can't go there. Writer Ron Evans writes in considering the aging process: "...in a world where old age become golden years, where every problem can be fixed and every ailment cured, let the preacher say, you have permission to be sad." Our culture, occupied as it is with the necessity and demands of bringing life, and "our best lives, now" always to the fore has very little bandwidth for the ability to express the sad. Sadness is not, of itself, bad, nor by itself a diagnosable cause for concern. Yes; depression is real and must be addressed, but this is something of a different sort. Sadness is a part of life where the realities of life, the disappointments that accompany living, and just the multitude of loses can gather and be heard. In sadness our soul gets its chance to speak of frustration, loss, death, inadequacy, moral failure, or the circumstances of our lives that a very much are real, bitter, and unalterable. Acceptance of our lot is often our only choice at times, and sadness is the price we pay for that. When we fail to listen to this voice, when we fail to note its import, our health and our sanity often suffer alongside.¹

Too often, we chose that which is easy above that which is right. It is not easy to carry our sadness; it is harder still to hold it in any public fashion. There is a reason why we begin the work of grief in denial: it is the most immediate and accessible response we have to the realities of life—deny that they exist at all. But when we progress beyond that, we end up in Job's territory. We can, like him, find ourselves searching the points of the compass for the face of God we long to see, any face who might be able to field the questions of our lives. Job negotiates with God by way of his lament. He starts out wanting to escape—expressed in his desire to simply see the end of it all, further supported by his friends hope for it all to go away. But in the end, escape is not good enough. It isn't possible as he notes that in death there is no final reality, but even more so, we see Job increasingly demanding the vindication of righteousness in the here and now. It is this God that Job hopes to encounter for vindication that he sees and increasingly unjust, but were it brought to bear would see his state and his righteousness and find him blameless. This seems far of, and this is what Job spends his time lamenting.

Lament is an act of hope that engages the Holy One with the fullness of despair. Lament trusts God with the feelings we don't want to have. Lament honors the God who does the hard

¹ See Ronald Rolheiser; Permission to be Sad, <https://archregina.sk.ca/news/2021/10/18/permission-be-sad>

things and has created us in that image. Lament moves us from the bitterness of longing for mere escape to the hope of believing vindication, redemption, and justice are possible. As such it trusts that there is someone, anyone out there to do something, even if that someone is not readily to hand here and now. We have to lament that which is not as it should be, to acknowledge those places where our best laid plans, or our wildest dreams (as the case may be) have not come through, and the world is not as it is. In the long litany of the ills of the world, we can get so bruised by the recitations of “Christ, have mercy” that we can forget that this is perhaps the most powerful prayer we have at our disposal: not a plea to fix it necessarily, nor one more thing to add to our to do list of stuff to fix one of these days, but simply to acknowledge God in our world, even in that which defies our ability to know what to do, what to say or how to feel. Lament reminds us that we have a partner who has made Themselves accountable to us by way of the promise of covenant. Job reaches the point that he can say what needs to be said: imploring the Almighty to act, even while he still bringing his case before God. Job’s lament is a true lament; not just venting in the abyss or griping in a fruitless way to feel better. As such, it is an utterly necessary part of redemption.

What about us? Dare we lament? Dare we speak of that which is not as it should be? Dare we grieve the world that is broken, holding it up to God, speaking of the world, the sadness, the realities that we cope with and call on God to act? Can we do this for ourselves? Can we do this as a church? One of the costs, indeed perils of material comfort is that we are so used to that comfort and the relative power that it affords us that we take complete responsibility for everything, and expect the world to conform to our wishes. When it fails to do so, as it inevitable will, we are loathe to lament because it seems far too needy and out there for the likes of us. Yet when we find the courage to name what is, especially the stuff we wish were different, we can begin to perhaps to rehearse for the bigger things between us and God—the hurts of our world, speaking of the sadness, developing in time the language and the courage to confront the oppressions of the world rather than blithely endorsing the status quo. In this there is hope—continuing to engage, naming our needs, and trusting God in all things, come what may.

May we like Job find our voice in confronting adversity with lament, knowing our truth, and reaching out to a God who listens even yet. Amen.