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The 15th Sunday after Pentecost

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St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church

Last week a friend of mine took a road trip from LA to Salt Lake City. Hungry for nature and desperately, she was eager to immerse herself in the vast openness of the Utah landscape. The past couple of years had been difficult with the pandemic, the death of loved ones, and many demands around work, and it had been too long since she was able to get away. So, she planned for several stops for rest and exploration with the intention to be aware, to listen and pray, as well as to take hikes, all free of distraction. She hoped she would have space to just be.

The day after visiting Zion, she arrived to hike Bryce Canyon. She was mid trail when the smell of the air shifted as raindrops first speckled the path, and then began to transform it from dry to wet.” As she literally soaked in the rain, what happened next caught her by surprise. Gazing out at the oranges and browns of the landscape and at the ominous dark gray sky, she suddenly felt a swell of emotion rise up within her. Tears began to flow as if the floodgates had been opened. Soon, words followed. Words she said, that were not so much a prayer, but rather, a lament. There, alone in the wide expanse of God’s creation, all of the weariness, sorrow and grief she had been carrying came pouring out.

In our Old Testament reading today, the prophet Jeremiah is deep in sorrow. Joy is gone, grief has descended, and his heart is broken. In his grief at what he sees, he expresses uncertainty and anguish. He wonders, “Is it too late? Will God’s people ever turn back to God?” In desperation he asks, “Is there no balm, no physician to heal?” Here, with God and deep in despair, Jeremiah laments.

When the concerns of our lives overwhelm; when the pain and suffering in the world around us distresses, the psalmist cries out to God in lament. Not only is lament a way of expressing what is on one’s heart, it is sacred and spiritual act of communing with God, either individually or collectively, an act that gives space and can lead to hope.

Theologian NT Wright says, “It is no part of the Christian vocation to be able to explain what’s happening and why. In fact, it is part of the Christian vocation NOT to be able to explain—and to lament instead. As the Spirit laments within us, so we become, even in our self-isolation, small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell.”

Often, lament gets a bad rap. Just hearing Jeremiah, we might think, “boy he complains a lot!” While the words lament and complaint can be used interchangeably, in Scripture, they occur in different contexts. If we look to the 50+ psalms that are laments, we will come to see that Lament is a holy practice prominent in the Hebrew scriptures in which one turns to God to express great sorrow, regret, grief, or anger.

We may recall that in the wilderness, Israel complained to God: about the lack of bread, meat and water. They thought the worst of God, certain God wanted to kill them. Although they had been saved, dramatically rescued, they were ungrateful and miserable, and thus lodged a complaint against God – accusing and questioning God. But in the psalms, Israel asks God not to judge, but to answer according to God’s unfailing love – because God is a God of justice and righteousness and has always been faithful.

When we lament, we enter into the intimacy of relationship with God. We recall how God made a covenant with God's people, and in response, God's people offered psalms that both praised God and called upon God for help. But when we, God's people lament, there is a difference. We may be likened to a small child who lashes out at his parent in anger or frustration because he is overly tired and can no longer cope. We might call that a temper tantrum, but sometimes it is just the child communicating to his parent as best he can the difficulty and frustration he feels. And like a loving parent, God listens, embraces, and soothes. Because lament gives us permission to name and surrender to God anything that is burdening us. And when we give up our concerns and complaints to God, it can be cathartic, and healing.

A first step in lament is to allow ourselves the space to acknowledge and name that which saddens our hearts, minds and souls, and then to share those things with God.

The enormity of the world's suffering is enough to weigh us down. We look around us and note: war continues to rage in Ukraine, where hundreds have been found in mass graves, and thousands, displaced. We hear of elected officials who rather than aiding the exiled immigrant, use their resources to displace them, to send them off to places unknown – to make their problem someone else's. We see people in our own community who suffer greatly, and whose suffering saddens us, because we want to help but don't know how.

Add to these the difficulties or challenges we face in our everyday lives, and we can become overwhelmed. And, if we hold such burdens within us for too long, we may begin to feel unwell: sad, depressed & hopeless, until like Jeremiah, we are overcome.

This is when turning to God in lament becomes life-saving and life-giving. We all need a safe place and person we can turn to – the intimacy of relationship that will allow us to boldly shout out our disappointments and distress, without fear of repercussions, or judgement, or rejection. Sometimes we need to empty ourselves before we can take on more. We need to remember that none of us has an unlimited capacity to bear hardship and that we need not do it alone. God is here, waiting and ready to listen, and God can handle anything we bring.

Jeremiah desperately longed to find a remedy, healing for his people. While he desires the people to turn back to God, he also wants God to act, to bring healing and restoration in their suffering. I think we all can relate to that. Our desire to save, to fix, to restore the suffering of others.

I read in the Pinecone a few weeks ago that Fentanyl addiction is a greater threat to our youth than Covid, with over 23 deaths in Monterey County in 2020, and numbers rising. The loss of young lives to drug overdose is devastating to me, and I had to admit that I have a lot of anger toward those who prey upon and sell drugs to our youth. This news made my heart heavy, and I found myself hopeless about what could be done.

Then, last week at the St. Dunstan's Foundation board meeting, a representative of the Bridge Restoration Ministry – one of our 2021 grant recipients, met with us to share about the work they do. Mike told us of his experience of abuse, and how he became addicted to heroin when his father introduced him to the drug at age 19. Through the many twists and turns of his own addiction and recovery, and by God's grace, he was determined to help others and founded The Bridge. It is a faith-based residential program for men and women that provides safety, structure, discipleship, job training and supervision– so that individuals may be restored and returned to family, work and community. With over 100 people in residence, The Bridge is making a positive and lasting

difference in the lives of those suffering from addiction, and in our community. Hearing this gave me hope as well as a tangible way I could help.

Jesus calls us to not just look at the need in front of us, but to look further and deeper to examine the systems that keep the need in place. One example of meeting the needs of our neighbors is Nancy's Project, a non-profit ministry that serves our farmworker communities. This past week volunteers delivered 192 pairs of new shoes to children in need. This is in addition to their weekly deliveries of fresh produce and food that help families who live and work on the margins survive. While these efforts make a huge difference in the day to day lives of those who work to ensure that we have fresh produce on our table, we are called by Jesus to examine closely the system that seems to keep these workers living on the fringes, and to explore how we might change or better the system.

Still, sometimes life is overwhelming, and we can get lost in the mire. We can lose hope. It seems that along the way we've come to believe that rather than turn to God in our anguish, frustration, or sorrow, we should only come to God in praise and thanksgiving. Maybe we think that God doesn't want to hear our complaints, or that we've got to resolve them ourselves. Rather than give space for lament, our culture is quick to encourage us to get over it, to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off and get back in the game. Thus, we've learned to keep our feelings to ourselves and to deal with them privately and quietly, so that we don't disrupt anyone or anything. We are so good at burying our grief and holding on to our anger, that we often don't realize when it is consuming us. And sometimes, if we don't address our upset with the injustices of the world, it can manifest into something else.

It is in times like these, that we are encouraged to lament – to pour out our hearts to God. Sometimes we have to get away to a quiet place, like my friend, before all we are feeling can surface. But truly, lament can be offered to God any time and any place.

And then, when we are ready, we may step back into action. Certainly, money helps — it allows us to step in and meet immediate and long-term needs. But beyond money, we are called to employ the currencies of Christ – love, kindness, compassion, listening, acts of justice and restoring hope. Through these Christ Currencies, we begin to shift those places and systems that are broken and move them toward equity, wholeness and healing. This is how we find healing and restoration for ourselves, so that we can help to heal others.

After her time with God at Bryce, my friend returned to her hotel, had a nice dinner and a good night's sleep. She awoke the next day with a lightness of being and renewed energy and hope for the journey.

Bishop Marianne Budde said, "The way of the cross is the way of life. We may come to God in our lament – with complaints and whining, and we can be assured that God will listen, and God will hear, and God will show compassion and care – but God will not fix it for us. Like Jesus, we cannot be spared our suffering, nor can we spare others theirs. What we can do, though, is turn to God in our distress and sorry, surrender it all to Jesus, and then take some time to rest. As we rest, learn and grow, we can then step into the world ready to serve again.