November 19th: Lament (Pastor Heather McDaniel)

Thank you so much for inviting me to be here this morning – I am honored to be able to participate in your year-long exploration of "Love in Action," to join you in discovering how God's word shapes us as God's people and calls us to respond in real, tangible ways that show love to our hurting world. I love the way that Pastor Meg has been challenging this church to take the words of wisdom from your weekly lectionary texts and transform them into positive change in your community—so that our neighborhoods, city, and nation can be places where God's love is seen and felt by everyone. I hope that the action verb I focus on today joins the others you've been challenged with, to form and send us in this purpose. Before we look at our text more closely, I invite you to pray with me.

God of righteousness and mercy, who sees and cares when bloodshed replaces justice, who hears the cries of the oppressed, we join our voices with those who suffer, and we call on you to answer, to judge with equity, to bring peace and healing where there is violence and hatred. As we linger with your words and allow them to challenge and provoke us, may you tend and transform us into a people who bear the fruits of peace and justice. Amen.

Almost 80 years ago, on a hot summer's day in Mississippi in 1955, a 14-year-old Black boy from Chicago was abducted, tortured, and killed because he failed to show proper deference to a white woman in a grocery store. Emmett Till's murder, and the subsequent acquittal of the two white men who lynched him, was only one of the many rotten fruits of the racial injustice that infected the United States. What made this hate crime different was that his mother, Mamie Till, refused to quietly mourn her loss. Mamie courageously transformed her grief into prophetic lament – she insisted on a public funeral and an open casket that revealed her son's mutilated body, and the tens of thousands of Americans who attended were forced to acknowledge that within their nation there was bloodshed instead of justice, cries of distress instead of righteousness. In Mamie's own words, "People had to face my son and realize just how twisted, how distorted, how terrifying, race hatred could be. How it had menaced my son during his last, tortured hours on earth. How it continued to stalk us all. Which is why people also had to face themselves. They would have to see their own responsibility in pushing for an end to this evil."[1]

[1] "Mamie Till-Mobley Chooses to Hold an Open Casket Funeral," *Facing History and Ourselves,* *https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/mamie-till-mobley-chooses-hold-open-casket-funeral*.

Mamie Till was following the steps of Isaiah, the prophet who used his subversive voice and witness to lament the injustice in his land and awaken the people of Judah to how far they had strayed from the ideal God called them to.

Last week, you spent some time with the prophet Hosea, who ministered to the northern kingdom of Israel in the 8th century BC, during a turbulent time period in which they were threatened and ultimately conquered by the Assyrian empire. Isaiah was a prophet whose ministry overlapped with Hosea's, but took place in the southern kingdom of Judah. The nation of Israel had split after King Solomon's death, and it was Judah who retained the city of Jerusalem, the temple of the LORD, and the Davidic dynasty of kings with whom God had made an everlasting covenant. Judah saw themselves as God's chosen and protected people who worshipped the Lord "properly", in contrast to their "apostate" northern cousins. The prophet Isaiah's ministry spanned an eventful time period in which Judah was also threatened and attacked by Assyria – but unlike Israel, Judah survived, scarred but still a nation. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah are situated in and shaped by this geopolitical turmoil – but instead of dwelling exclusively on the external threats, Isaiah repeatedly focused on the injustice and rottenness within Judah's borders, and how God's chosen people were failing to live out their call to embody God's justice and righteousness.

Isaiah was a poet, and in the passage we read today, he creatively lures his listeners into an encounter with their own failures. He addresses the inhabitants of Jerusalem, perhaps at some public festival or celebration, and he invites them to hear a love song about a vineyard on a fertile hill, which was a common image in Ancient Near East love poetry. As Isaiah portrays the gardener's tender cultivation and devoted care for his grapevine, he primes his audience for a description of the luscious fruit it will produce, maybe even of the rich, flowing wine that will follow. And that's when this "love poem" takes a jarring turn. Both the gardener in the poem and the listener are startled out of their expectations, because the grapes this vineyard produces are nasty – the Hebrew word translated "bad" describes something that stinks because it's gone rotten. And things continue to go sour, both in Isaiah's poem and between the gardener and his vineyard – because as the gardener withdraws his protection and care, the vineyard gets devoured, trampled down, and overgrown with thorns.

By this point, Isaiah's listeners would have realized that they're not hearing a love poem, but a tragic story, and were probably identifying with the gardener – especially if they were gardeners or farmers themselves. And that's when Isaiah pulls his second bait and switch – he reveals that in this story, God is the gardener, and they – the "righteous and chosen" nation of Judah, who thought they were properly worshipping God because they had the temple and the dynasty – they were the grapevine producing rotten fruit. In the final verse of his song, Isaiah uses wordplay to highlight the difference between the fruit God expected to see from God's people, and the fruit they produced. What God wanted was *mišpaṭ*, or justice, but what the Israelites produced was *mišpaḥ*, bloodshed. What God looked for was *ṣedaqah*, righteousness, but all God heard was *ṣeʿaqah* – agonized cries from victims who were denied justice. The Hebrew words sound alike, but the difference between them is vast – the people of Israel may have deceived themselves about the kind of fruit they were producing, but God was not deceived.

In the chapters before this song and the verses immediately afterwards, Isaiah describes the rotten fruits of injustice: the people of Judah refused to defend the vulnerable among them, such as widows and orphans; they accepted bribes instead of judging fairly, depriving the innocent of their rights; they increased their landholdings and wealth and lost themselves in feasts and parties while ignoring the poor; their leaders were corrupt and allied with thieves; they called what's evil good and what's good evil. Isaiah wanted to jar and provoke the Israelites from their complacency and their tolerance of the status quo – and in order to change, they needed to hear God's lament about injustice and their own participation in it and make that lament their own. Remember Mamie Till's words in calling people to see her son's shattered body: "people also had to face themselves. They would have to see their own responsibility in pushing for an end to this evil."

And so our action verb for today is: to lament. Lament is a response to the reality of suffering in our world that refuses to look away, but instead engages both God and ourselves in the context of that suffering. It's a personal and corporate practice that involves remembering and bringing to light hard things, honestly naming and describing them, mourning, confessing and repenting, beseeching God's intervention, and then moving forward, in renewed hope, to participate in the justice we cry out for. Theologian Soong-Chan Rah, author of the book *Prophetic Lament,* writes that when the church ignores lament and focuses only

on praise and celebration, we become complicit in maintaining the existing dynamics of injustice.[2] Emmanuel Katongole, a Ugandan priest who ministered to survivors of the genocide in Rwanda, goes even further: he claims that "the resurrection of the church begins with lament."[3]

We worship a God who is not content with the status quo, who sees and remembers when bloodshed replaces justice, who hears and amplifies the cries of the oppressed, who rejects worship that is not accompanied by just living. To lament as a church means that we allow the eyes and ears of God to become our own, and that we become open to learning and repenting of the ways we – as a nation, a community, a church, individuals – might be complicit in the suffering of others, either by our actions or our inaction. It's a call to linger with the final verse of Isaiah's song, asking questions: where do we see bloodshed instead of justice? When we listen to the cries of the oppressed, what do we hear? We don't have to look hard to see bloodshed - as I wrote this sermon, I wrestled with the daily images and stories of violence in Israel and Gaza. But I was also confronted with the heartbreaking news that right here in Bremerton, nine members of the homeless community have died since the summer. As the encampments are cleared away from our sight, we need to make sure that the needs, voices, and sufferings of that community do not also fade from our consciousness.

I want to acknowledge that the practice of lament is hard. When we listen to and lift up the voices of those who are suffering, we are not only moved by their pain; we also accept that we are involved and implicated in their suffering and its causes, which are deep-rooted, complex, entrenched, and overwhelming – lament will not allow us to cling to easy answers and idealized notions of how we can solve an entangled issue. Lament is not going to give us a clear way forward to engineer a just and lasting peace in the Middle East or fix the issue of homelessness in our own community. Emmanuel Katongole writes that "to learn to lament is to see our own visions of transformation shattered on the rocks of the truth about the world's deep rupture and how we ourselves are part of the brokenness."[4] Yet it is from this place of lament – of empty hands raised to God and false narratives put to death – that real hope and change is born.

---

[2] Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament* (Downers Grove, IVP: 2015), 23.

[3] Quoted in *Healing Our Broken Humanity* by Grace Ji-Sun Kim & Graham Hill (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2018), 40.

[4] Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 88.

And that's because when we lament, we engage God in the suffering, believing that God's passion for justice and peace is even greater than our own, and that God will not let injustice and violence have the final say. Isaiah's prophecies return again and again to this hope – even as he indicts Judah for their failures and laments the injustice they participate in and the disaster that awaits them, he proclaims the enduring faithfulness and love of a just God who refuses to abandon the ruins of Israel's withered grapevine, who promises to redeem and restore and rebuild. The central part of our story as Christians is that God's response to the entrenched mess of human brokenness wasn't to judge us from afar, but to fully entangle himself in it, with us. As God-with-us, Jesus embodied perfect justice and love so that we could see what it looks like when it's lived out by a human being, and took on the full, devastating weight of the world's injustice, allowing it to do its worst and crush him. And with his resurrection, Jesus confirmed that death and injustice will never have the final say, no matter how intractable they appear. This is our hope in lament – that we engage a God who is not impassive, who knows and shares our pain and is found in the midst of our suffering, who makes beautiful things grow from ruined ground and calls and empowers us to participate in that work of creative redemption, to bear the fruit of peace and justice that we yearn to see.

John 15 records some of Jesus' final words to his followers before his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion. As they gather together to celebrate the Passover, Jesus re-tells Isaiah's well-known song of the grapevine, with a twist: "I am the true grapevine, and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:1, 5). We are not doomed to bear rotten fruit or remain complicit in suffering, but are called and emboldened to embody the same righteousness and justice as Jesus, becoming righteous branches of a thriving vine. Ruth Haley Barton writes that lament, rightly practiced, "always leads to *necessary action* that confronts principalities, powers and systems. It…asks the question, "What is mine to do in the field God has given me to work and to cultivate?"[5]

Rosa Parks was one of the people who attended a church meeting about Emmett Till, hosted by the young Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., where attendees lamented the patterns of injustice that led to Emmett's lynching and the subsequent

[5] Ruth Haley Barton, "Lament that Leads to Justice," *Transforming Center,* https://transformingcenter.org/2023/01/part-2-beyond-lament-in-celebration-of-transforming-leadership/

acquittal of his murderers. Four days afterwards, Rosa was asked to move to the back of a bus to make room for a white man, and she refused. She later told Mamie Till that she thought about Emmett in that moment, and knew she had to resist.[6] Rosa Park's refusal to move was the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which galvanized the Civil Rights Movement. Rev. Dr. King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech on the 8th anniversary of Emmett's lynching, and just last year, Congress passed the Emmett Till Antilynching Act, making lynching a hate crime. Mamie Till's prophetic lament, and the actions it prompted in Rosa Parks and others, bore the fruit of justice.

In the first draft of this sermon, I concluded with some specific suggestions for actions we could take as the result of lament – how we could bear the fruits of justice and peace. But I realized that, as important as those actions are, I was falling into the trap of rushing past the hard parts of lament. Rosa Parks' act of resistance arose from her willingness to first engage with the pain and injustice around her, to listen to and stand in solidarity with the suffering of Emmett and Mamie Till. I want to conclude with a call to not look away from the suffering in our own community, our nation, on the other side of the world. May we have the humility and courage to seek out voices from the margins who call for justice. May we listen to and learn from them and then join our own voice with theirs, lifting them together in a lament to the God who is with us in our pain, who lovingly tends and mends and transforms us into a people who bear the good fruits of justice, love, forgiveness, peace, and healing.

[6] From *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* by Jeanne Theoharis, https://rosaparksbiography.org/bio/let-us-look-at-jim-crow-for-the-criminal-he-is/