

Searching for God: Are You There?

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Psalm 42 and Psalm 85

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We have not spoken before, you and I. I am the stairs leading up to David's private chambers. For the most part, I remember the light hearted steps of David and his family as they went up to the chamber. Absalom used to skip up the stairs, hurrying to see his father. But, today, all of that has changed. The pressure on my treads is heavy. David is making his way to his chamber and he is grieved. I can hear him wailing. Oh my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom. The fact that this was so poignantly described in your scriptures is a testament to the importance of personal lament.

Life is full of lament for one reason or another. Whether we give ourselves permission or not, grief will have its way with us. Today as we look at two of the lament psalms, it is important to see the benefits of individual lament and group lament. God is able to meet us in the depth of our need as well as in our moments of celebration. Today we will take a look not only of society's tendency to deny and or avoid grief but also the church's same tendency.

Walter Bruggemann describes the lament psalms as the psalms of disorientation. He makes the case that for the most part, churches focus more on maintaining equilibrium than on acknowledging the events that throw us off balance, or as he calls it, disequilibrium. He calls this a cover up especially

“considering the large number of psalms that are songs of lament, protest and complaint about incoherence that is experienced in the world.”

Lament is ever with us. For many of us, just listening or watching the nightly news is enough bring into sharp focus the types of suffering that affect all of us at one time or another. The California fires, the brutality of the killings in Yemen, the multiple shootings in Chicago, the partisanship in our politics just to name a few. Some of my acquaintances tell me they cannot even watch the news anymore. A friend of mine made this comment. We see a particular tragedy on the news for a few nights and then it goes away as newer, equally disturbing events are reported. But the events do not go away for those who are suffering through it. So we need a God that is available.

When we say that God is available to us, this is not some wishy washy faith where we only address God in careful measured words. It becomes what it truly is: a bold faith that says we believe in a God who is present to us who participates in and is attentive to the darkness and weakness present in life. This is not some immutable God; a God that cannot be changed. Rather it is a God that pays attention all of the time and can be relied upon to intervene. It is a God to whom we can say “where are you?”

Considering the communal laments, my mind went to the events on the Sunday after 9-11. I was preaching at Kent First Presbyterian Church. In front of the altar were a row of candles in addition to those usually in place. As we were preparing for worship, a young man walked down the center aisle, then knelt before the altar. He paused there to pray. Then he explained that he could not come to worship, but needed to add his prayers on behalf of our country. Then he left to go to work. In addition to the individual prayers offered that day, the focuses of our prayers of the people were primarily the painful events that had just taken place a few days prior. I am sure you can recall the many services that were telecast after 9-11, along with the photographs of the people who laid flowers and lit candles in many locations across the country as a memorial. In this case, people all across the nation participated in lament. Often times our words fail us in seasons of war, disaster and strife. That is one reason why turning to passages of lament are so helpful. These ancient words reflect a deep trust; and they are still the right words. Think about this: the Holy Spirit helped to express those words long ago and the Holy Spirit helps us to lift the words from the page and turn them into our voices.

The question that comes to mind is how do we make the psalms our words, our deep felt feelings?

To me, the first step is to acknowledge our need to lament. We give ourselves permission to be out of balance, to be off center because of personal or communal grief. We would do our church a disservice if we were to cover up or deny our shared hard times. In some ways that seems arrogant of us if we think that we cannot express these emotions to God, whether in private or here in church. After all, prayer is our way of having a conversation with God.

Applying these thoughts to Calvary, a pervasive characteristic of Calvary is our deep felt affection for one another. To call us family is not just some "churchy expression." It is truly a family of persons who care about one another and our actions show it. So we should trust that 1) God can handle our feelings and 2) we can turn to our Calvary family to support us and others.

Another step in praying our laments is to say or read the psalms slowly and to repeat them. By repeating them we can make them become our own, to fit them into our context. This will keep them from just being locked in the past.

You know I often speak of the value of silence. Well, you will hear it from me again. We do not, nor are we really able to effectively fill the empty spaces of grief with more words. Being quick to speak may betray our discomfort with the situation that prompts the prayer in the first place. But it takes time and

receptiveness for God to speak to our hearts. After all when we are feeling helpless it takes longer to reach into our troubled souls.

Another purpose of is that it provides a means for God to be calling us. What is it that we are to become or to do in the midst of the broken world? Earlier in the service candles were placed near the altar that reflected either our own personal lament or that of others, many of whom we do not know. It is nevertheless a very powerful activity. I firmly believe that in the act of public lament we add power to the prayers of others who may also be lamenting. It is bringing to mind the pain of others. As I mentioned before, stories on the news only get so much attention and then are forgotten. However, the effects of the suffering linger a long time. Thus, adding to others' laments lets God know that we have not forgotten "the others." The other possibility is that we will identify with a particular difficult situation and find ways to help alleviate some of the pain. I am thinking of things like making a donation to the Red Cross or World Vision for example. Or maybe there is a volunteer activity that makes is possible to reach out and help others.

Despite the dark side of the lament prayers, there still is an expression of hope. Listen again to the closing lines of psalm 42: "O foolish heart, why do you see the unrest? God has not changed; His love for me is ever the same. I must renew my faith in God; I must again shout His praises even when I don't feel His presence.

For truly He is God, and He is my Help and my Hope.” A similar positive statement appears in Psalm 85: “We know that You have not turned away from us. You touch with joy and peace the hearts that are open to You. You stand ready to show Your salvation to all who trust in you. “

No matter the circumstances that have prompted lament, there is hope. Not always easy for us to see in the midst of our difficulties, but nevertheless, history has proven that after lament comes relief. Walter Bruggemann describes it well. “We have faith in a God “who is present in, participating in, and is attentive to the darkness, weakness and displacement in life.”