

Psalm 27:7-14

⁷ Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! ⁸ "Come," my heart says, "seek his face!" Your face, Lord, do I seek. ⁹ Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation! ¹⁰ If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up. ¹¹ Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies. ¹² Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence. ¹³ I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. ¹⁴ Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!

Philippians 3:17-4:1

¹⁷ Brothers and sisters,^[a] join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸ For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. ¹⁹ Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship^[b] is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹ He will transform the body of our humiliation^[c] that it may be conformed to the body of his glory,^[d] by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. ¹ Therefore, my brothers and sisters,^[e] whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Luke 13:31-35

The Lament over Jerusalem

³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." ³² He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me,^[a] 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. ³³ Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' ³⁴ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵ See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when^[b] you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

“Lament and Longing”
Rev. Leanne B. Thompson
First Presbyterian Church of Willmar, MN
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This week, on the 2nd Sunday in Lent, a season of reflection and repentance, I am not beginning with an engaging story or clever joke. In light of what has happened – is happening – in the world this week, it felt like a false way to begin. It felt more important to begin this week reminding all of us of an important truth: we are people of hope. It is one of the core tasks of this life of faith that we cling to hope. We are resurrection people, after all, and we believe, *we believe*, that light can break through darkness, that life can triumph over death. With a tenacity born of faith, we reach beyond our present struggles to grasp hold of the triumph of God’s grace and love that await us.

Some days that is easier than others. Some days the present struggles are almost more than we can bear. And this week has seen more than its share of grief:

157 souls have died in a plane crash in Ethiopia. Odds are we don’t know any of those who died. But we feel the weight of so many grieving so suddenly. And we feel the burden of our own worry for those we love who take for granted the ease and speed of air travel, who trust, when they board their flight, that they will reach their destination.

A little closer to home, thousands have been forced to evacuate communities in Nebraska as flood waters rise. I suspect, like me, those are communities and people with whom you are a little more familiar. If not those in Nebraska, certainly someone in the Dakotas, or Iowa who are also threatened by the forces of nature. These worries and fears have names, and there is a deep sigh of relief as each friend or family member checks in to let us know they are safe. But, still, we worry.

There is some solace in coming together today in this place of sanctuary to worship God and pray for the world and those we love. We find comfort here, encouragement and love in this family of faith. Even as we gather in this holy place today, we are mourning for our Muslim brothers and sisters in New Zealand, who also gathered with their communities of faith to worship, and pray, and find encouragement together. I am angry at a world where hatred

and violence claim the lives of any human being, but I am especially troubled when that hatred and violence violate holy space where people have gathered to pray.

A plane crash is a tragedy, but accidents happen, and in the face of this tragedy changes will be made to prevent more loss of life. Smarter brains than mind have already begun investigating the problem and looking for solutions. I trust that future accidents can be prevented.

The weather is beyond our control – we’ve all experienced that – and when the storms are over, neighbors will show up to take care of neighbors, because that’s what we do. That’s why a team of you are preparing to depart for Louisiana to help with hurricane recovery. I have faith that in the midst of this disaster, people will take care of each other.

Entering a house of prayer – 2 houses of prayer – and killing 49 people is an intentional act of terrorism. It’s a little bit harder to trust that the climate of violence in our world will change or have faith that the kinder more compassionate nature of human beings will triumph when we get a glimpse of the potential for hatred and evil that exists in other human beings.

I’d like to say that what we’ve seen this week is unusual, but it’s not. Each week, it seems, brings another tragedy, another natural disaster somewhere else in the world, another senseless act of violence. And that is why I feel it is so important to remind all of us that we are people of hope. We trust that God has a plan for us; we trust that God has not abandoned us to this chaos; we trust that God is going to redeem us out of this chaos.

But, as Old Testament scholar Amanda Benkhuyzen reminds us: “Trust does not preclude lament. Confidence in God’s ability to overcome the darkest of evils does not require holding back our tears, our disappointments, our deep longing for more of God. Faith does not rule out doubt,” she writes. “Both trust and lament are proper expressions of faith in the context of hardship and suffering and often they go hand in hand. What they share in common,” she continues, “is an unwavering conviction in the reality, the goodness, and the power of God, who is both worthy of our confidence but also attentive to our cries for help.”

Friends, we are people of hope, but we are also people who are allowed to lament in our circumstances. We are people who *need* to lament in our circumstances. We come from a long tradition of lament, and today's scripture readings give us three beautiful examples of lament in action: one from the ancient Psalmist, one from the apostle Paul, and one from Jesus himself. We get a glimpse, in each of these readings, of the beautiful vulnerability of humanity that pours out sorrows, and fears, and discouragement, and expresses the deepest longings of humanity to be comforted, and healed, and made whole.

We heard it in the Psalm:

- Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!
- Do not hide your face from me.
- Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help.
- Do not cast me off, do not forsake me.
- You have been my help and my salvation; help me again.

We heard it from Paul in his letter to the Philippians:

- For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears.
- Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.
- But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory.

Friends, there is something transformative that happens to us when we, as people of faith, engage in lament:

- When we adopt a stoic attitude that doesn't give ourselves permission to express what we feel, and when we lock it down, believing that we just have to accept things and move on, then what we have suppressed festers in us and makes us sick from the inside out. Small worries become all consuming; fears multiply; doubt and animosity grow.
- But when we lament, when confess our doubts, fears, and longings to God, we bring them out into the light where we can invite our Lord and Savior to be at work in the midst of the chaos. When we lament, when confess our doubts, fears, and longings to God, we claim the power of Christ in our lives instead that which holds us captive.

- In every single example of lament in scripture there is a turning that happens when the one who laments empties themselves (of grief, anger, resentment, doubt, frustrations, fears) so they can be filled up with something else (hope, joy, confidence in God's grace). The emptying must happen in order for the filling to begin.

Even Jesus lamented. As he began the journey to Jerusalem, the journey that would lead to his death, even Jesus paused to cry out to God his disappointment in humanity's unwillingness to be saved, to grieve all of the missed opportunities to comfort and heal his people:

- Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!
- How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Even as Jesus laments for his people, even as he pours out his disappointment in humanity's unwillingness to be saved and grieves the missed opportunities to comfort and heal his people, he is being filled with conviction to walk to the path that will lead to their salvation. As he is emptying his frustration over their tendency to push him, their Messiah, away, he is being filled with love that will compel him to give his life for them. Our Lord and Savior, even though he knows the outcome will be the ultimate redemption of all creation, pauses to lament what that salvation cost.

Perhaps we should be willing to pause and lament as well. We have been called to follow Jesus in his way of love and mercy. We have been called to be his hands and feet in service to the world in need of repair. Before we go and act in his name, may we follow his example and pause to release our doubts, our fears, our disappointments, and our resentment for all that in the world that makes repair necessary. Lament for unexplainable and avoidable tragedies; lament for the destructive forces of nature; lament for the hatred that lives in human hearts – in the hearts of others and in our own hearts. May we take the time to empty our grief for the pain in the world so that there is room for Christ's love to fill us and empower as we begin to repair the breach that hatred has caused.

Alleluia! Amen.