

“Lamenting in Praise”

John 14:1-4, 6

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My topic today is not really from our readings from Psalms or from Acts but is actually a few verses from the beginning of John chapter 14. I intend to use the sections we already read to get to what Jesus says in John. I'm using people who praise God, but who have found themselves in lament in their lives. People in trouble but who look to God and the Lord's promises, and rely on those promises. Here, in John 14, Jesus makes it very specific what those promises look like when He says:

John 14:1-4, 6

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Bold words really, wouldn't you say? Miraculous words.

Do not let your hearts be troubled - I prepare a dwelling place for you - I will come and take you to myself - I am the way - all promised blessings.

Our two character studies in the Psalms and Acts are similarly bold - but on a more human scale.

In the Psalm reading today, King David calls God his "rock" (which shields him from attack) and his "fortress" (which protects him on all sides). These allusions should remind us of when David and his few men were hiding in a cave from then King Saul and his 3000 troops, shielded and protected on all sides by rock and fortress. In the story, David gets the better of Saul by cutting his robe unaware (1 Samuel 24). David lives his life with faith in God and the Lord protected him even though Saul continued to try to kill him, God continued to provide him blessings.

[Psalm 31:5](#) (into your hands I commit my spirit) was quoted by Jesus Christ as His final words on the cross before yielding His life. Stephen, the first martyr of the church, in our other reading, also alluded to this same passage.

Our problems, like David's never go away just because we don't pay attention to them, even if we hide out in a cave. They don't diminish when we turn off the TV and radio and leave the newspaper to gather dust. They don't fade with a drink or two, with a drug, or even with a really great diversion like League of Legends or Minecraft. In fact, the truth is still the truth even if we don't believe it; even when conventional wisdom or our favorite blogger says otherwise.

The same is true in our spiritual lives. In second Timothy Paul says: Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. The time will come

when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, discharge all the duties of your ministry. ¹

And this was Stephen's example. He was Jesus' disciple, a servant of the church, a deacon. He had no power against the masses arrayed before him. In Acts 7, Just before today's verses, he had delivered a history lesson to the leaders of the Jewish faith, the Sanhedrin, ending in a scathing oration against those very people. He concluded by saying:

*⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— ⁵³ you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.” **And while they were yelling at him, he looked up and said: “Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”** (Acts 7:51-53)*

And for these things, they killed him. Stephen was God's servant, a man of unbounded service and of abounding faith to his very end.

¹ 2 Timothy 2:16, 4:3-5

Hebrews 11 says that Faith, like that of David and that of Stephen, is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Without faith in God and a conviction of what that faith means, when trouble walks in our door we stand hopeless to understand how God is there for us.

So, we fall into our own humanity instead of falling into the arms of the Great Sustainer.

Instead of lamenting in the one who knows us and loves us through loss of health or security or profession; through all our griefs, we suffer in hopeless silence or anger.

Life is sometimes painful, we all experience loss and lament. In truth, to be a person in lament is a human condition, it's one mark of simply being a person - any person.

But a child of God is to be one who knows that God is in lament with us - never alone in loneliness or mournful pain because God suffers with us because Christ suffered for us.

When I was a Chaplin in training at L&M hospital down in New London, I visited with a lot of patients who had a deep abiding faith in their souls. Some felt comfort in a time of anxiety, others felt a need to seek forgiveness for lives lived with reckless abandon, knowing in their hearts that eternity was not that far away. One such man, there for a relatively routine surgery, told me he really needed to pray and to unburden himself of some hidden sins. He had lived a life of deep faith and said he just knew that a few issues were standing as a wall between himself and Jesus. We worked through his spiritual battle and parted with kind words. The nurse told me he slept

well before he died that night of a heart attack. Who would have known?

He had experienced a David prayer; a Stephen moment. He had known God as his rock and his fortress. He had the experience of working on his own faith throughout his life, and it prepared him for that night where he quite literally said: “Into your hands I commit my spirit. His preparation in life mattered.

Three weeks ago, Wayne gave a sermon recalling the scene of Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee and inviting Peter to get out of the boat and come to him. In depicting that story, he used wooden sticks, some bigger than others and he made the point that bigger sticks could represent how God wants us to grow, how we can become so much bigger than we are or than we think we can be. Growing by getting rid of the us and putting on the likeness of Jesus. Paul describes this as putting on the new self, created after the Lord’s likeness. (Col 3:10, Eph 4:24)

In the Spring we were working through an evening study on Romans where we struggled every week with Paul’s words, his grammars, his intentions. But in those struggles we grew and as we started to feel a kinship with the apostle and his words, we could feel our own faith grow more deeply. Thinking on that struggle actually brought me back to our celebrations of Mother’s and Father’s Days and how we take a day to acknowledge how parents pour their hearts and souls into giving in their lives.

I remember this time when I was a kid: on Mother’s Day in maybe 3rd grade, I brought a lump of pottery home to my mom from school. We had made it in art class. It looked a little like a

green and brown and black volcano, about 3-4 inches across at the base, with most of its top cut off. Very ugly but the glaze job was nice.

It took days to make. Shaping the mis-formed, firing, glazing, firing again, a second glaze and final firing. It took days. And in the bottom, I had painted LOVE but it went top to bottom top to bottom so in English reading it was LVOE, which brought the unfortunate reaction...

I was known for walking the back alleys home from school every day, fishing treasures from people's trash cans, so when mom saw it she didn't say "oh thank you" but instead "which can did you pull this from?" or something to that effect. Devastating for a young lad of course. It had such an effect on me, not just because I made it as a Mother's Day gift, but also because I had put a lot of 9-year-old effort into that clay. She lived a life of hardship and poured a lot of mom-effort into my life, correcting my ways and telling me of God's blessings and her hope in the Lord. And - she kept the clay pot until she died.

The cross of Christ reminds us that 2000 years ago mankind tried to pin our hope, like mom's hope to a cross, killing it forever and leaving all things in the hands of humanity. What a tragedy that would have been for us.

But we are fortunate to live our lives under the cross of the resurrection. The Cross that offers a balm to our hardships in life. Some of our hardships are simply a part of being human: the undulating roller coaster from birth to death. But from God's

point of view all of our trials, faced in the Lord's hands are trials that help shape us in the image of the son - Christ.²

So, what do we do with our lament in the time political angst?

What do we do with our lament in the time Hurricane Laura dashing the Gulf Coast to bits?

What do we do with our lament in the time racial unrest?

What do we do with our lament in the time economic devastation?

What do we do with our lament in the time of the Corona virus?

It drains us just thinking about the effects of this pandemic, worldwide, in this country, in this state, and city. Really the numbers are unfathomable: over 185,000 deaths in the US alone - over 840,000 worldwide.³

There are fewer and fewer of us every day who have not been touched personally by these effects. And all of this is on top of the challenges that had already made up our messy lives, before we ever heard of COVID -19.

But, even in the book of Lamentations following verse after verse and chapter after chapter of sad lament over life's hardness, Jeremiah remembers the God who created him, the

² Summary of book *Suffer Strong* by Katherine and Jay Wolf
https://harvest.org/donate/?project_code=13000&motivation_code=E20PROD&utm_source=hs&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=appeal_2&utm_content=5-2020&hsenc=p2ANqtz-M52ulEx-J3dKxf3gLP_iaibvlzmorb3TCtr7A_xQFZPfkG3Q0PfeRco9SKw6xXOOZSym0zEffyDBWxPA_I_q3e9vLtw&hsmi=87616372 Accessed 5/8/20.

³ WorldOmeter Coronavirus tracking for the world, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>
Accessed 5/9/20.

one who continues, even in lament to cradle him in loving hands when he says:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Sometimes, we are overwhelmed with our human condition, we need real examples from God's love letter to us. We need a David and a Stephen to remind us that we are never alone.

And Jesus tells us the why of all of this when He says:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places and I will come again and will take you to myself.

I commend to you David and Stephen who knew God through faith - who praised the blessings of their life in the spirit, even in times of great lament in life, and even unto death.

Thanks be to God - Amen