

“God remembers us in Lamentation”

Fifth Sunday after Easter
May 10, 2020

From the front pew of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
John 14:1-7; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16
Matt Matthews

Last week we explored the idea that Jesus is our Good Shepherd. He nurtures the flock. He loves, listens, and does good for us and gently expects us to do good for others. The sheep know his voice, and trust him.

And now we hear his voice here in chapter 14 of John’s gospel: “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” The disciples don’t need to be afraid. Jesus is going ahead of them to prepare a way. “In my Father’s house,” he says, “There are many rooms.” I will take you there, he says, adding, “you know the way.”

His disciples say, “We don’t know the way. How can we know the way?”

Jesus the Good Shepherd says, simply, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” You can feel the disciples sigh with relief. Their friend will see them through. They don’t need to worry. Later in this chapter, Jesus will reiterate: “I will not leave you orphaned.” God will send the Holy Spirit to be our counselor. And in verse 27: “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and neither let them be afraid.”

This chapter begins and ends with this comfort. And that’s how this “Mother’s Day” sermon will begin and end. With comfort.

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However, the middle contains lamentation.

The reason Jesus tells his disciples not to worry is because he knows they have known sorrow, grief, and lament. And Jesus knows they will experience soul-searching sadness again. He’s offering his peace to them precisely because he knows they’re going to need it.

We need the peace of God because we have known hard times. And though we pray that hard times will come again no more, we know they will. And this will be cause for lamentation.

In the book of Ecclesiastes we are told there is a time to laugh and a time to mourn. There are good times and bad. And in the midst of bad times, we are right to lament.

The Bible is filled with lamentation. There is a book called Lamentations that begins with these lines:

How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people!

To me that sounds like an apt description of the cities of our world during the Coronavirus. Our cities sit empty and lonely, bereft of people as we shelter in place at home. That’s not what the writer of Lamentations was talking about, but those opening lines fit our lives well these days.

There is a time to Lament.

Rev. Soon-Chan Rah, an evangelism professor at North Park Seminary in Chicago, wrote a book on Lamentation. 60-percent of the Psalms are psalms of praise and joy. 40-percent of the Psalms are about suffering and lament. American hymnbooks, he says, are comprised mainly of praise; 80-percent focus of joy and praise. Only 20-percent address lament and suffering.

The American church, he said, is obsessed with success, greatness, winning, triumph, and exceptionalism. We don't want to grieve. We avoid lament.

But Jesus knows that lamentation is part of life, and when lamentation comes, he is there. By the power of the Holy Spirit, God is present in our suffering. So, do not let your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

Notice Jesus doesn't try to explain away suffering, he simply says he'll be with us and we do not need to be afraid. I will not leave you orphaned. Let not your hearts be troubled; neither let them be afraid.

But suffering will come.

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Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity N. T. Wright recently wrote in Time Magazine this bold proposition: Christianity Offers No Answers About the Coronavirus. It's Not Supposed To.

He describes this period of physical distancing as a period of "not of rest, but of poised, anxious sorrow."

When Christians dare to ask why, theologically speaking, is this pandemic happening, we are left with no answer. Wright suggests we want to believe that everything must have an explanation.

Wright suggests, rather than explanation, we need "to recover the biblical tradition of *lament*. Lament is what happens when people ask, "Why?" and don't get an answer." And if we look more broadly at this pandemic, answers become even more illusive. "It's bad enough facing a pandemic in New York City or London. What about a crowded refugee camp on a Greek island? What about Gaza? Or South Sudan?"

The point of lament, woven thus into the fabric of the biblical tradition, is not just that it's an outlet for our frustration, sorrow, loneliness and sheer inability to understand what is happening or why. The mystery of the biblical story is that *God also laments*. Some Christians like to think of God as above all that, knowing everything, in charge of everything, calm and unaffected by the troubles in his world. That's not the picture we get in the Bible.

God is with us. Emmanuel. What Jesus offers to us in John's gospel is not a key to the puzzles of life and of suffering, but the gift of presence. I will not leave you orphaned. Jesus is not a magician. Jesus is a shepherd. He walks with us. Laments with us. And leads us through even the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus, in fact, has prepared a way. But this good news doesn't mean we won't experience life's sorrow. Nor does it mean we have easy theological answers.

"It is no part of the Christian vocation, then, 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. And out of that there can emerge new possibilities, new acts of kindness, new scientific understanding, new hope. New wisdom . . ."

What does this pandemic mean? I don't know. I do know, however, that it's okay to lament. It's okay to grieve. It's okay to be sad, angry, impatient. I also know that God is with us. Jesus said so. I will not leave you orphaned. The Spirit is with us like a holy counselor. I know that *I* can trust Jesus. *Do not let your hearts be troubled; neither let them be afraid.*

In the midst of our lamentation and prayer, we can remember God.

Jesus assures us, that God loves, walks with, and remembers us. For this healing grace, thanks be to God!