

A Psalmist's Lament: Psalm 85

When I was reading the choices for scripture in this week's lectionary, Psalm 85 stuck out to me for many reasons. Mostly because it is a lament and the lament is that God feels distant, uninvolved, angry even.

There are many psalms that are considered laments. Many of them are written from the perspective of a particular individual lamenting about his life to God. But some psalms, like this one, is a lament for a people over the condition the nation is in and how it seems to have fallen out of favor with God. In thinking about the condition this country is in right now, I thought it would be good for us to think about this psalm and what it may mean for us today.

This psalm was written at a troubling moment in Israel's history. The psalm starts out with remembering past glories that God bestowed upon them, but now the psalmist feels that God is angry with them and asks if God will be angry with them forever.

I look around at this country and wonder how God feels about what is going on and what he expects of us in this moment. Is God angry with us? Has God withdrawn from the US? And what are we Christians to now in the midst of this turmoil? And I think that the answer starts with prayer. What God expects from us first is prayer.

Pastors do a poor job of teaching their congregations how to pray. We do a poor job of praying ourselves oftentimes. But we would all do well to learn how to pray and to pray with passion, with intercession, with lament, and with praise. I would like us to first to look at what a psalm of lament is. A lament is a sort of woe is me prayer to God, but it is more than that.

I've always appreciated the lament psalms because they are an honest expression of a person's or people's pain and how they feel abandoned by God or feel that God is angry at them.

Laments are a way for the person to express their fears, worries, anxieties, even anger at God. And I believe that God wants us to express our feelings to him. God is big enough to handle whatever thoughts or feelings we may have. I know I've gone to God enough times in confusion and fear over things happening in my life and sometimes with anger. But what I also love about the laments is that they don't end with the complaint. They always end with praise and thanksgiving. And that's why they are so important.

The psalmist shows us that we can take our anguish at the injustice in our world to God. We can express our anger over the seeming inaction of God in intervening in a government that is out of control in disappearing people to concentration and torture camps. We can come before God in fear due to rising costs with no end in sight while disposable income remains the same. We can come before God in confusion over family conflicts that do not seem able to be ended. This is lament and I think it is good for the soul to come truthfully to God with what we are feeling, but it is important to pray through those feelings.

The psalmist starts this psalm by reminding God of what God had done for them in the past. That may seem like an odd thing to do. Surely God remembers what God has done for the people in the past, but the flow of a psalm is just that - remember when you loved me, loved us, do you not care for us now, help us now, we're desperate, but then the psalm always ends with praise. Because it ends in believing that God has not abandoned them and that God will continue to be faithful now.

One author I was reading this past week talked about how laments could be fruitful for congregations to pray today. So how could they be fruitful for us today?

First, the psalmist starts by recounting the outpouring of favor from God that resulted in a past event of redemption. Again, as I have said many times before, remembering God's action in our lives is important in the Christian walk. We need to be able to recall God's faithfulness to us.

In this instance, the psalmist is remembering that God's past blessing had three components: restoration of land and fortune, forgiveness, and a cessation of God's wrath. But now the people are being hammered with losses and disappointments. Their land is not producing, struggles abound, and the word on the street is that God is absent.

The psalmist surveys the current landscape and laments on behalf of his community, concluding that they need a renewal of God's spirit in the current struggle. Their hearts have grown stale and dry and the psalmist senses that God is displeased with them.

This is a difficult time not only in our country, but for our churches as well. We live in a post-Christian society, even if the government would like to pretend that we are a Christian nation. Our churches reflect society's lack of belief. Our churches grow older and smaller.

I don't like what is happening in this country, but I do believe it is a time for the church to assess how they are sharing the gospel and how they are going to move forward. The old model of doing church was to offer lots of programs. If we offer the right programs, and if the preaching and music are good, they will come. But the large denominational churches of the sixties and seventies are no longer and so the greater Church and the local churches all need to figure out how to be relevant and meaningful in a society that sees no relevance and meaning to it. In other words, churches need to find new ways of sharing the Good

News of Jesus Christ, to find new ways of bringing that good news out into the world, specifically to a country that is in turmoil and is in need of peace. The church needs to find new ways of doing church.

In my last church I had a seminarian working there. In one sermon she preached she said that a professor of hers said that the church makes radical changes every 500 years and she gave examples of those changes. And she said that we are at that 500 year mark now. So it is up to the people in the churches to discern God's leading in this new society we are living in; to explore what the church is going to look like for the next 500 years. We need to Explore how we live out our faith as a community of believers in a society that doesn't realize they need God. Churches need to start thinking outside of the box. If they don't, then they will cease to exist. We need a new vision for being the church and what our call is in our community and in our nation.

I'm not a creative thinker, so I can't imagine what the church will look like going forward, but in these challenging times we need to seek out God for inspiration.

In the second stanza of this psalm, the psalmist writes: will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you? And that is what is needed, a revival of the church, a revival of God's spirit within us to prompt us to embrace new life.

When I was at my last church, about a year or so ago, a christian college somewhere in the south made news for the revival that was taking place. What was supposed to be just a campus revival quickly became something that people from all over were going to. What was supposed to be only a weeklong event ended up lasting three weeks. The Spirit of God was being poured out.

I remember I had a discussion with my staff about what was happening there. They had only negative things to say about it. To them it was like mass hysteria at work, but I believe that God revives, that there are times when God pours out the Spirit in a certain place and for a certain time to renew and revive spirits that need to experience God anew. A mountaintop experience. We can't live on mountaintops all our lives, that's not the reality of life, but we do need those mountaintop experiences from time to time to revive and refresh our spirits.

The third stanza of this psalm has the psalmist asking God to speak. There are so many voices clamoring for attention these days - the news screams at us of all the nonsense going on, everything is a crisis, everything is a calamity. Yet in the midst of the noise, the psalmist insists, "let me hear what God the Lord will speak." Here is a posture of solitude and silence before God, a still point in which God's voice may be discerned.

Our world is crowded with experts offering quick solutions to all that ails us, personally or globally. These voices pander to our fears and anxieties, and seldom yield peace. To pursue and discern the voice of God amid the racket of distracting noises is a disciplined choice. "Let me hear..." It was crucial for the psalmist to make a quiet space within to hear the promise of God.

And the word of God to God's people is peace. We all have hopefully listened to the Word of God and found in scripture words that spoke peace to us in the midst of a crisis and its emotional turmoil and despair. Here God speaks peace to those who turn, or lean forward in their hearts toward God. They're in despair, but they turn to God. This turning involves a paradoxical mix of passion and surrender.

While the psalm involves pleading for God to act, the final verses make clear that we are not pleading because God is unwilling to

act. God is not standing far off, coldly debating whether to come to the aid of the people. Rather, God's salvation is near! As God's people turn, God enthusiastically pours out blessings.

As we look to our nation, we can see the same spiritual dryness, even abandonment of faith, that the psalmist perceived in his nation. And, individually, we too when looking inward may realize that we may feel a barrenness in vocational, spiritual, or relational spheres. As a nation, as a church body, and as individuals, we stand in need of renewal, revival. The reality of this psalm is that it gives us permission to come before God with honest and bold lament; yet the closing of the psalm reminds us that sorrow need not be the end of the story. It calls us to lift our eyes to see the energizing, revitalizing work of God. The vivid image of the fertile field yielding what is good gives us a vision that can enlarge the scope of that for which we dare to pray today.

We come before God in need of restoration. God knows this country is in need of restoration, but the church is also in need of restoration and revival. Let us hear what God wants to speak to us: words of peace, words of salvation, words that call us to turn, and turn again to God.

If we follow the outline given to us in this lament, we will remember God's goodness, we will be able to express our fears and misgivings of what's going on, and we will be able to remind ourselves that God is faithful to us and is always with us, even if we don't always feel him or see God working as we would want. In the end, like for the psalmist, praying a prayer of lament brings us back to praise and to the peace that God desires for us to have.

We can carry on the work of the church in these dark and difficult times because in the end, we have hope and we can find peace even in the midst of chaos, because we worship a God of peace, hope, and love. Amen.

