

Sermon: Complaints to God

Scripture: Psalm 13 and Lamentations 3

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I always feel a bit caught when someone asks me how another person is doing who has just had a loved one die. I feel caught because I think the question comes with an assumption – that they are doing well if they are being strong and stoic. The problem with that assumption is that someone might be doing quite well actually in being overwhelmed by their grief. They might be doing exactly what they need to be doing in being unhinged, unable to speak of it without weeping bitterly, not all that functional actually! And someone might not be doing well at all in keeping a stiff upper lip, by being “strong” so to speak and carrying on with their lives. What if I said “It’s amazing how well they are doing, overcome in their grief, crying and railing against the tragedy of it all, even these months and months later!” Or “I’m not sure they’re doing very well, they seem strong and resolute and seem to be just carrying on.”

The expectation that we are strong in the face of life’s tragedies and great sorrows derives more from the Greek philosophy of stoicism than it does the biblical traditions of Judaism and Christianity.

The Judeo-Christian tradition and the scriptures out of which it arises refuses to side-step life’s tragedies, cruelties and sorrows, but rather goes right there pretty much immediately from the beginning of Genesis and all the way to the end of Revelation and so much in between is filled with tragedy, violence and trauma, of course there are also the moments of beauty and joy, but there is no white-washing or dismissing of the horrors of life, rather they face them squarely

as they try and remain faithful to sharing about a Creator God of it all who is loving and all-powerful... and yet somehow allows for terrible things to happen on the earth all the time. It's true that one of the final answers our scriptures give for it all is that in the end, ultimately, when the story of this world culminates, God will redeem it all and there will be victory of good over evil, joy over sorrow, unity over division, life over death, but the scriptures decidedly DON'T say "it'll all be fine in the end so just buck up and take it!"

Instead, the Bible has littered throughout it a genre of writing and expression that is specifically and contentiously unwilling to accept the pain and sorrow of life sitting down. That genre is known as lamentations. There's a 5-chapter book in the Old Testament called Lamentations as well, which is the cry of Jeremiah, some believe, at the immense suffering and destruction meted out to Jerusalem by Babylon in 587 BCE, but it's also a genre that shows up throughout the Psalms and in such books as Job and Ruth, Jeremiah and Isaiah, as well as in certain key spots in the New Testament. In the final analysis the Bible in general is more aligned to Dylan Thomas' lines – "Do not go gentle into that good night...rage, rage against the dying of the light" – rather than the stoic philosopher Seneca's line: "a wise man is content with his lot whatever it may be without wishing for what he has not."

Lamentations, rather, specifically wishes that what is, were not so.

The writings of Lament in the scripture are a specific way of praying to God in the face of tragedy and sorrow and all biblical laments have do 3 parts – there is an expression of complaint to God, there is the making of request of God and there is the final assertion of trust in God. Those 3 parts pulled together show us

how to pray in the face of tragedy, blesses our relationship with God and helps us to process our grief.

First step of the prayer of lament is an unrestrained raising of the voice in complaint. Somewhere along the way most of us are told pretty clearly and pretty early to stop complaining, that complaining is ugly and annoying. Don't be a complainer. Stop griping about everything. There are a lot of people worse off than you. You want me to give you something to really complain about?! It's more about how annoying the complainer is to the parent (usually that's where the "don't complain" messages come from) than anything else. For the one doing the complaining it's actually somewhat satisfying if not liberating, which is what lamentations bank on. Lamentations gives us full permission in our prayers and interaction with God to complain and God apparently in the scriptures does not say "WAH, WAH, shut up, don't be such a baby about things." If anything Jesus tells us to be more like babies... and I'm assuming he means complaining too!

There are 2 things that complaining to God does for us. First of all it's real. It's not presenting ourselves to God in the way we "should" be but we offer to God exactly who and how we are. Honesty and authenticity is critical in our relating to a God of truth. Our parents might not be able to handle our whyness but if the scriptures are any indication God sure can. We need to come before God in all our honest joys and sorrows and gripes and frustrations and fears or we will short-circuit the relationship in a serious way. Unless everything in your life is perfectly the way you want it and everything in the world exactly as it should be, complaining to God should be an aspect of your prayer.

And in scripture it's not just complaining to God, lament often involves accusing God in our complaints, believe it or not! God is not insecure and God is

not impatient, so according to God's word, God hears our complaint and whining without wanting to smite us dead! Just listen to some of the Psalms that embrace this aspect of lament:

From Psalm 13 that Karen read for us – “How long O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

From Psalm 22 – “Why are You SO far from saving me and hearing my anguish!

From Psalm 10 – “why are you hiding yourself from me in my time of trouble?”

From Psalm 44 – “Awake O God, why do you sleep. Will you reject us forever?!

We don't hear the Psalmist holding anything back from God at all... and neither should we, cause the other thing complaining to God does is acknowledges that there is a right and good order to things that God intends for the world and when something is NOT right then God's good order is being thwarted. God is a God of life and that our hearts are anguished at the reality of death especially of someone we love and who is dear to our lives, is an implicit acknowledgment that life is the way things should be and death runs counter to that. That is fundamental Christian theology 101. As Christians we are not asked to accept stoically the reality of death and see it only as an illusion... but rather we understand death as counter to God's intentions for this world. To rail against the dying of a beloved person in our lives is really the only reasonable response to the reality of death in this world and to speak our anguish of heart and our grief to God is to speak to the heart of God and receive God's mercy and love not God's scorn or contempt. God does not say “Stop countering reality and making

yourself miserable! It is what it is.” That’s no where in the Bible. Rather God’s Spirit comforts and understands and begins the work of healing what once again this world has broken.

As with the personal same with societal. Lamentations in our scripture is not just about personal anguish and struggle and complaint but lamentations very often involves complaint against the injustices of this world. And again, it’s only the keepers of the status quo and the power holders that will resent you or try and stop you for complaining about injustice. God doesn’t require silence on your part. In the scriptures complaint against injustice, against jails too full and too full of one color of people and poverty too deep to justify and environmental devastation too great to ignore, are all injustices that the God of our scriptures rails against time and time again and expects the same of us in the quest for making it on heaven as it is on earth. So complain. Full permission to be a whiner to God!

But that’s just the first third of the practice of Lamentation. There are two other parts to make the prayer complete. After the honest complaint of a personal or societal wrong is expressed in prayer and supplication – how long O God will death ruin my life! How long will some enjoy the fruits of this life at the expense of others? How long will we be stuck in quarantine? – then comes the second part of the lament and that is the request.

Yes, God knows better than we do what is needed in any given situation but that should not stop us from being very clear with God about what we want. Don’t we want to hear from our children about what they want even if we know better of what they need? Again, our honesty with God is always the best policy. “I want to see my loved one again, I want to be with them, hold their hand, hug

them again! This absence is SO not ok with me God!" Or "Turn the rich away empty so that the poor can have what they need! Do something God! Give me an answer! Help them through this! I cannot do this without You, You must give me strength! Please thwart the schemes of those who don't have the common good at heart! Please save my daughter, do not abandon her, save my friend do not abandon them! Please God!" That's step two - the request and expressing clearly, honestly with boldness what we want from God while ignoring that really troublesome voice that says who do you think you are asking something like that when there are bigger needs out there. That's not God's voice.

And then after you've complained and made your request known, however trivial or unrealistic, the third part of Lamentations is some expression of turning it over and trusting in God in the end. The movement in Psalm 13 is typical of laments which begins with the complaint "how long O Lord, will you forget me" then continues with request "give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death and my enemies will overcome me" and then finally moves in the last 2 verses to "BUT I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise for he has been good to me."

Lamentation always ends or at least has within it some affirmation of God's love and mercy and faithfulness. In the Lamentations passage that Karen read, it began "God has pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver, broken my teeth with gravel" how's that for a visceral complaint?! But then it turns to "yet I will call this to mind and therefore have hope, that because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, God's mercies are new every morning." It's almost as though after this howl of upset and fury and complaint and all that energy pours

out, there is this release back to a state of calm and quiet and trust in God. And that's how the lamentation works.

Father Richard Rohr suggests that the prayer of Lamentation helps us *transform* our pain so we don't *transmit* our pain out to others. Sometimes a stiff upper lip leads to a stiff heart as well and the pain hidden there is meted out to the world around us. Sometimes the refusal to complain and rail against the way things are masks a deeper resentment that will find its way out one way or another.

As followers of Jesus we must remember that our great example was not a stoic. He railed against the injustices around him, flipping tables over in the temple, telling the Pharisees that they were white-wash tomb hypocrites and when it came his time to suffer and die, he wailed his complaints. First in the Garden saying please God take this cup from me and later on the cross quoting one of these very Psalms of lament – “My God My God why have you forsaken me!” Jesus himself complains bitterly against God and the reality of injustice and death, bitterly, and if it's good enough for him it should be for us as well.

Over the past year we all have something to complain to God about. Yes, there are many who have deeper sorrows and sufferings than certain others of us do, but maybe before we cut short the expression of our own complaints and sorrows and troubles, we should give voice to them, at least in our prayer to God. For disease to run rampant and kill half a million people in our country is not ok and it's not the way things should be. For some of us to have loved ones die and not to be able to be with them in the hospital because of this disease, is not ok. For us to be in forced exile from our church and away from the people that we love and give us comfort and joy is not ok! It runs counter to how God has

created this world to be! And yet, God's faithfulness remains, God's loving presence is true and the spirit's movement towards new life and redemption and healing of all that's been broken is also true. Praise be to God whose love endures forever.