

Teaching Notes

I was reminded this week that all that I consider **“painful”** and all that I would identify as **“adverse”**, is really experiencing the void of all that my heart longs for: **“heartsick”** [Proverbs 13:12]

It's realizing that sometimes our biggest fears in life are not about what will happen, but that nothing will happen...things will always remain the same.

“How long, O Lord?” Anyone had one of those moments this week? Over finances. Over infidelity. Over health. Over your own failures.

Sometimes that's an inquisition (an honest appeal). Sometimes it's veiled-accusation. Perhaps this appeal sounds more biblical and sterile than our own. Perhaps our response is more expletive laden.

“O, that I had wings... I would fly far away... I would escape...” Psalm 55. To a different spouse, to a different place, to a different job, to a different body (one healthier and more cooperative).

Amidst any given gathering of the church, there are people who are finding it difficult to *“count their blessings”*. And, perhaps to do so without acknowledging the very real pain of their circumstances is to dismiss them and to somehow miss the opportunity to experience a more authentic expression of **worship**.

I often worry about people who encounter inexplicable tragedy in their lives and are able to walk away as if it doesn't hurt. It's our Christian version of *“Don't rub it!”* (baseball).

This week:

“The Pulse”, *Night Club* in FL: 49 people.

ISIS: *“Despite all of our progress (?), our efforts have not reduced the group's terrorism capabilities”* (CIA Dir.)

A half-page in the USA Today dedicated to, *“What To Do If You Are In A Bank Robbery”* (take comfort in knowing that bank robberies are declining and even if they get away with your money, it is federally insured!).

What we experience, along with all of creation (Romans 8), is the gnawing sense that things are 'not as they ought to be' (evil). That's why our anger is aroused at injustice, senseless tragedy and death. It's the way you're supposed to feel. We weren't made for it.

Evil is more than just the human dilemma. It is more than simply the mess we've gotten ourselves into, but the frustration that God feels over the disruption and distortion of all of his good creation **and** the pain that he feels with us as we experience the inevitable consequences.

Our understanding of our world is always reflected by the solutions that we propose to the brokenness and disorder around us and within us.

As I perused the web for responses this week, I found nothing that would satisfy me either intellectually or spiritually. I read debates concerning who is ultimately responsible and a variety of proposed responses (stricter gun laws, tighter immigration legislation, more lenient stances on personal privacy when matters of public safety are at hand). I had very few, if any, propose that what we were experiencing was "evil". That seems too harsh. To identify something as "evil" is to suggest a story with an "ought"! And, it's not that everything is 'dark' and 'sinister', but broken.

"I did find this: God created people to be virtuous (right; straight; fitting; proper), but they have each turned to follow their own downward path" (Ecclesiastes 7:29).

At the very least, we must be willing to admit that there are evidences in the story which indicate that humanity has made decisions which have distorted and frustrated, although not thwarted, God's intentions.

"Humankind cannot bear too much reality." T.S. Eliot We've seen too much [I read one "expert's" response to a lady who wrote in about her angst: 1) Fantasize, 2) Join a gym, 3) Learn how to cry.

I have a variety of musical styles in my collection (with one glaring exception). **Lament** is the one style of music that I would encourage you to keep in your "faith-repertoire".

Lament is a "reflex" response to life. It is the biblical alternative to denial and progress.

It is an involuntary reaction to the panorama of disorder that we see around us. *"Life under the sun"*, as Solomon describes it [e.g. financial worries, relational breakdown, life-threatening illness, ISIS, inexplicable acts of chaos, etc.] Even when we know it's inevitable, we still flinch!

We have to have some honest means of communicating the hurt, the disappointment we feel without jeopardizing our place.

Lament is not about clinical language and diagnosis, but the raw stuff of life.

We say we're "depressed", the Psalmist says he's in a "pit" and *"darkness is my only friend"*. We speak about loss, while the Psalmist says it feels like I'm *"walking through death-valley"*. *"Poured out like water... all my bones out of joint... heart turned to melting wax, tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth"*.

I love the incredibly gutsy ways that people dialogued with God; secure enough in their relationship (or just 'fed up enough'--- sometimes it's hard to tell the difference) to be able to speak in a rather 'unedited' way with him knowing that there was no 5-second delay.

Lament is not so concerned with being polite and having good God-manners. It cries and spits and gets animated. They didn't seem to equate their honesty with irreverence. They believed that our tirades would in no way diminish his holiness.

I remember in a moment of lament over a particular decision that my mother made that displeased me, I yelled, "*I hate you!*" She slapped me across the face. (She didn't seem to take it as well as God did).

As I matured (and regained feeling to the left side of my face), I realized that my mother's actions were a reaction to what was an affront to her love. A serious, life-threatening misinterpretation of her good intentions toward me. It was a jealous love for me.

The appeal (lament)...

- presupposes God (which creates its own challenges as we attempt to discern between God and our own "designer version" of him).
- assumes his interest and involvement [½ of the Psalms contain complaints which are directed at God].
- anticipates his capacity for altering the circumstance.
- imagines a time of cessation; when it all comes to an end. You ask, "*How long?*", because you are somehow hopeful that it won't go on forever.

Relative comfort always takes the edge off of our prayers.

Tragedy never really requires much of an explanation until it happens to us. Until then, we're content with clichéd responses and some nod to sovereignty, but we can catapult from relative ease to desperation in a matter of seconds [one phone call from the doctor's office, one, "*Honey, we need to talk...*"]

I think there are at least three reasons why we don't lament:

- **We don't lament if we feel no sense of connection to those experiencing the suffering.**
We are afraid of other people's pain. To acknowledge it is to compassionately engage it and refuse to move too quickly to our "diagnosis".
- **We don't lament if we secretly presume that those who are suffering are simply getting what they deserve.**
I decided a long time ago that I don't want to live in a world where everyone gets what they deserve. That can't end well. "... *he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities...*" Psalm 103:10

- **We don't lament when we haven't acknowledged the prevalence and depth of sin and brokenness in our own lives.**

Sometimes we actually run toward other's pain as a way of avoiding our own.

Lament is the cry for help to the very God that we are accusing.

Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor, recounts a trial that was held in a German death camp during WWII. The rabbis decided to put God on trial. For (3) days they presented evidence to the jury of how they had suffered and how they had prayed to God, but he did nothing to deliver them or defend them.

After deliberation, the jury found God "guilty". When the trial was over, the rabbis prayed to the very God that they had convicted.

Most times, life doesn't "resolve".

There's dissonance in the Psalms: we assume that as we progress through the cycle of emotions that the song will naturally resolve. That God will speak to defend himself or that he will act to reverse the traumatic effects of our situation, which will, then, evoke our praise.

Lament is not simply catharsis or going to our "spiritual happy place" or the preamble to worship... **the lament is the praise. It is the worship that we offer God from "within" our pain.**

Listen, God, for whatever reason, has allowed you to be, in this "place". To resist "place" is to dismiss the only context for presence: genuine interaction with God. To dismiss presence is to miss the grace and "shalom" that God wants to offer you there.

We as Christians will always be identified by how well we function in the interlude.

"interlude": in a musical piece, it's a necessary movement toward something else.

How are we to live in space between the 'already' and the 'not yet'?

- **We realize that, as the people of God, our call will never permit us to disengage from the culture nor concede to the dysfunctionality.**
Expecting sin in a broken world does not mean endorsing it or ignoring it, but structuring our lives in ways that contradict, resist and help overcome it with good (Romans 12:21).
- **We commit to bringing God's loving rule to bear through many touch points of grace rather than coercion.**
The hope is that as we learn to live counter-culturally, we portray the vision of God for humanity in ways that will cause others to actually favor (choose) the Jesus-way-of-life over their own self-indulgent, self-destructive options.

It's where in our righteousness, we become '*great oaks that the Lord has planted for his glory*' (Isaiah 61:3).

➤ **We live within the holy-discontent of partial fulfillment and expect less than satisfying results.**

It means that we refuse to live under the illusion that the "Kingdom Come" is something we can establish or usher in of our own ingenuity and resourcefulness. It will require a massive expression of grace, on God's part.

But, it also means that as Kingdom-people, not only pray for its coming, but we make it happen all around us. We work with God as his "collaborative-partners" to restore as much order as we can. We disperse as a people of "hope" into a world that God longs to recover.