

SLIDE 1. Sunday January 22, 2023

Hey. Help. Holy.

Jackie and I were at a celebration of life last Saturday.

B's life – Becky who became Ben – a multi-scholarship athlete, strong and talented, a fiercely independent person, with a huge and infectious smile, a locker-room and on-field cheerleader, a deeply compassionate individual, funny and sensitive and optimistic – enjoyed and loved by family and friends.

Gone. At 30 years of age. Stomach cancer.

Mom and dad are wrecked. What do they do now?

They believe in God. They trust Jesus. They respond to the Spirit of God in their lives. They participate in a faith community.

They lament.

They express their grief and regret and sorrow to God in prayer.

Like a holy complaint.

Like Job who complained of his troubles: *Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?* (Job. 3:11).

Like Jeremiah who wrote a 5-part, acrostic, alphabetically repeating poem lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple – incl. these lines: *"You, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures from generation to generation. Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us for so long?"* (Lam. 5:19-20).

Like the Psalmists – who variously said things like...

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?" (Ps. 22:1).

"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; Lord hear my voice!" (Ps. 130:1).

"My soul is deep in anguish. How long, Lord, how long?" (Ps. 6:3).

"Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me." (Ps. 42:7).

"Why, Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (Ps. 10:1).

In the bible!

Songs – even.

Do you know what percentage of the Psalter – the book of Psalms – are laments?
More than a third of them. More than 50 of 150 Psalms are laments!

Are holy complaints.

Some personal. Some communal. They give voice to our suffering.

If we were to strictly apply that percentage here – that would mean singing a lament every third song on a Sunday morning!

That would keep things real!

Referring to the book of Lamentations – Hebrew scholar, *Kathleen O'Connor* asks -
“Why write poetry of sorrow – in alphabetical order?”

She argues that this artistic choice signifies several important truths about grief and regret and sorrow:

1. That it is vast. It goes from A-Z.
2. That it rolls over us like wave after breaker after wave after breaker (Ps. 42:7). It goes from A-Z again and again and again.
3. And that processing grief and regret and sorrow needs structure.

The Psalms offer us a bit of that – at least more than 50 of them!

There’s a fairly consistent structure to the Psalms of Lament:

SLIDE 2. General Structure of the Psalms of Lament.

1. The Psalmist cries out to God.

2. The Psalmist asks God for help.

3. The Psalmist affirms God’s character.

1. The Psalmist cries out to God. The Psalmist voices a complaint or feeling or rhetorical question or invocation of some sort – at the beginning of the lament. For example...

"Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my sighing. Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray."(Ps. 5:1-2).

"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"(Ps. 13:1).

"Hear me, O God, as I voice my complaint."(Ps. 64:1).

2. The Psalmist asks God for help. Whether specific or general, personal or communal – the Psalmist asks God to intervene. For example...

"Arise, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked."(Ps. 3:7).

"Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name." (Ps. 86:11).

"For I am poor and needy, my heart is wounded within me. I fade away like an evening shadow... Help me, O Lord, my God..." (Ps. 109:22-26).

3. The Psalmist believes God will help. The Psalmist often then transitions. He recalls what God has done in the past, affirms the character of God, and chooses to believe that God will answer his prayer (if he hasn't already). For example...

"I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done." (Ps. 143:5).

"For you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the foe." (Ps. 61:3).

"I will give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness and will sing praise to the name of the Lord Most High." (Ps. 7:17).

SLIDE 3. If we were to summarize – so far – we might say - **a lament is a prayer that cries out to God for help because He is holy.**

We might remember this kind of prayer with 3 words: HEY. HELP. HOLY.

BTW - not all the Psalms are structured like this. There is one exception – one Psalm that has these elements but doesn't resolve – doesn't *end* on a note of trust or worship.

Psalm 88. Listen to some of its bits...

"O Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you. Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry! For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol (death)..."

...you overwhelm me with all your waves...

...Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do those who are dead rise up and praise you?...

...O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?"

"...the darkness is my closest friend." The end!

This feels like an emotional placeholder Psalm – like a lament for a prolonged time of deep grief or regret or sorrow - when we are struggling to trust God or to affirm His character – even though we know God is trustworthy and true because of our past with Him, even though we know the truth of what the bible says about Him, and even though we *want to* choose to trust Him.

Sometimes our hearts have a hard time catching up to what we know in our heads. Maybe Psalm 88 is for those times. Even still – it gives us hope.

SLIDE 4. HEY. HELP. HOLY.

HEY. The writer of Psalm 88 is disoriented by his feelings and thoughts. So, he turns to the One who he acknowledges as the One who saves (v. 1) and the One who reigns over all things (vv. 6-8) and unloads his feelings and thoughts.

I think this – itself – is a supreme act of faith on his part – for him to turn to the One who he feels, or thinks has abandoned him – even though he believes or knows better.

It seems to me that we are often faced with the same choice - to turn *to* God or *away* from God - when we feel grief or regret or sorrow.

We might even put it in a question: *Why would I turn to God when it seems like, it feels like, He's turned away from me?*

I think this question is at the heart of any lament.

And oddly enough – I think we choose to turn towards God – not because we *don't* think He can help us – but precisely because we *do* think He will help us!

This is the essence of faith: being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (Heb. 11:1). Turning to an invisible God with confidence that He will help us.

Because He is love (1 John 4). Because He doesn't change (Heb. 13:8). Because he is always turned towards us – like the father in the story of the prodigal son – who was always looking for his son's return.

HELP. The writer of Psalm 88 – literally – asks for help. He says, "*I call to you, O Lord, every day; I spread out my hands to you... I cry to you for help, O Lord; in the morning my prayer comes before you...*" (vv. 9, 13).

He brings nothing but his needs. He's broken.

He shares his deepest pain. He asks for help. And he waits.

He's not dismissed for being disrespectful to God. His feelings are not belittled. He is not asked to suck it up – to be stoic. He's not asked to move on – to get over it. He's not asked to compare himself to others who have it worse. He's not rebuked for the size of his faith.

He turned to God, dumped his feelings and thoughts, and experienced grace!

We are invited to do the same.

This might be awkward for some or even feel irreverent for others.

Many Christians have grown up in churches where there is a subtle pressure (or not so subtle) to "always look on the bright side" – to "live a life of victory" – to be "overcomers in Christ" – at the expense of being honest and genuine and real – in their relationship with God – and then with others.

This is what Dr. Susan David – a South African Pastor’s kid – describes as “toxic positivity.”

It threatens personal and relational integrity.

Maybe it *is* o.k. to not be o.k. once-in-a-while!

Amy Peterson reflects on her own Christian upbringing in this light in her excellent book, *Where Goodness Still Grows*.

She shares, “...we drew from a limited emotional register when we approached God, a limited vocabulary; we avoided the book of Lamentations and the sad psalms and camped out in ‘Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of any kind’ and ‘Give thanks in everything’.” (p. 5).

She asks, “Do we have to be happy all the time? Was that what it meant to be good?” (p. 4).

No! That’s neurotic! Right?!

BTW: I think it’s true to say that when we are honest and genuine and real with God – we will first need to be honest and genuine and real with ourselves – enough to start or have that conversation with God – which – SECOND BTW - will make us way more likely to listen to our neighbors with patience and empathy and kindness.

Which leads to a THIRD BTW: Please be gracious – as God is with us - with family and friends who are suffering pain or sorrow or confusion. Show up. Listen up. Be patient. As best you can.

Please – Don’t avoid them. Don’t belittle their feelings. Don’t tell them to get over it. Don’t compare their state and story to someone else’s. Don’t accuse them of having such little faith.

And please - be careful about asking them how they’re doing. Sometimes, talking about it can trigger their grief or regret or sorrow if they’re not ready to talk – which can result in a kind of double-burden for them – or - they answer conversationally – “I’m o.k.” - to avoid burdening you.

Perhaps the best thing to say is something like, “Hi. It’s good to see you.”

Or if you have more time, “I’m here if you want to talk.”

HOLY. Even though the writer of Psalm 88 doesn’t end his song on a note of trust or worship – it is where he begins – which functions as a reminder to us – as do the other 50+ laments that *do* end with trust and worship – that we are finite, and God is limitless – that we always need help – that we need an intercessor for a world too big for us and out of our control – that the One who saves and reigns over all things – is turned towards us to help.

Some time ago – the leaders of this church talked about having a Sunday morning service when we could lament together as a community of faith - express our grief and regrets and sorrows together.

Because we have lost much over the past couple of years.

We have lost staff: Jeff and Wes and Dave and Sarah and Adam and Annika. Some of those departures went well – some did not.

We have lost people: people who moved on because of how we handled some of those staff departures, people who moved on because of how we managed through COVID, people who moved on to be with family, people who moved away, people who moved on to thriving churches, people who moved on because we hurt or ignored them, people who moved on because of disagreements and misunderstandings.

We have lost kindness and respect for one another in the ways we have sometimes talked about and to each other.

We have lost family and friends in this life - to the next.

It is healthy to grieve these losses, healthy to acknowledge regrets, and healthy to share our sorrows. And not just on a chosen Sunday in January – but any time we come up against losses of all sorts.

We have each other. And we have a God who loves us, sees us, empathizes with us, suffers with us, suffered *for* us, who *is* the God who saves and the God who reigns over all things. He is turned towards us. Let us turn towards Him.

Please – join me in this responsive reading...

SLIDE 5. LEADER: Here we are, O Lord, your kids, turned toward you.

SLIDE 6. ALL: Give ear to our words, O Lord, consider our sighing. Listen to our cry for help, our King, and our God, for to you we pray (Ps. 5:1-2).

SLIDE 7. LEADER: We are grieved. We have regrets. And we have experienced sorrow.

SLIDE 8. ALL: We cry out to you, O Lord. We grieve the loss of staff. We regret the hurts that resulted from some of our processes. In humility, help us learn from our past.

SLIDE 9. ALL: We cry out to you, O Lord. We grieve the loss of people who have moved on. We regret the things we've done and said that became reasons for their leaving. In humility, help us seek forgiveness where we can.

SLIDE 10. ALL: We cry out to you, O Lord. We grieve the loss of loved ones who have passed from this life to the next. Comfort us as we comfort each other with the comfort you have shown us (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

SLIDE 11. LEADER. Lord, we know you hear us, and we know you are good (though sometimes our feelings and thoughts get in the way). Help us to see your answers to our prayers. You are the One who saves and the One who reigns over all the earth. We are in your gracious hands with you. Amen.

HEY. HELP. HOLY.

May these 3 words act as prompts for you to lament like the Psalmists – whenever you encounter loss.

HEY Lord. Turn to Him.

HELP Lord. We need an intercessor.

HOLY Lord. You are the One and Only.