

2017-12-03 “A Song of Lament” – Michael Cheuk
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19, Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37

Today, as we begin the season of Advent, I will be preaching a series of sermons called “Songs of the Season.” Today, I’ll talk about “A Song of Lament.” It is important that we talk about lamenting, because frankly, most churches don’t do laments very well.

Well, today, in our Lesson from the Psalms, we find that we are not alone in our sorrow and pain.

Listen to what the Psalm writer says in verses one to three: “Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel! You who sit enthroned between the cherubim! Shine forth! Awaken your might; come and save us!” In the midst of calamity and defeat, in the midst of a national security in shambles, they appealed to God as a protective shepherd. In the aftermath of being subjugated by a foreign power, they called upon God as a powerful king sitting enthroned among heavenly beings. One does not sing a song of lament *to* God if one no longer believes *in* God. One sings a song of lament to God only if one still dares to trust God despite the dire circumstances. That’s why **a song of lament is the heart-felt cry of one who dares to trust.**

A song of lament is the heart-felt cry of one who dares to trust. **But a song of lament is also the heart-felt cry of one who dares to be honest.** Verses four through six are brutally honest accusations almost shoved in front of the face of God: “O LORD God Almighty, how long will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people? You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful. You have made us a source of contention to our neighbors, and our enemies mock us.”

There is a shocking honesty here that is almost too raw for us good church-folks to hear. But there it is, in this song of lament, the uncomfortable tension between faith and trust in God on the one hand, and the anger and frustration with God on the other. In our reading from Isaiah this morning, the prophet waffles between a redeeming God who is a father and a maker and an absent God who seems to hide from his people in their time of need. From a posture of faith, both the Psalm writer and Isaiah expressed to God brutally honest emotions, all the while assuming that God was big enough to take it, that God was not threatened by their feelings.

That’s the mystery of the human condition—terrible things happen, and God does not always answer our prayers the way we want them to be answered. When that happens, we are like a dissonant song played in a minor key, desperately waiting for a resolution back to a harmonious ending. Sometimes that harmonious ending comes sooner; sometimes it comes much later. Sometimes it never comes.

This is an uncomfortable place to be, caught in the dissonance and discord of this fallen world, with seemingly no resolution in sight. And here, the eightieth Psalm has one final lesson to teach us. A song of lament not only dares to trust and to be honest with God. **A song of lament is also the heart-felt cry of one who dares to hope in God.** For in this Psalm, there is a recurring refrain that increases in intensity. It is a petition that cries out in verse three, “Restore us, O God!” and repeats in verse nine, “Restore us, O God Almighty!” and culminates in verse nineteen, “Restore us, O LORD God Almighty, make your face shine upon us, that we may be

saved.” Even in the midst of the dissonant tension, even in the midst of the waiting, this lamenting Psalmist dared to hope in God with each repeating refrain. Even in the midst of the anguish, anger, and confusion, the lamenter is persistently seeking God, insistently turning toward God and continually calling upon God’s name. And this gives us a model to hope in God even in the midst of our fallen human condition.

For in our weariness, we hope for our restoring Messiah to revive us.
In our weakness, we hope for our almighty Messiah to strengthen us.
In our waywardness, we hope for our LORD Messiah to lead us.
In our wrongfulness, we hope for our shining Messiah to light our way.
In our wretchedness, we hope for our savior Messiah to rescue us.

The fact of the matter is, if we all are just fine and dandy, if we don’t have a care in the world, then why in the world are we in church hoping and waiting for a Savior? Advent is a season of hoping and waiting for a Savior because things are not the way they ought to be. And so, we lament for our world and for ourselves, because we are not strong enough to save either.

The good news is that we believe there is One strong enough to save the world and all humanity. As Christians, we believe that Jesus is our Good Shepherd, the King who sits enthroned with the cherubim, the Son of Man who entered *fully* and vulnerably into our human condition, and the Light of the world who will shine His face upon us. As Caleb Wilde has written: “If God is really love, if God sees us and feels with us, it means that at God’s core is this vulnerability, an interdependence that allows God to feel our pains, to know our sorrows and our joys. Maybe it’s okay to have sorrow. Maybe it’s okay to weep. It’s okay to be vulnerable, for when we do so, we aren’t becoming unlike God, we are, in fact, worshipping.”¹

Therefore, in the midst of our sorrow and suffering, we can trust and be honest with God because we have hope in God’s son Jesus Christ, who knows our suffering and who bears our grief. And in this time between Christ’s first coming and his second coming, we wait, and we keep awake for we do not know when the master of the house will come.

And so on this first Sunday of Advent, let us all cry out with the Psalmist: “Restore us, O LORD God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.” Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

¹ Caleb Wilde, *Confessions of the Funeral Director*, pp. 94-96.