

Sermon– “Persisting in Lament”
Sunday, October 10, 2021
Scripture – Job 23:1-9, 16-17, Psalm 22:1-11
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Today we continue our “Persisting” sermon series based on the lectionary readings from the Old Testament books of Job and Ruth whose heroes persist in their faith. The prologue in Job 1 and 2 which we read last Sunday sets the stage for Job’s suffering—the loss of his estate, family, health) and the dialogue that follows between Job and his three friends. Job’s friends have learned in the wisdom tradition that human suffering is punishment for sin. They come to accuse Job under the cloak of piety and orthodoxy. Today’s reading, Job 23:1-9, 16-17, is the second of four readings from the book and part of Job’s speech near the end of the major cycle of discourses in the book (Job 3-31). Three times each of Job’s friends speaks and each time Job replies. Today’s reading forms part of Job’s reply to Eliphaz’s final monologue and includes important aspects of Job’s beliefs. Job agrees with Eliphaz that God is a just God and that God is reasonable and merciful. The trouble is, Job cannot locate this God to lay his case before the divine tribunal. Job persistence in lament voices the deep frustration of this righteous man and the frustration of faithful men and women in every age who have experienced underserved suffering. By claiming his innocence in the midst of suffering, Job astonishes his friends, rejects the simple, trite religious answers of the faith they share, and affirms the mystery of the God whose presence Job’s seeks. Hear now, the word of God.

“Today also my complaint is bitter; God’s hand is heavy despite my groaning.³ Oh, that I knew where I might find God, that I might come even to God’s dwelling!⁴ I would lay my case before God, and fill my mouth with arguments.⁵ I would learn what God would answer me, and understand what God would say to me.⁶ Would God contend with me in the greatness of God’s power? No; but God would give heed to me.⁷ There an upright person could reason with God, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.⁸ “If I go forward, God is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive God;⁹ on the left God hides, and I cannot behold God; I turn to the right, but I cannot see God.¹⁶ It is God who makes me fainthearted; The Almighty who fills me with fear,¹⁷ Yet I am not reduced to silence by the darkness or by the mystery which hides God. Amen.

I Choose Love Mark Miller

In the midst of pain, I choose love.
In the midst of pain, sorrow falling down like rain,
I await the sun again I choose love.
In the midst of war, hate and anger keeping score,
I will seek the good once more, I choose peace.
When the world falls down, explanations can’t be found,
I will climb to holy ground I will rise. I choose love.

I Choose Love was written by Mark Miller in June of 2015 following the tragic church shooting in Charleston, South Carolina when nine men and women who came to the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church to pray were killed. Dale and I heard the song during a worship retreat we were attending at Montreat Conference Center that summer, and Dale brought it home to Westminster. It has been a favorite of our youth, and we are grateful to Jessica Borland for sustaining our spirits with this lovely song of lament.

Our second scripture reading today is Psalm 22:1-11. This psalm is especially familiar because in Mark's Passion narrative (15:34) Christ quotes verse one from the cross. *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* What is surprising about this psalm of lament is that pain and suffering do not lead to denying faith, rather they motivate a more insistent candor addressing the God who is expected to save. The substantive issue (as with Job) is the absence of God and the need for God. The psalm in its daring rhetoric and therapeutic complaint is an exercise of bold approach to the throne of God, by one who voices legitimate claims against God. Hear now, God's Holy word.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.³ Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.⁴ In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them.⁵ To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.⁶ But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people.⁷ All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;⁸ "Commit your cause to the Lord; let God deliver— let God rescue the one in whom God delights!"⁹ Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast.¹⁰ On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God.¹¹ Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help. Amen.

The title of the sermon: "Persisting in Lament"

The text: Yet I am not reduced to silence by the darkness or by the mystery which hides God. Job 23:17

Let us pray: O God, from whom we come, to whom we return, and in whom we live and move and have our being, strengthen and sustain us during times of betrayal, loss and suffering and give us the courage when pain comes into our lives to choose love and to persist in lament. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The year after I graduated from seminary I spent time in Chicago serving as a chaplain at Children's Memorial Hospital and Grant Hospital in a year-long Clinical Pastoral Education program. Each day as I talked to suffering individuals, both children and adults, and their families who steadfastly stood by them, I was reminded that we live in a world that is unfair. As chaplain, in as much as I represented the God of comfort and healing, I also represented the God who needed to be held accountable for the pain and suffering.

During this year as I prepared for my ordination I learned the value of persisting in lament, both my own and honoring the laments of others. Lament is a passionate expression of grief or sorrow. Lament holds God accountable and therefore is an expression of faith. Nearly half the psalms in scripture are songs of lament and poems of complaint.

Ann Weems, whom Westminster welcomed as a Bay Weekend speaker in 2003, added to this collection of poems in her book Psalms of Lament. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote the foreword to Ann's book and offers the following insights:

A closer look at these psalms reveals a recurring, disciplined form to the complaints and laments. Israel knew how to order its grief, not only to get that grief fully uttered and delivered but also to be sure that, said in its untamable fullness, it is not turned loose with destruction.

What we have in these poems is not raw rage, anger, and sadness; rather what we have has already been ordered, mediated, and stylized to make the rage and hurt more effective, available and practical. It is this ordering of raw grief that is the work of the poem and the gift of the poet. The discipline and expression Ann Weems and Walter Breuggemann elucidate in the psalms, we also feel in the gift of music, especially song in the minor key.

In all of the Psalms of Lament, following the fully-voiced and disciplined expression of grief, the mood and tone of the psalms change from anger and despair to praise and gratitude. The psalmist finds healing in the midst of silence and the mystery of being in the presence of a non-anxious, non-judgmental God. For those who faithfully persist in lament, simply being heard is therapeutic and the genesis of healing.

The entire poem of Job is cast as a series of vigorous complaints in the mouth of Job to which his three friends make inadequate responses. Terrified by his loss, they need to convince themselves that Job's suffering is a result of his sin. Their orthodox beliefs keep them from choosing love, entering into and absorbing their friend's pain to become a healing, non-judgmental presence. They are unable to embrace their shared humanity or to affirm the humbling truth that by the grace of God goes each one of us. Job is baffled by his friends' lack of compassion, empathy, or ability to reach beyond their religious orthodoxy.

Human sinfulness is responsible for suffering in the world; however, this is only partially so. This view does not take into account all the innumerable instances in which suffering is inflicted on men and women for no apparent reason whatsoever, from the ravages of nature to terrible diseases and viruses that cripple and kill. There simply are those terrible moments when no human sinfulness lies behind our pain. In those moments, where is God? When Job finds himself in a faith crisis feeling alone and abandoned, he cries out with the psalmist *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me*. These are the same words Jesus will speak from the cross several hundred years later. God is difficult to find in the midst of suffering, even for Christ.

Job's story was of great comfort to the Israelites who experienced tremendous loss and suffering during the Babylonian exile. The age-old wisdom that the good are blessed with prosperity and the evil punished with misfortune, pain and suffering could no longer be embraced by the exiled Israelites.

Job begins his journey toward spiritual healing by persisting in lament, persisting in asking honest and poignant questions of God and the friends who were his community.

Job's persistence and tenacity lead him beyond traditional religious piety to seeing God's face in the midst of his tremendous loss. And so, with Job, even though our questions may never be fully answered—we can find strength in the courage to ask them, in the gift of lament, and in the God who listens to us and who rejoices when we are not *reduced to silence by the darkness or by the mystery which hides God*.

For Job, it is God who has made us as we are, capable of love and attachment but also susceptible to disease, accidents, violence and betrayal. The wisdom of Job's stance is that it allows him to recognize and to seek the presence of God even in the most desolate of experiences. Although our Creator may never fully answer our laments, complaints, and questions, we find strength in the courage to ask, healing within our lament, and comfort in the faith that calls us to choose love even in the midst of pain. Amen.