

November 6, 2016

Psalm 77

God Is Holding Your Life (The Hope In Lament)

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(Play YouTube Clip of “Put on a Happy Face” with Dick VanDyke and Janet Leigh till 1:20 mins.)

“Just put on a happy face.”

Society encourages us to do this.

Some churches even demand it.

Saying, if you’re not always smiling and joyful,
then you’re not being “a good Christian”.

Yet, the sources of our worship:

the Bible and music

tell a different story.

Many of our hymns and songs

speak of the images of wilderness,

use words that express

sorrow, anger, pain, and confusion.

The Psalms – the songbook of Israel

contains more psalms of lament

than any other type of Psalm.

Jesus himself, upon the cross

in the face of salvation and redemption

cried out using a psalm of lament,

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.”

Sadly, we have misunderstood

the great value of public and private lament.

For lament is a crying out to God

with our doubts,

our incriminations of God and others,
and our complaining.

The Psalms give written and verbal expression to
God's people's struggle to comprehend
the vicissitudes of their lives
in light of God's promise to protect and sustain.
The Psalms tackle this discrepancy of promise
and living reality
with forthrightness
and a depth of emotion
that unnerves us.

Let me just say here,
that lamenting is more than just
grumbling or
p and m (pissing and moaning).
A grumbler has already reached a conclusion,
shut down all desire
and postures with questions
that are barely concealed accusation.

Rather, lamenting is truly
asking, seeking, and knocking
to comprehend the heart of God.
A lament involves the energy to search,
not to shut down the quest for truth.
A lament uses the language of
pain, anger and confusion
and moves toward God.

Lament is a cry of agony.
It is the cry of "How Long, O Lord?"
It is the cry of suffering which propels us
to struggle with God.

Lament is due to having had to eat and drink sorrow.

Radical pain is often required
before we are prone to surrender to God's goodness.
We struggle with God in order to comprehend why
God remains silent when we want God to speak,
abandons us when we want God's protection,
and attacks us when we want God's comfort.

The cry of pain

is our deepest acknowledgment -
we are not home.

We are divided from our
own body,
our own deepest desires,
our dearest relationship.

We are separated and long for
utter restoration.

It is the cry of pain that initiates the search to ask God,
"What are you doing?"

The Cry of Anger

Deeply embedded in our cry
is the assumption

"If you loved me, you would take away this agony."

If pain initiates the search,
then anger clarifies what we are
most deeply demanding –
relief.

The cry of anger is the
cry of the soul that says,
"I must have a new perspective, or I will die."
Anger is good
when it moves the heart to confusion,

to feeling trapped between our belief in God
and our movement away from God,
when it opens the heart to redemption.

The Cry of Confusion

Pain propels the search,
anger makes the search
a matter of life and death;
and confusion opens the heart to
God's answers.

Confusion - experienced in the middle of
asking tough questions
opens the door to a new perspective.

For the Psalmist,
agony can't be denied,
and God can't be denied either.

From Psalm 77 -

The Agony:

"Will the Lord reject forever?
Has God's promise failed for all time?
Has God forgotten to be merciful?"

God Will Not Denied:

"I will remember the deeds of the Lord;
yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago...
You led your people like a flock
through the mighty waters,
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Touch questions asked,
an opening of the door
to a new perspective.

Lament is a search –
a declaration of desire
that will not rest with pious refusal to ache,
nor an arrogant self-reliance

that is a hardened refusal to search.

The language of lament is oddly
the shadow side of faith.
For the person who hears your lament
and far more bears your lament against them,
paradoxically, is someone you deeply wildly trust.
It is the paradox
that opens the heart to unfathomable rest,
to sing a lament against God in worship
reveals far, far greater trust
than to sing a jingle about
how happy we are
and how much we trust God.

Why is lament important in worship?

Pain separates.

Pain, anger, and confusion deepens our loneliness.

To sing in sorrow is to befriend one another and to
authenticate we are not ultimately alone,
even if no one can fully comprehend our pain now.

The awareness we are not alone
increases our courage to honestly look at pain
and to struggle to know God.

It gives us less excuse to withdraw from fellowship
assuming either no one understands me,
or everyone else has his or her life in order.

Those assumptions destroy
the integrity of true Christian community.

Pain not only separates,

But it also numbs the heart.

Nothing is more common than a person who has been
deeply hurt, disappointed to make an internal oath,
“I will never be hurt again.”

The oath leaves the heart calloused and blind
to the heartache of others
and the passion of God.

But to sing and talk together –
to allow your sorrow and joy to be mine,
and mine to be yours,
Requires me to stay alive to sorrow and to the struggle of my
pain, anger, and confusion with God.

If I am alive to God, then I am more apt to
note your deadness
and more gentle and courageous in calling forth
the lament to you.

To sing lament together will enable me to more readily ask
the question, “How are you? What are you doing with God
in the midst of your “presumed” and not unusual song of
sorrow.

Could this be the reason why we are told in Ephesians 5:19
to “speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual
songs.

To lament together also holds a vision of what might occur.

Lament is not an end in itself.
For God does not want us to sing laments
as the staple of our worship,
nor should it be our predominant internal hymnal of choice.
But, lament opens the heart to wrestle
with a God who knows
that sorrow leads to comfort
and lament moves to praise
as sure as the crucifixion
gave way to the resurrection.

Listen for lament –
find some place to sing with others
the songs of sorrow.

Pray the psalms – line by line
until you join the throng that wrestled with God
and receives the blessing of a limp and a new name,
just like our forefather Jacob did!

Then your heart will not be as afraid of lament,
nor your soul so leery to live
the paradox of sorrow and joy.
Then we may learn to sing
with a new passion
the words we must learn
from those who not only sing of sorrow,
but lived lament until it broke loose into the freedom of joy.