

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent. Lent, which means “springtime,” is a period of forty weekdays and six Sundays in which the church prepares through prayer, study, and other spiritual practices for the celebration of the Resurrection of our Lord on Easter. Lent began this past Wednesday with Ash Wednesday and ends on Easter Sunday. The color is purple as you can see, which is suggestive of repentance and renewal. I told the staff this last week as we celebrated Fat Tuesday that I didn’t grow up observing Lent, as that is what our Catholic neighbors did. However, in the last thirty or so years, more and more Protestant churches have begun to give up things or take on a spiritual practice or two for Lent. This year I wanted to invite us all in these next six weeks to look at two spiritual practices on the way to the cross: Lament and Forgiveness. For the next four weeks, we’ll talk about lament, as forgiveness gets a lot more air time in the church.

We used to do Bible drills when I was growing up. Some of you may be familiar. It’s when the Sunday School teacher would pass out the King James Bibles and you’d stand it up- closed- in your hands like this, and you’d wait for her to call out a verse and the first one to find it and read it out loud would “win.” Being the preacher’s kid, I felt the pressure to win. It didn’t help that my brother, who is a year younger than I, was also in the class with me. Double the competition. I’ll never forget the morning that I was trying to quickly look up a psalm and realizing that there were 150 of them, I misheard what the teacher said and read the wrong psalm. The psalm I read was asking God to take out their enemy, and it was very detailed. Mrs. McCowan, my Sunday School teacher and

also my 4th grade teacher, was not happy with me. She told me that THOSE psalms weren't to be read in church. I was confused because I thought the psalms were poetry and praises to God. I felt ashamed and embarrassed. You would think that my preacher dad would have warned me? Curious, I went home and began to read some of these supposed, forbidden psalms- at least to 5th graders- all addressed to God, and I never mentioned this to either of my parents. Fast forward fifteen years later I became reintroduced to these psalms that were rarely if ever preached or taught in Sunday School. It turns out that they served a purpose in the function of Israel's life and worship, just as the psalms of thanksgiving did. They're called lament psalms and some of them are also known as the cursing psalms. And wouldn't you know it...it was during a difficult time of loss for me in my own life that it was reading the lament psalms that made me feel honest, heard and closer to God. It turns out that that over 1/3 of the 150 psalms are lament psalms. And laments aren't only found in the Psalms, they're found in other places in the Bible as well (think Job, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, some of the Gospel stories). These lament psalms are about honest dialogue with God and in this dialogue, nothing is held back. It is raw and relentless. The words of the psalms speak to the very core of human experience in ways other language cannot begin to approach. In this way, the psalms teach us to pray. They teach us to stand faithfully before God, asking and even demanding response, action and answer. As a community of faith and also in our personal prayer lives, we need to recover- to reclaim- the lost spiritual practice of lament, if we don't already have it.

Why doesn't the church talk much about lament? When life is going well, we tend to praise God. However, what about when the opposite is true? What happens when we are overcome by the presence of chaos, brokenness, suffering and death, or by a sudden sense of our human vulnerability, such as war or acts of terrorism or violence? When we hurt physically, we cry out in pain; when we hurt religiously, we cry out in lament. Lamentation can be described as a loud, religious "Ouch!" ([link here](#)). So what is it about us as Christians that we think we have to have it together all the time in our walk with God? Is that being authentic or faithful? God knows anyway. Who are the people in your life with whom you get most angry or sad or joyful or excited? Isn't it with those whom you love the most? Should it not be the same way with God? Isn't the goal to grow in our relationship with and faith in God? In places such as the lament psalms, "God's children are invited into the whirlwind, to cry out and question, to demand and debate, and to consider the big questions of life without resting in easy answers. The Bible reflects the complexity and diversity of the human experience. It turns out that the notion that the psalms only contain uplifting words of comfort and praise is one of the most common misconceptions about the Psalms. You see prayer causes God to do things that God would not otherwise do (Karl Barth, *Lord's Prayer Book*). Prayer changes things; there is power in honest, heartfelt, hold nothing back prayer- whether we sing it or shout it or weep through it. In the Psalms, you will find the right words for nearly every occasion in life" (Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired*).

One scholar says that “lament challenges the status quo by crying out for justice. It runs counter to our American hubris, which focuses on trumpeting our successes.” He explained that “the absence of lament in the liturgy of the American church results in a loss of memory. We forget the necessity of lamenting over suffering and pain” (Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament*). We forget that we can and should approach God with honesty. Author and theologian, Rachel Held Evans, writes, “Often I hear from readers who left their churches because they had no songs for them to sing after the miscarriage, the shooting, the earthquake, the divorce, the diagnosis, the attack, the bankruptcy, the addiction, the trauma. The Psalms are, in a sense, God’s way of holding space for us. They invite us to wrestle, cry, complain, offer thanks, and shout obscenities before our Maker without self-consciousness and without fear. Life is full of the sort of joys and sorrows that don’t resolve neatly in a major key. God knows that. The Bible knows that. Why don’t we” (*Inspired*)? Why are we so afraid to name or omit our feelings to God? Is it because we don’t have hope or are so afraid that no one will answer?! My OT professor, Walter Brueggemann, argues that there is no doubt that the lament psalms had and have an important function in the community of faith. The “genre of lament is a statement of candor before the God from whom no secret can be hid. The speaker tells the story of hurt in forceful detail. There is almost never a statement of guilt nor a statement of helpless despair with a lament; it is rather a statement of insistent hope, as the speaker expects and claims a transformative answer from God. And in regularly using the lament form, Israel kept the justice question visible and legitimate. Though the church avoids the

laments, they are crucial for mature, effective faith. In these psalms, Israel moves from articulation of hurt and anger to submission of them to God, and finally to relinquishment. And only when there is such relinquishment can there be genuine praise and acts of generosity” (*Truth & Hope*).

So this morning we’re going to look at snippets from four different lament psalms, but I invite you to go back and read each of them. “The most interesting and perhaps most important recurring feature of this form of prayer is that while it characteristically begins in need, sadness, or dire strait, these same prayers characteristically end in praise, celebration, and confidence that God has acted or will act” (Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith*). This morning’s first **Psalm** reading is **6:2-4**. Listen for a Word from God. **READ**. The psalmist is afraid that God is out to get him, as he is ill. Have you ever felt that way? Like God is out to get you for something you did wrong? A long time ago the belief was that if you were sick it was something either you or your parents did to cause the illness. Let me be clear here. Sickness is not punishment. That is NOT true; however, the psalmist has real fear of God’s wrath. Yet, there is also a confidence in God’s ability to deliver- to heal the psalmist- because God’s love is faithful. While this psalm does not mention the word “sin,” the speaker models repentance by depending on God’s mercy to sustain his life. **Psalm 7:1-2; 6-8. READ**. This is a prayer for deliverance from enemies who are present and powerful in the psalmist’s eyes. Anyone ever had an enemy? Ever talked about how you felt about that enemy to God? The psalmist is

calling on the God of justice to get angry and judge their enemies. In other words, “God, this is the way I feel; I leave it to you to do what you will.” For this psalmist, God is their refuge and also their shield. Therefore, the psalmist demands that God wake up and take on their enemies. **Psalm 38:10-11. READ.** This psalm is a prayer for help prayed by those who are sick. Specifically- this section- addresses the psalmist’s loneliness in their illness. “Like Psalm 6, this psalm is one of the traditional penitential psalms prayed during Lent and Holy Week” (James L. Mays, *Interpretation: Psalms*). However, also like Psalm 6, this psalm was written at a time when the belief was that God’s wrath at human sin takes effect in negative ways on human life- like sickness. What, instead, if we read this psalm not as individuals but as a community- in the context of the whole of Scripture? In other words, what if the confession of sin is “a condition of every human being and sickness is not correlated with some specific sin of the person who prays but it is rather a condition that brings to light in a special way our sinfulness and need of God’s grace? This psalm offers no other reason than the confession of sin and the loss of wholeness and health as a basis for their appeal to God” (Mays). **Psalm 71:8-12. READ.** This psalm repeats some phrasing also found in Psalms 22 and 31, thus it is often read during Holy Week. It is a prayer for help prayed as a way of seeking refuge with the Lord, especially in old age. Anyone know about old age? Yes, this psalmist is petitioning God for deliverance in the infirmity of old age. This leads to another petition for deliverance from their enemies- making fun of the psalmist- telling them that they have been abandoned by God in their old age. “Though a prayer for help, the

psalm majors in assertions of trust, so much so that confidence in God outweighs the concern with trouble” (Mays). This Lenten journey, let us bring our full selves to God in prayer and in song. This is an invitation to live into the freedom, if you haven’t already, to express before God our joys and celebrations as well as our deepest fears and needs, including our brokenness and the world’s brokenness. Feelings are real and will not go away, and if we do not recognize them and deal with them constructively, they will go underground and pop up later in destructive ways. Lament, like art, is a constructive and healthy way to deal with them before God. It is only after we lament, after we face and express the pain and negativity and get it all out, that healing can begin. It is only by facing and going through the death that we can come to new life, to resurrection. Don’t be far from us, God! For you are our hope. Amen.