

# Sermon Text for March 20, 2022

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## ***Acts 28:26-28, Psalm 43*** ***“When the Psalms lament”***

I have always struggled with the verses in the Bible that the Byrds turned into a famous song in the 60's where it states in Lamentations that there is a time for love and a time for hate a time for war and a time for peace. Those last two have always stuck with me as being contradictory to what Jesus teaches us about the kingdom of God and about what those who inhabit the kingdom of God ought to strive after.

This week I have come to realize how much the war in Ukraine is affecting you. I spoke to a member who came into my office and absolutely was distraught and so very upset with the refugee crisis which is affecting children and families disproportionately. I spoke with a youth who was very much concerned about the war and expressed how he hoped that God would be able to do something directly to stop the Russian army. I think I underestimated how much you are concerned about the war, especially since I know in one of my enews I mentioned how the handful of wars that are happening around the world in African and Asian countries have been somewhat forgotten and the death toll among women and children in those wars is exponentially higher. But I am sensing a real feeling of lament for what is happening in Ukraine.

Paradoxically I have also sensed that in matters of the heart, especially in matters of lament and distress, this region of the world in which we live tends to be fairly austere in its approach to emotion. There is a cultural understanding that if you are struggling you just have to button down and try harder. There is an aversion to think that we might be in a place where people are in need and it is our responsibility to meet those needs. People just need to try harder. But when we address lament, sadness or dismay, oftentimes I see that people feel as if we need to change the subject so we don't brush up against that emotion.

When you read the Psalms you are constantly brushing up against emotion. It contains a treasure trove of emotion from joy and celebration to lament and destitution. I rarely preach on the Psalms, I think I have preached on Psalm 23 and Psalm 121 and that is probably it. I'm not a huge fan of poetry ever since I had to memorize "If" by Rudyard Kipling in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and recite it in front of the whole middle school. I think that is why I read the words of institution during communion today and not try to memorize it, I was scarred by that experience.

For my sermons I like stories, parables, ways in which to make the Word of God come alive and Jesus' teachings real and relevant to us today. I struggle doing that with the Psalms. But this is where we find ourselves in our Bible readings, so this is where we are going to go today. There are 150 Psalms and they are divided randomly into the categories of Psalms of Praise and Thanksgiving, Psalms of Kingship, Pilgrimage Psalms, and today we will be looking at the category of Psalms of lament. These psalms are important to hear and understand, but not necessarily what we ought to emulate. Let's read.

## **READ**

Before we begin, we need to define the term lament. What does it mean? In a lament it touches up on a very human condition which is that of despair. Despair destroys the positive, outgoing view of life and turns a person in upon himself. When you despair all that matters is what you are going through and getting through what you are going through. So the Psalms of lament describe an individual who is in despair as a result of their current life situation and expresses that despair in a psalm, or a song, or a poem. Despair can come about because of a major loss in life or livelihood.

There is an element of lament that assumes God is either absent, hardhearted, or disinterested. Jesus' cry from the cross: My God, My God why have you forsaken me comes directly from Psalm 22 which is itself described as a Psalm of lament. Ultimately despair becomes desperate because there is a sense of separation from God. Is there anything more tragic than that? This Psalm that we are looking at today, Psalm 43, falls squarely within the category of Psalms described as laments.

But let's first get to Acts of the Apostles where we find Paul in the last season of his life as he is in Rome where he eventually dies and he is defending the faith and arguing before those who would listen that the Holy Spirit, God, told the prophets to tell the people of Israel that they are not able to hear the Word of God because they have chosen to be separated from God. This separation from God of their choosing then opened up the doors of salvation to the gentiles, the non-religious, whom Jesus has chosen to make as member of his family.

In some ways the words of Paul are a lament from God to be spoken by the prophets to the people. I wish you would listen, I wish you would understand, I wish you would not think that just because you were born one of my people that you no longer have to obey me. You may put yourself in the temple and in the religious communities, but you will not experience God.

Maybe this lament is heard in churches today. How many of us have experienced the presence of God in church, while we are with those who proclaim Jesus as Savior?

I have repeatedly expressed that what happens here in church is practice for what we do out there in the real world. If we are not able to speak in a way that is loving with each other, or put the needs of others ahead of ours, or distinguish the resources we have as abundant and able to be shared, then it is very possible that these words are directed to us. Paul was sharing a lament that God expressed that his people were religious, but were not faithful. I'll take faithful over religious. I'll take loving over following the law. It is a heartfelt lament because God loves his people.

But we then transition from a lament that God expresses consistently in Scripture – go this people and say, Jesus says the same lament in Matthew and we find it again in John and Paul expresses it in three chapters in Romans 9-11 how God mourns that his people do not understand, but this blindness that he laments, opens the door to salvation for the rest of humanity, for the entire world.

We then transition to a lament by an individual who feels all those things that we mentioned at the beginning of this sermon. A sense of despair as a result of the reality in which they find themselves. We don't know what has happened in the life of this author, but we can guess as we see the tragedy and the carnage unfold before us in the news today. I am so pleased that we have acted as a church to send relief in the form of finances. I spoke on Thursday with Vladimir who is on the frontlines in Belarus ministering to refugees who are crossing the border, yes, into Belarus. He has a young man in his church who is in seminary in St. Petersburg, and he left seminary and went to join the Ukrainian army as a Belarussian. It is amazing to see the bravery the willingness to die in the face of the cruelty and savagery that Russia is unleashing.

But there is still a cloud of despair and as a result lament is an appropriate form of expression at this time. We are also in lent, and lament is a very appropriate expression in this season of the church. Those who take liturgy legalistically would say that we should never sing Alleluia during lent. I say that Sunday is the day of resurrection and it ought to be filled with Alleluia. But there has to be room for lament. And this Psalm bemoans the absence of God which the Psalmist feels, even though by the end of the Psalm he recognizes that God had been there all along.

It is in the lament and the movement of this psalm from a request for vindication and deliverance in vss.1-2 where we hear the real cause of the lament. Defend me against an

ungodly people, from those who are deceitful and unjust. But vs.2 also contains a very clear statement of faith in the midst of a lament. You are the God in whom I take my refuge. Just about all of the Psalms of lament bemoan the absence of God, until you get to the end of the Psalm and it seems like some resolution has taken place. This Psalm follows that same pattern.

God, why have you abandoned me? Why have you cast me off. But then at the last verse, hey, why am I downcast? Once I see your holy hill I will worship you with the harp. It is as if he remember that all life is dependent on God. All life, but the reality of his current life had taken him to the place where he was having a hard time in the midst of the despair. You are my God in whom I rejoice. In these times one comes to God only with the help of God. We aren't able to do it on our own, only the one who gives life and on whom life depends can lead us back to Him.

Jesus laments in his life. Father take this cup from me, with sweat that rolled from his forehead like drops of blood according to Luke 22:44. That is anguish, that is despair, just stay up with me. On the cross the words of betrayal shouted to the father, why have you abandoned me? Lament is meant to be a dialogue between us and God. A dialogue that takes us eventually to the realization that is it only by the grace of God that we are even here on this earth. In this season of Lament, may God bless us and keep us as we look to do his will. Amen.