

It has been hard to read the news this past week. I gave up watching news programs on TV and listening to news on the radio several years ago for sake of my mental and spiritual health but I still begin my days in the old-fashioned practice of reading the daily newspaper, by which I mean scanning the headlines and actually reading important things like the baseball box scores and the funnies and articles that grab my attention. I also rather unwillingly read the news on Facebook. I joined that social media platform to keep up with far-flung friends and relatives but more and more I find it to be primarily an instrument for folks to share their views on the news. As a result, I spend less and less time with it. I already know what I think of the news. And then there are the more thoughtful analyses of current events that are a regular feature of the magazines I read regularly, “Sojourners” and “The Christian Century.” And while it’s good to get the in-depth coverage those periodicals offer, sometimes it’s every bit as hard to read as the daily papers.

There’s been a fair amount of coverage in both “The Christian Century” and “Sojourners” of late about the necessity for healthy faith of practicing the ancient art of lament. Webster’s defines the verb form of lament as “to feel deep sorrow or express it as by weeping or wailing; mourn; grieve. To regret deeply.” For the noun form, Webster’s says, “an outward expression of sorrow; a literary or musical composition, as an elegy or dirge, mourning some loss or death.” There has been a tremendous amount of loss and death in our country and world in the past week, certainly enough to bring us to a point of lament. Mass shootings, mass arrests, the further separation of children from parents, the increase of violence in Kashmir... the list seems endless. And so, this morning, I want to take a look at some examples of lamentation in our Scriptures to see what they might have to teach us.

The first lament comes from the pen, or perhaps the cave wall scratchings, of David, before he became king. Psalm 58 is purported to be the work of David when he was a young man, on the run from King Saul, who had unjustly accused David of treason and was seeking to kill him. To escape, David hid out in caves and, because of his charismatic leadership, gathered around him a band of other such unjustly accused men. They were outlaws, but not in the vein of Butch Cassidy and the Hole-in-the-Wall Gang or even of Robin Hood and his Merry Men. They were just trying to stay alive. David’s companions were amazed and probably furious when he passed up the opportunity to kill Saul when he caught the old king unawares. But David could not bring himself to lift his hand against the anointed King of Israel. Instead, he poured out his fear, grief, and anger into works like the one we read together as our Call to Worship.

We don’t often use such Psalms to begin our time of worship together on Sunday morning, though we’ve read part of a Psalm together almost every Sunday. This is the first time in my 14 years here that we’ve used Psalm 58. We’ve read a few others of late, as Timothy Slemmons put them into his “Year D” lectionary to address their abandonment by the creators of the Revised Common Lectionary. And we have previously used one of the most famous ones. Psalm 137, a lament of the exiled Judeans in Babylon, is probably best known by some thanks to Lee Hays of The Weavers, who arranged a choral treatment by Philip Hayes from 1786. Don McLain picked up the Weavers version and put it on his best-selling “American Pie” album. The same lament was turned into the song “On the Willows” in the musical “Godspell” by Stephen Schwartz. Both modern songs do a fine job of capturing the sadness of exile while leaving out the rather

bloodthirsty desire for vengeance that crops up in the last verses of the Psalm. If you don't know what I mean, look it up later.

We don't use these Psalms much because we tend to favor more upbeat beginnings for our worship services. We want to thank God for all that God has done for us and focus on the positive. Our lives are pretty good, in the grand scheme of things. We may very easily feel that we don't really have the need or even the right to lament. But sometimes, we need to explore the laments in Scripture to remind us that others may not have it as good as we do, that there is real pain in the world and real oppression. It's important for us to remember that for most of the history of the Bible and even in many places in the world now where the Bible is read, it has been the solace of the underdog, the hope of those who are powerless, the comfort of those in pain. If for no other reason, we should explore the scriptures of lament to participate in the grief of others, to open our hearts to those in need.

Lament also recognizes the power of God to change the world and that is important for us to recognize as well. David did not act against Saul because Saul was anointed in the name of God. Did David superstitiously fear reprisal by God if he, David, smote Saul? No, instead he recognized that Saul, as the anointed one, was God's responsibility to bring to heel, not his own. The laments plead with God to act for God is the One who can act and the One who should act. It is not for the ones raising the lament to crush the snake or yank the teeth of the lion, even if they could.

Soong-Chan Rah, the Professor of Church Growth and Evangelism at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago, wrote on lament recently for "Sojourners." He points out that part of the purpose of lament is to cry out "against exiting injustices." He goes on to say that lament in these cases is an important part of healing following injustice. "In order for healing to occur," he writes, "truth must be told and the complete biblical narrative must take root in our community. Lament has to become a part of our story and a part of our healing journey... The ultimate hope of triumph rests not on human strength to fix the problems of the world but on the power of a sovereign God. The spiritual practice of lament acknowledges the source of hope. Lament helps the people of God find hope even in the midst of suffering... speaking truth to power through lament can be a small step towards healing." On those occasions when we do experience suffering, injustice, perhaps even oppression, lament helps us find hope and heal.

Speaking truth to power is certainly the context for our passage from Jeremiah this morning. God gives the prophet a powerful word to take to the reigning King of Judah. The king is not named; the passage comes from a time when Judah had five kings in rapid succession thanks to the intervention of first Egypt and then Babylon. To which king Jeremiah spoke is immaterial – all of the candidates continued the policies of crushing taxation, military adventurism, and judicial malfeasance. They abandoned the nation's covenant with God. They were doing exactly the opposite of what God told them would bring blessing: "Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place." Instead, the kings and their nobles took what they wanted, especially from those who could not fight back, and there was no relief in the courts.

Through the prophet, God reminded the powerful of Judah that there would be consequences for their actions: “But if you will not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation.” And, indeed it was so. The Babylonians shortly destroyed the palace, the Temple, and all of Jerusalem. The men who ruled Judah during Jeremiah’s ministry were the last of the House of David to do so with the exception of Zerubbabel’s short-lived governorship under Persia. And, of course, the spiritual rule of Jesus, Son of David.

So, how does this relate to us? I don’t think I have to tell you that the news of the week to which I referred before tells us that the U.S. is on a very similar path to Jeremiah’s Judah. Our national policy seems built on exactly the same sins that God told Jeremiah to point out. We call them immigrants instead of aliens or strangers or sojourners, good Biblical terms, all, but our government does wrong and violence to them in direct opposition to the will of God. We round them up, split up their families, deport the parents, and “disappear” the children or leave the little ones in camps with inadequate sanitation and food, where reports say they are routinely abused, even sexually. In addition to those orphaned ones, our foster care system is rife with abuse as kids are shuttled from home to home and then dropped unceremoniously from any aid at age 18. We thought our widows were protected by the Social Security system devised by the New Deal but Congress has repeatedly failed to raise payments to meet cost of living increases and now Congressional leadership, after giving tax cuts to their wealthy supporters, their future employers, and themselves, is threatening to raid the Social Security fund to finance the government whose budget they’ve broken. People around the world are looking at the once bright promise of the U.S. and asking, “What happened?”

The answer today is the same as in the day of Jeremiah: we have abandoned our covenant. I’m not referring to the covenant of Yahweh with Abraham, honored at least in speech by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. Oh, that covenant is plenty on my mind this morning as having been broken by our co-religionists and fellow monotheists. But this is not, after all, a Christian or even a monotheistic nation. We have no national religion as stipulated in the First Amendment to the Constitution: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” No, there is another covenant we have abandoned – our national covenant. That covenant sounds like this: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” And our abandoned covenant sounds like this: “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” As I look at the actions and intentions of our Federal government this morning, I say, like Jeremiah, that we have abandoned our covenant.

Of course, you could make a pretty substantial argument, as some have, that those covenants were broken as soon as they were ratified. Even the man who wrote the words, “all men are created equal,” owned slaves. The men who drafted our Constitution eventually agreed that those African slaves who were clearly not equal in their eyes to themselves could count as 3/5 of a person to allow the Southern states a greater representation in Congress. As we’ve discussed in this place before, the slaves were freed in 1863 and won the right to vote in 1870 but retrograde

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forces have worked continually up to this very day to restrict access to voting by African-Americans. Women of all races, of course, did not gain the vote nationally until 1920. And the nations that existed in Northern America prior to the arrival of the European settlers have been destroyed, diminished, relocated, harried, and kept powerless, despite the bravery of many of their men in defending the very nation that abuses them. The “sacred documents” of our nation are largely, like our covenant with God, given only lip-service by those who are most responsible for their upholding. As citizens of the United States, we should know better and we should be ashamed, if not for ourselves, then for our nation.

As I read the words of David and of Jeremiah and compare them to the newspapers and journals and conversation of my friends, I am moved to lament and I hope you are, too. That is part of our sacred calling, my sisters and brothers, to weep with those who weep as well as to rejoice with those who rejoice. Like those who raised up the laments we find in our scriptures, we are also called to speak truth to power. Whether that means writing letters and e-mails or phoning our legislators or marching with the Poor People’s Campaign, as some of us did last summer, or reminding our friends and family of the call of God upon all of us, we must not shun our duty to be mouthpieces for God and for God’s justice.

On Thursday, as we met with the Evergreen Association Executive Committee, Rev. Doug Avilesbernal asked us to consider the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery found in John 8. In our conversation around that story, we identified the things that Jesus did to bring peace and justice to that situation and how we might emulate his actions. Jesus, too, spoke truth to power, facing down the scribes and Pharisees. He sought justice and righteousness – he called on the woman to sin no more just as he reminded the leaders that they, too, were sinners. He showed his love for everyone present by not calling out those leaders’ sins publicly and by forgiving the woman. And he left room for God to act, allowing those who were trying to trap him to be convicted of their wrongness and then slipping away. In other words, he did justice, he loved mercy, and he walked humbly with God. These qualities are at the very heart of the healing connected with lament.

And so, we, my sisters and my brothers, must emulate Jesus. As we raise our voices in lament, let us remember that we are to speak truth to power and not simply complain to God. We are to seek justice, not vengeance, for we are to love even our enemies, even as Jesus loved and asked forgiveness for those who killed him. And always, humbly, we are to leave room for God to act, for all human beings are beloved by God and as sacred to him as was Saul. We must humbly wait for God to act not only on those who have perpetuated injustice but also we must wait for God to act on us, to heal our wounded hearts, to bring us wholeness and peace, the Shalom of God. When we act for peace, for justice, for mercy, for righteousness, then we will find peace, just as Jesus promised for peacemakers. And as our hearts heal and find peace, we will be able to turn from our words of lament to our songs of joy. Since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can we keep from singing?

Thanks be to God. Amen.