

The Necessity of Lament
First Sunday in Lent 2018
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We begin with the concept of covenant...of relationship with God. God promised us that we and all of creation (all living things) would always be held in the care of God. Being held in relationship with the Creator of the universe is the context for the rest of the message this morning.

It's been a rough week. I didn't want to watch the endless coverage of the latest school shooting in Florida this week, but I forced myself to do it. Like so many of us in the United States, and around the world, it is far easier for me to numb myself out, to shut out all of the pain and distress, all of the parents and students who have been crying out in anger and pain, than to listen to them and feel it...

But that is neither human nor is it faithful.

Jesus came to give life and to live it abundantly. He came to remind us to be fully alive, to embrace both the full joy and sadness of life.

If you're like me, you may be fairly good at experiencing the joys and celebrations life brings us; but when it comes to the events which bring stress, sadness and anger...well, I may reluctantly dive into them...but certainly not fully embracing them. It's uncomfortable and those feelings are not very pretty.

This week, I was drawn to a TEDtalk by Susan David, PhD which stopped me in my tracks and made me reconsider my thoughts about this.

*"Being positive has become a new form of moral correctness..." David conducted a survey with 70,000 people and found that a third of those either judged themselves for having so-called bad emotions like sadness, anger, or even grief, or actively try to push aside these feelings... "Normal emotions are now seen as good or bad. But when we push aside these normal emotions to embrace false positivity, we lose our capacity to develop skills to deal with the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. I've had hundreds of people tell me what they don't want to feel. They say things like, I don't want to try because I don't want to feel disappointed. Or I just want this feeling to go away. I understand, I say, **but you have dead people's goals. Only dead people never get unwanted or inconvenienced by their feelings. Only dead people never get stressed, never get broken hearts, never get the disappointment that comes with failure. Tough emotions (sadness, anger, disappointment) are part of our contract with life. You don't get to have a meaningful life, raise a family, or leave the world a better place without discomfort. Discomfort is the price of admission to a meaningful life.**" Susan David PhD TEDtalk*

We were created to experience the whole gamut of emotions, and we are called to be fully alive. Faithfulness to God includes feeling all of it...and BECAUSE we are in relationship, in covenant with a God who loves us, we don't have to have false positivity. The meaningful lives we are called to live means we will be uncomfortable. AND as we see from the many writers in the scriptures in Job, in the Psalms, for example, we can wail out to God in anger, in sorrow, in pain. God can handle it all. And when you're in any kind of committed relationship, all of those feelings come into play.

Lent is a season when we are given permission to spend time in lament, of mourning; We have time to grieve over what's keeping us from God, not only personally but as a community and as a nation. We ask--Where do we need to repent, to change our ways and to ask for forgiveness so that we may more fully express God's love and grace?

Take a walk through the Psalms during Lent, and make your own. When you express honest grief, anger and sorrow to God, you're expressing true intimacy.

Last week, I went to a conference at Union Seminary on preaching through Lent and Easter. A Jewish professor talked about the Hebrew texts of lament. He said something counterintuitive yet profound and true..."Lament yields to hope and praise...How can it be that despair leads to hope...is the most unanswered question." But you see it throughout the Psalms.

Here's the thing I know...that when we spend time in the depths of despair and pain and see it through, we are able to get to higher places of joy. Isn't that what we celebrate at Easter? The surprise of joy after pain and loss?

So take this time of Lent with God...cry out to God. Be gut level honest...and let yourself go to the depth of whatever you're experiencing...

In the Gospels prayer was always followed by action. Jesus said pray for the poor and feed the hungry. Acts of justice to further the kingdom of God always followed. After he healed people, we often told them to go and tell others. Spread the good news...

That's why we can't just send our thoughts and prayers after mass shootings. It doesn't sit right with people because Jesus never just left it there...

Here's how one faith leader addressed the Colorado legislature this week:

Opening Prayer for the Colorado State House in the Aftermath of a Tragedy February 15, 2018

Our God and God of all people,

God of the Rich and God of the poor.

God of the teacher and God of the student.

God of the families who wait in horror.

God of the dispatcher who hears screams of terror from under bloodied desks.

God of the first responder who bravely creeps through ravaged hallways.

God of the doctor who treats the wounded.

God of the rabbi, pastor, imam or priest who seeks words of comfort but comes up empty.

God of the young boy who sees his classmates die in front of him.

God of the weeping, raging, inconsolable mother who screams at the sight of her child's lifeless body.

God of the shattered communities torn apart by senseless violence.

God of the legislators paralyzed by fear, partisanship, money and undue influence.

God of the Right.

God of the Left.

God who hears our prayers.

God who does not answer.

On this tragic day when we confront the aftermath of the 18th School shooting in our nation on the 46th day of this year, I do not feel like praying.

Our prayers have not stopped the bullets.

Our prayers have changed nothing.

Once again, a disturbed man with easy access to guns has squinted through the sights of a weapon, aimed, squeezed a trigger and taken out his depraved anger, pain and frustration on innocents: pure souls. Students and teachers. Brothers and sisters. Mothers and fathers- cut down in an instant by the power of hatred and technology.

We are guilty, O God.

We are guilty of inaction.

We are guilty of complacency.

We are guilty of allowing ourselves to be paralyzed by politics.

The blood of our children cries out from the ground.

The blood of police officers cut down in the line of duty flows through our streets.

I do not appeal to You on this terrible morning to change us. We can only do that ourselves.

Our enemies do not come only from faraway places.

The monsters we fear live among us.

May those in this room who have the power to make change find the courage to seek a pathway to sanity and hope.

May we hold ourselves and our leaders accountable.

Only then will our prayers be worthy of an answer.

AMEN

Rabbi Joe Black

Maybe this stirs feelings in you...good. Feel it and cry out. Lament, be angry. God can handle it...thanks be to God!

Amen