

Sara Anne Berger, First Presbyterian Church, Natchitoches, 7.5.20, Lamentations 5:15-22, Psalm 23:4

Sermon Resources: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7853310/characters/nm0068338>

Catherine Marshall, *Christy*

We are on week 4 of things I want to make sure you've heard from me before I leave you. I've told you that God loves you. I've told you that God cares about you. I've told you that you are allowed to rest. And, today, I want you to know that you are allowed to doubt. More than doubt, actually. You are allowed to doubt, to question, to mourn, to lament, to wonder. You are allowed.

You are allowed, in fact, to doubt what I've told you, to question it, to wonder about it. You are allowed to lament and mourn in the face of it. You are allowed to doubt that God loves you, you are allowed to question that God cares about you, you are allowed to wonder if you are really allowed to rest. You are allowed to lament and mourn in a way that shows up as questions and doubt. You are allowed.

In the show, *The Good Place*, there's a scene, where the main character, Eleanor, in a moment of heartbreak, asks Janet, a sort of human version of Google, to tell her "the answer". "What answer?", Janet wonders. "The answer to everything", Eleanor replies. "There has to be meaning to life, otherwise the universe is just made of pain, and I don't like the thought of that". And Janet doesn't tell her that there isn't pain, nor does she give the answer to the universe. But she helps Eleanor understand that the pain is part of the mystery, and that to live meaningfully in this universe, we have to embrace the uncertainty, the parts where we are not sure, where we doubt.

And that's basically what the book of Lamentations does, too. This section from Lamentations, particularly, is saying 'tell me the answer', it's asking 'is there meaning here, is there anything more than this pain?' And this section, but the

whole book of Lamentations is a description of wonder, mourning, lament, questioning and doubt. “Why have you forgotten us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days?” Is it possible that God has utterly rejected us and is angry with us beyond measure? Lamentations makes space for the uncertainty, for questioning, mourning, and doubt.

And here’s the other amazing thing, that part I just read, “unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure”, that part is the very last sentence in Lamentations. It doesn’t come with a tidy wrap up, an answer, a solution. It ends with the question and the lament and the doubt hanging in the air—has God forgotten us completely, rejected us utterly, is God angry with us beyond measure? And that’s how it ends.

Isn’t it amazing that this is in here? That this is still in our bible? Because, if you’ve done any studying about how the biblical canon came together, you’ll know that they could have said “you know this is really bleak and not really an expression of solid, certain faith, maybe let’s just leave this one on the cutting room floor”. No, it was kept in, it remains, all these centuries later. And listen, y’all, this is the tamest part of Lamentations, but if you really want to encounter some biblical doubt, lament, horror, questioning and uncertainty, read all 5 of these chapters. And then be even more amazed that this is in here. For us to read and learn from and be comforted, maybe, but at least to know that if this is allowed, then we are allowed to doubt, as well.

And it’s not the only place, either. The psalms ask why, and how come, and have you forgotten us, of God, too. Abraham is usually our picture of faith, but even he second guesses God and argues with God and bargains with God. In Matthew, when Jesus returns, it describes his reception as “some worshiped, but some doubted”. And of course, probably most famously, is the man’s respond to Jesus, “I believe, help my unbelief”. Questions, lament, mourning, wondering, and

even doubt are found throughout scripture, and on the lips and minds of some of the most faithful characters. These, and our passage from Lamentations tell us that we, too, are allowed to question, mourn, wonder and doubt.

And the reason it's important that we do allow for this, that we engage in, at least, the mourning and wondering, is that it shows we have noticed what's going on, that we aren't immune or shut off, that our hearts are not made of stone. This passage from Lamentations in its bleak assessment, is acknowledging the suffering of Judah, the suffering of these people. The writer is looking around and going 'I see what is happening here and my heart is broken over it, and I have some questions, it causes me some doubts'. The writer of Lamentations doesn't have a faith that is so rock-hard as to be unchanged by suffering or unaffected by pain. And the verse from Psalm 23 we heard today, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley", it doesn't say 'If I were to, perhaps, walk through a dark valley', it says 'I walk through the valley, it is happening, it is occurring, I see it and experience it and am aware of it, I respond to this dark and shadowy valley that I am in'. Questioning, mourning, even doubting aren't a sign of a weak faith, they're a sign of a compassionate heart, a moved spirit, an awareness and responsiveness to the world's pain.

As a pastor, I encounter two kinds of responses to me, when it's known. Either people want to prove to me how what I believe is absolutely un-true, and seem to think they are introducing doubt to me for the first time. But the other is folks who want to prove to me that their faith is absolutely solid and without a doubt. Even if they sort of dip a toe into it, say, "Well I wondered why God did that", or "I really question this", they'll immediately then cover with "But I know God is good and right, pastor" like just to make sure they're covered. Sometimes folks feel compelled to say the exactly right faithful thing around me, so that I'll be absolutely sure of their faith. And listen, I understand the impulse, but the thing is,

I don't worry as much when you express healthy doubt or questions to me, when you mourn and lament as a person of faith. I worry when you maintain that you have never had a doubt. That you've never questioned. When you stop your own grieving because it might be unfaithful, somehow. That worries me more. It makes me think, "you've never had a doubt? A single one? You've never looked around at some of the most terrible things in this world and had cause to doubt, or at least to question or wonder, at the very least to mourn and lament? Never?" That worries me, because it makes me think you aren't paying attention.

Maybe you truly haven't, though, I'll allow that there could be someone here with absolute faith, the kind to move mountains, and I would love to talk to you. But the reason I'm telling you that you're allowed to doubt, that you're allowed to do that, to question, to wonder, to mourn, to lament, as a person of faith is I think most of us have, and we need to know that that's not a separate, shameful part of who we are, that it's allowed, that it's normal, that it might even be healthy, and that at the very least, owning it and allowing it, makes for a more honest faith.

One of my favorite parts of the novel, "Christy", is when Christy Huddleston, after the unexpected death of a friend, who died much too young and too painfully, goes up on a mountaintop to be angry with God. And she think of it as rebellion, so she says, "I knew that it was wrong not to speak out my rebellion to the One at whom it was directed...Some of what I said bordered on blasphemy. Yet there was a feeling of soundness about being honest. If there was a God, that God would have to be truth. And in that case, candor—however impertinent—would be more pleasing to God than posturing." Which is all a way of describing bringing honest doubt to God.

You are allowed to doubt, and if you can, you are allowed to bring that doubt to God. I believe, help my unbelief, the man says, directly to Jesus. Lamentations asks God "why", directly. It is a more honest faith to own it, to admit it, to allow

the doubt, questions, mourning, and bring them before God, rather than to pretend they aren't there. You are allowed to doubt, and to bring that doubt to God.

Because God already knows about it. Even if you manage to hide it from everybody else, you aren't hiding it from God. Psalm 139 says even before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely. You might as well be honest about your doubts and wonderings and lament, because God already knows them. And what Psalm 23:4 tells us is that in the darkest valley, in that place where things are hidden and uncertain, God is there. With you. God is in the deepest dark, the shadows, the opaque mystery. God is already there in the doubt, the wonder, the lament. God isn't surprised, so you might as well be honest about it.

And who better to bring that to, than the God whose rod and staff will comfort us, even in the dark valley? Who better? And what would be better than to go into that dark valley, where God is, to that valley of doubt, questioning, lament and mourning, and face it? To acknowledge it and see if God can lead you through? God is the God of the whole entire universe. So the Lord can handle your doubts.

Now, I'll just say briefly, cause this is really a sermon for another time, God may offer correctives to that doubt, may respond to those questions, may offer guidance for that mourning and may answer your lament. God may also use that rod and staff to get you back where you ought to be. Just because you're allowed to doubt, doesn't mean you'll necessarily be allowed to camp out there forever, that you'll give up all attempts to be faithful. You walk through the valley, you don't want to live there permanently.

And, it's also why I think it's good to be a part of a community of faith, not only when you doubt, but also then. It's good to be there, and stay there, even when it's hard, so that when we doubt, when we question, when we lament, when we mourn, we have people to mourn with us. We have people to show us their

experience in response to our wonderings. And to, perhaps, believe, even when we can't, to pray for us and on our behalf, when we cannot find the words, when, perhaps, we cannot even conceive of God. Psalm 23 is a metaphor, but if we work within the metaphor, God is a shepherd, but you would never be a shepherd of just one sheep. Sheep are not ever supposed to be alone. Sheep are in a herd, a flock. If, in the dark valley, you can't quite believe that God is with you, maybe the rustling and bumping and presence of the other sheep can help you through. I think the community of faith is the exactly right place to be when we doubt.

What that means, though, is that as a community of faith, we're gonna have to remove any veneer of perfection in our faith, any desire to maintain an image of unwavering, undoubting faith. We're gonna have to be a place where, in the words of Matthew, some worship and some doubt, and we help each other along through the dark valley. We're going to have to be a place where we say I believe, help my unbelief. Where we can ask "Have you utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure?" AND say "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I know you are with me". And in the times where we are confident in faith, we'll have to be more welcoming and accepting of doubt, and of people who are responding to the world with faithful questioning, wondering, and lamenting.

You are allowed to doubt. Because I think that honest doubt, honest questioning, honest lament and mourning and wondering in the uncertainty of this life, can help us find our faith once again. I think that those things laid bare before God, can help us find a deeper faith than we had before.

So, ask your questions. Wonder about things. Mourn and lament over the brokenness. Respond to God and where it seems like God is absent. Face the dark valley, knowing that God is with us, and so are the other sheep. Face your doubts, offer them to God, with honesty, and bring them before the one whose rod and staff are a comfort to us, and who is with us through the darkest valley. Amen.