

“Hope and Lament”

A sermon based on Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

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In college, I had the opportunity to study with the late Rev. Dr. Peter Gomes, and I remember a story he told my class. A young woman came to him in some distress; crises had arisen in her personal life and she felt that her faith in God was shattered. And he asked her to go home, and start reading the psalms – one after another, until she had read them all, and then come back in a day or two. When she returned, the scripture had shifted her perspective, as he had hoped it would. Because the book of psalms is often mischaracterized. We think of it, sometimes, as containing only poetry that praises and thanks God. And it does contain psalms of thanksgiving and psalms of praise. But the book of psalms is much more nuanced than that – it encompasses the range of human emotion. So as she read the psalms from beginning to end, this young woman had encountered people of faith giving voice to her fears, her grievances, her sorrows, her pain, alongside the more positive, uplifting sentiments of comfort, consolation, thanks, and praise. Her faith was transformed and renewed as she read ancient words that gave voice to experiences like hers, and saw that people of faith could, and had, and in scripture did, turn to God with their pain, grief, anger, and doubt.

We encounter such a psalm today, on our first Sunday of Advent. Walter Brueggemann¹ characterizes this as a psalm of community lament – it seems to be a psalm that laments a “public devastation,” he notes, and it is framed by three repetitions of the same plea: “Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.” The psalm speaks of the sorrow of the people, and imagines that God has visited upon them whatever misfortune they are suffering. “You have fed [your people] with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves,” the psalmist wails. People throughout the ages have wondered whether misfortunes and calamities are brought about by God, and if not, how it is that tragedies happen. It is one of the great mysteries of faith, and one that I won’t be able to solve for us today. I don’t know what had befallen the people of God to give rise to this lament, but I believe that God never desires or rejoices in human suffering, but that as people of the resurrection, we know that God can bring new life even out of the very worst. The psalm stands firm in the trust that God is powerful to restore the people, that God is a “God of hosts” – a God of power and might, as “hosts” refers to military forces – that God’s shining face can restore and redeem.

Our bulletin art today is a contemporary interpretation of today’s psalm. The artist, Lisle Gwynn Garrity, writes of her piece:

Psalms of lament, such as Psalm 80, give us permission to add our voice to the choruses of faithful outcries throughout the ages. They give us permission to be fully honest—with

¹ *Psalms*, Walter Brueggemann, William H. Bellinger, Jr. *New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, 2014.

ourselves and with God. They give us permission to proclaim that God is powerful enough to take it—and to respond to our pleas. Lamenting, therefore, is an act of robust faith. When we cry out to God, we name the disruption, disorientation, and disorder of our lives. We dismantle the myth that we have everything under control. We awaken to our own pain and the suffering of others. We ask God to wake up God’s power. In this image, I drew a visual prayer of lament, grieving some of the many hardships we’ve collectively faced in 2020. A healthcare worker masks her son as he prepares to go into a precarious learning environment. A church building announces its closure. A crashing stock market creates a chasm through the composition. An eviction notice and a Zoom meeting loom in the background. An obituary hangs near hands testing a COVID-19 vaccine. Tears fall like rain. God, wake up your power. Restore us. Let your face shine, so that we might be saved.



We are in a space of lament as this holiday season arrives. My family spent Thanksgiving by ourselves, and had zoom gatherings with our extended families, because travel and visits are not safe right now. We just canceled our vacation plans – we might still take some time off, but our

hopes from the summer that we could spend a week at a skiing destination now seem foolhardy. And those are just the small inconveniences of my family. The death toll is rising, the economic and emotional devastation is growing. We are in a time of lament.

And yet, this week we light the candle of hope. Hope and lament are, I would suggest, two sides of the same coin. We lament because we know in our bones that a better world is possible, and it is not here. We hope because we hold fast to the dream of a world made new.

In a 2019 keynote address, the Rev. Dr. Emilie Townes spoke about hope, saying:

“Hope means we have opened our eyes, hearts, minds, souls, very spirits
and now see and feel and touch and smell the joy and the agony living in the fractures of
creation
that is the irony of hope
for in our yearning for it
we often walk far away from it as we try to come home to it
...
hope is one more piece to the fabric of the universe
one more way to signal this restless journey we are on
one more sign that Emmaus is not the end of the journey
but its beginning
you see, I don’t think hope is the end product on the assembly line of our lives
no, I think it is simply a part of the journey
part of the way in which we come to know God’s way in our lives with a richness that
ripens and ripens and ripens . . .”

So, beloved in Christ, let us hold on to hope, knowing that hope and lament go hand in hand, as we hold together our wakefulness to the ways the world is broken, and our dream – God’s dream – of a world restored and redeemed and made new. As this Advent season begins, we lift up our voices to say, “Restore us, O Lord God of Hosts, O come, O come, Emmanuel; let your face shine, that we may be saved.” Amen.