

Sermon is below scripture

Scripture for May 17, 2020 – sermon below

From Lamentations 1

How lonely sits the city of Jerusalem, that was once so full of people. She who was once great among the nations now sits alone like a widow. Once the queen of all the earth, she is now a slave. She weeps bitterly with tears on her cheeks. Her pursuers have overtaken her in the midst of her distress.

Lord, see my anguish! My heart is broken and my soul despairs. I have cried until the tears no longer come; my heart is broken. My spirit is poured out in agony as I see the desperate plight of my people.

From Psalm 10

O Lord, why do you stand so far away? Why do you hide when I am in trouble.?

From Psalm 13

O Lord, how long will you forget me? Forever? How long will you look the other way? How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul, with sorrow in my heart every day? How long will my enemy have the upper hand?

May God add a blessing to the reading, hearing and understanding of scripture. Amen.

May 17, 2020

“Let Us Lament”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Selected verses from Psalms and Lamentations

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Well, here we are – week ten of not having church here in our sanctuary. Of not being able to see our families, not going out to eat, kids not having school, no proms or graduations, no sporting events, no travel, and on and on. Looking into the summer, who knows what it will mean to go the beach. Events like the Fourth of July Fireworks, Barnstable County Fair and Falmouth Road Race have been cancelled. And tomorrow we’ll learn if our stay-at-home advisory will be extended, and what new regulations we’ll have to deal with. And so don’t some of those scriptures we just heard hit home? “O Lord, why do you stand so far away? Why can’t we come together to worship you? My heart is broken as I see the desperate plight of the people – people who are sick, or dying, who are home alone, who are out of work. How long O Lord? How long will my enemy, this virus, have the upper hand?”

Yes, these are the questions we bring to God. We come to him in frustration and ask that inevitable question, “Why?” And we lament. We lament. Now what exactly does it mean to lament? Well, lament is when we cry out and express our grief, our sorrow and perhaps even our anger over our situation. And surprisingly, lament seems to be an acceptable way to speak to God in scripture. You just heard it - David lamenting his feelings of abandonment, “How long, O Lord?” You heard the prophet Jeremiah as he was crying out, “How lonely sits the city of Falmouth that once was full of people. She weeps bitterly in the night with tears on her cheeks. Her pursuer, the virus, has overtaken her in the midst of her distress.” You’re all familiar with the Old Testament book of Job, and how he lost all his animals, his servants, even his children, and was then struck with painful boils all over his body. And Job cried out in lament, “Why was I ever born?” And even Jesus cried out in lament from the cross when he quoted Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” These are genuine, gut wrenching feelings from people who believed in God, and yet wondered where God was in the midst of their anguish and suffering, just like we do sometimes.

But there's more to lament. For one thing, lament acknowledges that bad things happen. When we lament, we are recognizing that pain and suffering is inevitable in this world. Even Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble.” And lament accepts that. But the other thing is, when we lament, we are really reaching out to God in faith and trust. Let me say that again: when we lament, we are really

reaching out to God in faith and trust, believing that God will bring us through. We are saying, “God I need you. I am desperate. But I know that you can and will help me.” Lament actually pushes us into the presence of God, and lets us hold onto God in the midst of our difficulty. It says that we trust that God can redeem our situation and transform our suffering. And so, lament isn't giving up, it's giving over. Giving our difficulty over to the only one who can overcome it: God.

Because God can indeed work through our circumstances to bring good out of bad. One of my favorite Bible verses is Romans 8:28. “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” And here's proof! Consider David - after his lament, he became the greatest of Kings. Jerusalem was rebuilt once more. The Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. And Christ rose triumphant from dead! And here's another example from the very beginning in the Book of Genesis. Joseph was one of twelve sons of the Old Testament Patriarch, Jacob. His brothers treated him harshly, and sold him into slavery, where Joseph ended up working for the Pharaoh. Through a series of, let's say, “unusual” events, Joseph was put in charge of controlling the food supply during a famine, and making sure people had enough to eat. When he later faced his brothers, they were frightened at what Joseph might do to them. But Joseph said to them, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

And one more example – let me share something I learned when I visited the Holy Land. About sheep. Sheep are totally dependent on the shepherd. They're defenseless but stubborn, and prone to wander off on their own. And some sheep are more insistent in their wandering than others, which puts them in danger of becoming lost, just like us. So in order to protect and save that particular sheep, the shepherd will actually break the bone of one of its legs so that it can't wander off. Now that sounds cruel, but wait. The shepherd splints and repairs the leg and then he lifts the sheep onto his shoulders, laying it carefully around his neck, and he carries the sheep there all day, every day for weeks, while the broken bone heals. For only a short while is the sheep in pain and suffering. And as the leg heals and grows strong, the sheep is lying around the neck of the shepherd, in actuality, growing closer and closer to the shepherd. Becoming as one with the shepherd. It learns the shepherd's voice, it knows his smell, and all his mannerisms. He begins to understand and become attached to the shepherd in a whole new way. And inevitably, it is this particular sheep who, after it is healed, becomes just like the shepherd and helps lead and guide the other sheep. Can't we trust our Good Shepherd, Jesus to do the same for us?

Yes, God can bring good out of the difficulties of our lives. Even the difficulty of COVID-19. I've seen it happen here at John Wesley already. We've got ladies making facemasks, we've started John Wesley Cares – to help each other stay in touch, and make sure we are all cared for. People are emailing one another, calling one another, making crafts to give away, dropping off treats on doorsteps of our congregation. People who hardly knew each other are now feeling connected, feeling supported, feeling a depth of Christian fellowship and love in ways we never have before. This is God working all things together for good.

How long, O Lord, will all of this last? I don't know. But I do know that if we trust God, listen to God, and obey what God calls us to do, we will find a way through. And then, we will cry out with the psalmist who also says, "I trust in your unfailing love. I will rejoice because you have rescued me. I will sing to the Lord because he is good to me."

I want to close today with the Serenity Prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr. You all know it, but it speaks so beautifully about all that we are going through.

Let us pray:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
Courage to change the things I can; And wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time; Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that You will make all things right if I surrender to Your will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
And supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen.