

Wisdom of Lament

Ecclesiastes 7:2-4

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This week didn't go as I had planned it. And so, this morning, I would ask for your patience and your grace to allow me to share with you a little bit of what the last 24 hours has been like. Over the last eight years that we've been here, we almost immediately grew close to Mi Ji Kim and her daughters Faith and Hope Chang. They have become good friends. And they are more than that. They feel like family. Mi Ji's parents in many ways feel like my parents. Although we are very different cultures, they've allowed me to be my very western pastoral self and love on them. And I've been honored to do that.

My plan this morning was to finish this series on the Proverbs. And this morning's title was to be, as you can see in your bulletin, the Wise Parent. I am postponing that by one week because as yesterday unfolded and I received the news that Hope had passed early on Saturday morning while visiting New York City with her family, I was feeling an incongruity with where my heart was and is and what I was setting out to preach.

And so, by last night, I was absolutely utterly exhausted, and I didn't feel like I could think very straight. I prayed as I fell asleep. I just asked that the Lord would give me wisdom as I awaken this morning as to whether I should continue in that sermon that I had planned and written for. And I woke this morning, and as I began to read, I just felt that the Holy Spirit was leading me to do something very different.

So, that's what this morning is born out of. And I thank you in advance for your grace in allowing me to work together as a congregation on the Wisdom of Lament because it feels as though sorrow has become something that we've become very accustomed to. It feels that our suffering over these last few weeks and months has been very, very acute. And as I have experienced this lament and as I have experienced it over the last 24 hours, I have felt overcome with the suffering that many of you have suffered. And it has brought it all very fresh home to me.

My heart grieves for Janice Hidey, Tim Flora, Dave Tack, Anne Clifford, David Scheerer, Eunice Johnson, Ellen Belliveau, and Kathleen Gandy. Each of these people in their own ways have made an enormous impact in the life of this congregation. And of particular difficulty is to have to walk next to parents who have lost a child. And I know that there are those of you here, some of you I know and some I don't. But particularly, walking with the suffering of the Strows and the Shoemakers and the continued suffering of the living, Chris Cole, Mary Strem, Estelle Davis, and their extended families and friends across this congregation.

It feels as though the grief and suffering are very heavy to me. And I imagine I am not alone. So, as I prepared this morning, I came across a wonderful quote. And nothing I will say this morning is particularly original to me. And here is the quote. "Lament is where our deep sadness meets the world's deep wounds. And this world has its deep wounds."

From another writing of scripture considered to be among the wisdom literature of scripture, I read to you this morning from the letter of Ecclesiastes 7. Hear these words.

"It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth." [ESV]

Will you pray with me?

Father help us, we ask, by the power of your Holy Spirit to look deeply into your word and therefore, deeply into the heart of God and to your character. And we ask that by your Spirit, you would shepherd us, you would teach us, and you would walk with us in our mourning and in our grief. But give us a hope that is in the deep wisdom of lament, for we have hope in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ and the promise of His return. But until He comes, O Lord, lament invades our hearts in ways we cannot fully measure and that we cannot predict. Lord, help us and meet us in this lament. And in our sorrow, heal our wounds and lift up our countenance towards you. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

The first thing I want to say to you is that in this letter to the Ecclesiastes after Solomon has searched the world over for purpose and meaning, he finds himself in these pockets over and over again throughout the letter of the deep things that he is learning. And he recognizes that mourning and death and brokenness is a part of everyday life for several reasons.

He says something odd here in these verses when he says in verse 3, "Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad." How could that be so? I think it's particularly because of what he was getting at and why I felt led to teach and preach on this this morning because I remember not too long ago teaching my daughter how to drive a stick shift, which ultimately was not successful.

I remember when I first learned stick shift, it's necessary that you're going to start grinding gears. And she was deathly afraid of grinding gears and breaking the engine. And I said, it's okay, the engine is tougher than you are. It's all right. But you know that feeling of when you learned, you know that ill-timed change of gears when you don't have the clutch fully pressed or it's in the wrong place, that it's just that loud grind. Perhaps you've done it around other people. It's embarrassing particularly when it happens on a hill and the people behind you start honking their horns.

I want to suggest to you that if we go through life merely with mirth and laughter, we are like a car that is completely out of gear. But it puts us out of whack with the world around us as well. And my gears have been grinding.

And so, I think what he's saying is that if our hearts and our face are not in sync, that is not the basis for a life of joy and peace. But it's when our hearts and our faces have integrity that our sadness of heart is reflected in the truth and integrity of our face, there is a life of integrity because as we look at the world around us, it is profoundly broken. It is not the way it is supposed to be.

In fact, just two chapters later in this very same book, this is what he says.

"There is evil in everything that happens under the sun. The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live. And afterward, they join the dead. Anyone who is among the living has hope. However, even a live dog is better than a dead lion." [ESV]

He's pointing out that as we look at the world around us whether in contemporary culture, something that we experience on a daily basis, or the world as a whole, it seems as though the heart of man is full of madness and futility and foolishness. And it is right and necessary to respond with mourning in that regard.

But beyond the foolishness and futility and the brokenness that we see in our world, and even if you are not a Christian, you must agree with me that whether you think it is the result of evolution or you think there is something divine and at work in the world, you cannot escape the reality that merely being angry at the foolishness of someone else is not a road sign that this world is profoundly broken. And we are hurting in various ways.

The question is in the middle of our hurt, in the middle of our mourning, in the middle of death and loss, what is the wise way to respond? What resources do we have, do I have to walk with you in a season of mourning and grief? I have nothing I can offer you of myself except my very presence. All I can offer to you is that which has been given to me. And we together celebrate this every week. But this week, we don't celebrate it. We need to find refuge in it. And that is in God's word.

And I want to remind you that not only is mourning a right response to the brokenness of the world and the brokenness of sin and death in our own lives, but we also find great hope in the middle of God's word. Hear the writing of Paul when he tells us the following as he writes to Timothy, his young protégé. As he mentors him, he says,

"You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happen to me at Antioch, a Iconium, and at Lystra - which persecutions I endured. Yet, from them all, the Lord rescued me. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." [ESV]

And if I may add, all who hear my voice will face suffering of many kinds.

"While evil people and imposters will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." [ESV]

And then he says this, church, "All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

I want to maintain to you that because of the brokenness of sin in the world, the scriptures tell us that lament and mourning is called for. Therefore, what we find then is that lament and mourning is a form of righteousness. How then do we learn how to mourn and to lament? He tells us here that we are trained in righteousness not through the wisdom of man but through the breathed-out scriptures of God filled by His Spirit that goes out into us, and we learn from them.

So, I encourage you, church, as you seek to comfort, as you seek to walk with one another, as you seek to pray with one another, whether it is in parenting or in loss or in work or in play, the word of God is our only source of truth and hope. I cannot offer you wisdom that does not blow away like the wind. I can only offer you the eternal word of God. And in it, we find righteousness and we find refuge.

So, then if lament is the right response, it becomes itself a form of righteousness. If we find in the word of God the way to mourn and to lament, then how is our grief different than the rest of the world? Hear again the word of God, Paul writing to the church at Thessalonica, "We grieve, but we do so with hope. But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep," meaning those who have passed away, "that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep."

Our loved ones, our friends who have gone before us lie not in their graves, but they are with the Lord. They have greeted Him face to face, and they long for the glory of the Son to be shown at the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. And their bodies will be raised from those graves, united to their spirits, and they, along with those who are still alive, will be made whole. And the world will be made new, not obliterated, for a new heaven and a new earth will be restored to us. But they have gone before us and they worship Him. They know Him face to face. "But we," he says.

“For this we declare to you by word from the Lord that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep, for the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. The dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive who are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so, we always will be with the Lord. Therefore, encourage one another with these words.” [ESV]

And so, I say to you, young and old, men and women, children and adults, I say to you whatever suffering you bring into this place whether it is suffering with besetting sin, whether it is suffering because you are mourning the loss of Hope Chang or a loved one, whatever the case may be, the end of the story is not our mourning but it is our resurrection.

But how is this the case? Why is this the case, that our grieving is not without hope, but it is girded up with hope, that we weep, and we cry, and we are broken, and yet we do so with hope? How is that the case? This is so. And if you're not a Christian, I hope you hear this. At the center of our faith is not a God who is far off and removed from our suffering. I say this with profound respect to those who practice other forms of religions, as an example Buddhism.

One Buddhist author and poet sought to carry out the Buddhist tradition and theology that we do not tie our emotions to that which is mortal. And so, in the process of trying to reach full understanding, we try to divorce ourselves from that which is mortal. So, therefore, we have this view of life that feels very disconnected. Life is like dew. It falls, and then it is gone.

And yet, this same poet who lost six children could not say but the following. “Life is as the dew. And yet.” He did not finish those lines because yet he knew that although his theology was teaching him that his heart must be far off from the suffering that he felt so acutely in his soul, his religion could not give him a reason for why his heart longed for more than life is but like dew because it is not. Life is more than mortal. Although our bodies waste away, yet there is eternal life. And it is only the Christian faith that has as its center a recognition of our sin which causes death and is entered into the world. But we have a savior who, instead of being far off from our suffering, came close.

More than coming close, Jesus Christ took on flesh and He walked among us. And He took on a cross which was not His because He was innocent of sin. And yet even on that cross, He did two things. He lamented being separated from the Father, but He also grieved over the sin which would be the result of His death, not His sin but the sin of the world. And yet, He gave Himself to the cross, and He lamented when He said, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

But here's the beauty of Jesus's grief on our behalf. It was grief with hope because He knew that even though He would be raised from death to life on the third day, even on that Good Friday, He lamented. And He asked God to forgive our sins because we did not know what we were doing. In our madness and brokenness and sin, we do not know what we are doing. Yet, God in His grace came close and He said, “Father, forgive them.” And yet, He also grieved being separate from the Father.

Yet He knew that without His grief, our salvation would not be possible. His grief had a purpose that you and I might have life. And that means that in our grief, we have a savior who knows us, who loves us, who is with us, and He has promised us His Holy Spirit.

And what does this Holy Spirit teach us? This Holy Spirit, Jesus says in the gospel of John, will lead us in all godliness, reminding us of the scriptures and what Jesus taught. So, how then, as I wrap up, does God in calling us to lament, how does looking into His word teach us? And if our lament is undergirded with hope, then what are we to learn?

First, lament reveals to us the deep heart of God. Our lament reveals to us the deep heart of God. And what does it teach us?

I encourage you to take out a pen or a phone, whatever you need to do. I want to remind you of some scriptures I want to encourage you to read. Psalm 22, Psalm 39, Psalm 88, Psalm 90. If you're still with me, 22, 39, 88, and 90. There are others. But those are some Psalms of lament. The book of Ecclesiastes, the book of Job, you can read those faster than you can read some of your favorite shows.

But what we learn there is that lament is a part of wise living. Why is that the case? Because in one of the pieces of wisdom literature that we have in the New Testament, Paul teaches us in his letter to the Romans in Romans 8,

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” [ESV]

What I want to maintain to you this morning is that Paul is teaching us in heaven right now as on this earth, wherever His church is gathered, the Holy Spirit is interceding for you. He is praying for you. He is praying for us. And He is groaning beyond the ability of words to capture. And He will enable us to pray. But even when we don't, even when we're frustrated by our inability to pray or not knowing what to pray or how to pray with joy, but rather we find our prayers are mixed with frustration and even godly anger as mine has been, I must tell you that I trust in the Holy Spirit to guide me. And I trust that the Holy Spirit will guide us.

What we learn is that lament teaches us about the deep things of who God is and His character. And what do we find? A God who has given us His Spirit, who intercedes for us and with us.

Secondly, lament teaches us that God has made Himself known. And by that, I mean this. God laments according to the scriptures. He laments and grieves over our sin. And yet, His grief has brought our salvation.

We learn this from the gospel of Matthew. In the gospel of Matthew, we learn in chapter 27 towards the end, we hear these words.

“Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’

“And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.” [ESV]

What we learn here is that in our lament, God is doing something that we cannot fully understand. No one, absolutely no one, would have ever envisioned that this Jesus, who is teaching of the coming of the kingdom of God, of the victory of God's kingdom, would end up on a cross and that Jerusalem would be shaken at its very foundation, that Jesus on the third day would appear and demonstrate that He was in fact alive, that Jesus would declare in the middle of history that He is victorious over sin and death. No one would have envisioned that. Therefore, I tell you even there is a profound truth about the realities that we face when we lament.

I see the Shoemakers here as we walked together last year. I see Diane Hidey as we walk together in your sister's suffering. As we have walked together in this suffering, I wish I could tell you and understand why these things have happened in the way that they have.

And this morning as I was sharing and talking with Mi Ji over the phone, as we were weeping together, I have no words. And I don't know why God has visited this suffering upon us. But the hope of the cross and resurrection tells me that God is doing something that I could not explain, and I cannot explain. But this I know, that in the midst of it, He is with us and that He loves us, and that He is doing something beyond our comprehension, and that He is our only hope. God reveals Himself.

Finally, lament is not grumbling. Lament is not grumbling. It is simply sadness. Now, I'm not critiquing this for the sake of it. But I'm doing this in contrast. At the rising of the study of happiness in our culture, there are courses you can now take to learn how to turn funerals into places of happiness. And I understand that response. But in an age where we're trying to find authenticity and happiness, I maintain to tell you that if we fail to grieve and to be sad, we're missing out on what it means to be human.

As I look at my own heart, as I look at my own limitations, as I experience your suffering, as I experience your limitations, I am sad. I do grieve, not in judgment but in company with you. It's not that I lack happiness or joy. Those of you who know me well know that that's not the issue for me. I find these emotions very difficult to sit in. But I have learned that if I don't, they will issue forth very, very cruel fruit.

And so, today, I have asked that you give me grace that I might process what I'm experiencing. And I hope that by God's grace, He can help you lament, that it is not grumbling, that it is not selfish. It is simply acknowledging that our world and our lives are broken. Lord, have mercy.

And then in another wisdom book from the New Testament, we hear from the book of James 4. He says,

“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.” [ESV]

It's not because James wants to be a downer. It's not that Christianity is this difficult and hard religion. It is anything but. It is acknowledging that when we grieve, and when we acknowledge pain, and when we acknowledge hurt and brokenness, and when we acknowledge our sin, we are humbling ourselves before God who is without sin, who loves us, and whose song over us is grace, who meets us in our time of grief. And when He does, He lifts up our countenance not to our wisdom, because in our limitation, God's grace gets center-stage to show us what He can do.

Lament is not grumbling. It is humbling ourselves, and saying, Lord, have mercy. Help us.

And I finish with these words.

“One day, God will lift up those who mourn and grieve before him on his terms. He will judge and resurrect the entire cosmos in the end. On this we

place our trust and we direct our hope. Yet, the lamb then in our midst was once scarred, crucified, and buried for the sake of our redemption. God counts our tears before he takes them away.”

Revelation 21:4.

Learning to lament is part of our lot under the sun. We and our neighbors are better for it, tears and all. May the Lord give you grace. May He meet you in your time of grief. May He give us wisdom in this world to respond in humility, in our limitation, and asking that His grace have its way with us. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we ask now that you would meet us, that you would meet us by your word, that you would strengthen us by your Spirit, and that you would give us hope in the midst of our mourning. Lord, we ask that you would befriend and acquaint and be strong in your presence with Mi Ji and Thomas and Jack and Faith, and their entire extended family, and with us as their extended church family. Lord, as we gather together in a week or so to remember Hope Change, we ask you Lord that you would remember us in our grieving, that you would comfort the weeping souls, but that in our grief, you would give us hope that is secure because of the work of Jesus Christ. Father, I pray that in our limitation, your grace would have center stage, and that you would glorify your name as you meet us in our brokenness. And Lord, I ask that you would fill your people and all who hear my voice with the truth of your word and the power and goodness of your mercy. And may you glorify yourself. Thank you. And we praise you. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.