**Lament for COVID Times-January 17, 2021**

*Rev. Joe Gaspar & Rev. Heather Power*

Joe: It was the beginning of the week and I was on for preaching. As is my custom I went to the scriptures as laid out in the lectionary and began to read, this week they were mostly about God’s call. The boy Samuel hearing God’s whispers and the first disciples dropping everything to follow Jesus. Usually there’s something that speaks to me, but this week, nothing. It all felt kind of pointless to tell you the truth. I tried to push myself, to stick with it, hoping something would emerge but as time went by it became clear to me that if I offered you a reflection today on God’s call it would just be me going through the motions of a what is expected of me. So, I decided instead to go deeper, to sit with the feelings of futility. What emerged is a weariness, a sadness that is rooted in lament, fueled by the resurgent virus and the need for another lockdown and the events in the United States and the state of our politics generally. So, I approached Heather about this and suggested that we organize the reflection time around the theme of lament, to create as Walter Brueggemann says, a safe space for the sharing of laments. to tell the truth about the hurting places and the places of loss in our lives right now, to share the burdens of our times, to disperse the weight of lament in community in hopes of receiving energy for something new. Heather was all in.

Heather: So what we decided to do is that each of us would pick a Psalm of lament to read. Joe would pick a psalm that speaks to his lament over what’s happening societally and Heather would pick a psalm that speaks to her lament individually. We’ll each offer a short reflection and then talk with each other about it.

We also want to invite you to share your laments for this time if you wish—a grief or sorrow that is weighing you down in the hope that by dwelling in loss you may open yourself to God’s unexpected gifts. At any time beginning now feel free to type into the chat feature what you’re lamenting, it could be one word, it could be a couple of sentences. The only thing we ask is that you not comment in any way on another person’s sharing either to advise, correct or sympathize. We just let the laments stand as they are. We’ll read them out after we’ve offered our reflections.

Joe-Psalm 58—*The inclusive Bible*

Do you really make just decisions, you leaders?
Do you judge everyone fairly?

No! You think only of the injustice you will do;
you commit crimes of violence in the land.

You’ve done wrong all your lives,
and lied from the day you were born.

You are full of poison, like snakes;
you stop up your ears,

like a deaf cobra that doesn’t hear the voice of the snake charmer
or the incantation of the enchanter.

Break their teeth, YHWH!
Tear out the fangs of these fierce lions!
Let them disappear like water draining away;
Let them be crushed like weeds on the path.

Let them be like snails that dissolve into slime;
let them be like an untimely birth that never sees the light.

Before these thorns can grow into brambles they’ll be swept away
whether they are green or dry.

The just will be glad when they see the corrupt punished;
they will wade through the blood of the wicked.

People will say, “The just really are rewarded;
there is indeed a God who judges the world!”

I picked this psalm because you can just feel the anger leaping off the page as the psalmists rails against the injustices and hypocrisy of their leaders. I’ve been experiencing a lot of anger toward political leaders as I see what’s going on in the United States, especially toward the President’s enablers, those who know how wrong and damaging he is yet for the sake of their own short sighted interests are willing to undermine a democracy and cast so many vulnerable people to the side. I’m angry at our provincial government and it’s casualness in sacrificing the lives of long term care residents and workers and essential workers (poor and racialized) for the sake of short term economic gain and ideology. I’m angry at the inequality that the pandemic has revealed and all the economic and political decisions that have been made over the years that have lead us to this point. I’m lamenting how little we as a society value the lives of the most economically and socially vulnerable. I’m lamenting that this has been going on for so such a long time, how old is this psalm? I’m lamenting that I didn’t feel this sense of urgency earlier. I’m lamenting my own powerlessness to affect change. I’m lamenting how vulnerable how I feel in the face of such powerful forces and interests.

Heather-Psalm 22 (select verses)**—***The Inclusive Bible*

1 My God, my God,

Why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far away,

so far from saving me,

so far from the words of my groaning?

2 I cry all day, my God, but you never answer;

I call all night long, and sleep deserts me.

14 I am like water draining away;

my bones are all disjointed;

my heart is like wax melting inside me.

15 My strength is dried up like a piece of clay pottery

and my tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth:

19 But you, YHWH, don’t be far off!

My strength, hurry to help me!

20 Rescue my life from the sword,

my dear life from the power of these dogs!

21 Save me from the lion’s mouth,

my poor soul from the wild bull’s horns!

22 Then I will proclaim your Name to my siblings,

and praise you in the full assembly:

23 “You who worship YHWH, give praise!

Children of Leah, children of Rachel, glorify

 YHWH!

Children of Jacob, fall down and worship!

24 For God has not despised—not disdained—

the suffering of those in pain!

God didn’t hide but answered them when they cried for help!”

I had my first “COVID dream” this past week. Or at least the first one I remember. I vividly recall being angry in my dream that I was in a crowd of people. There were too many of us, masks weren’t being worn, we weren’t supposed to be gathered like this. Our new reality has sunk into my unconscious.

These past 10 months have been exhausting. If the pandemic wasn’t enough to be dealing with – the events in our world add more pain and turmoil both individually and collectively. Joe captured that so honestly in his reflection.

I think back to March 2020 and remember it well. The sleepless nights. My body worn, head pounding, brain racing, as I lay in bed, eyes wide-open. It started when the first lockdown began, and COVID-19 became the top news story and trending hashtag on social media. Night after night, the day’s news left me staring into the depths of my bedroom, imploring myself to dream.

Now, many months later, my days still sometimes blend into an exhausted, emotional state. There are moments that I sink into an abyss of worry and despair that is hard to crawl out of. I feel like I live in a state of anxiety – a state of “What now?!” 24/7.

In this time, I’ve learned how my body and heart speak the same language. The lament in my heart tells of the twist in my gut. I’m still sleepless—mind, body, and spirit. I wonder if this new reality makes you feel sleepless too.

I have felt utterly alone while at the same time in the company of the tired, weeping and frightened. Those, who like the Psalmist, pour out their souls and name the laments of their hearts. In this time, my faith finds comfort in the vulnerability of the Psalms. Like Psalm 22, a song of lament from the Hebrew Scriptures. It is raw, painful and I find solace – even beauty – in the tears.

“I cry all day, my God, but you never answer; I call all night long, and sleep deserts me,” the Psalmist weeps. We stare at our screens, scroll through our phones afraid to read the latest news. We look through tiny Zoom windows into the homes of our family and friends. We stare out windows at snow, wind, sun, and gloom, and long for what we used to take for granted: Gathering with friends, going to movies, lingering over a meal in our favourite restaurant. Our losses grow by the hour, but our screens call us to keep going despite our weary bones. Restless. Sleepless.

Amid our suffering, uncertainty, and fear, I wonder if this is exactly the heart response that is necessary? When loved ones can’t say their goodbyes, when the noise – or the silence – becomes too isolating, when parents and caregivers are being asked to do what is not humanly possible, and the breaking stories on the news break our hearts yet again, sometimes I feel like the Psalmist calling out yet hearing no reply. I wonder if we, too, could benefit from crying out: “I can’t sleep! The virus continues to spread and we have lost so many of our norms and ways of being. So many people in our country and the world are grieving and in deep pain. We are lonely, afraid, uncertain, angry, stir-crazy, sleep-deprived, bored, DONE.”

And maybe that’s it. Maybe we NEED to cry out our lament. There’s something in the saying, in the act of naming, that matters. Today we have an opportunity to name those laments that are on our hearts. Something incredible happens when we let ourselves say, “I’m struggling too.” There is beauty in sharing our struggles. Out of the shadowed corners, our spirit reawakens.

This is what I love about this Psalm. It goes from full on, “ugly cry” to finding a glimmer of hope. Perhaps like storms and rainbows, lament and beauty are intrinsically tied. So today, beloved friends, individually and collectively let us join in the chorus of weeping and waiting.

*At this point we read out the laments that had been shared and closed with a prayer*

Closing Prayer

Hear our cries, Holy One. Listen to our prayers. From the depths of our pain and confusion, we cry out. From fear-filled hearts, anxious minds and weary souls we plead for relief. We long for days of ease, of hugs and casual meals with friends and family. We long for a world where the powerful place love above else, where the powerful are satisfied to find their place among the natural rhythms of interdependence.

How long, O Lord? Whatever the length of time, help us to not drown in despair, give us glimpses of the kingdom. Help us to bring the things of heaven to earth. Amen.