

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, July 23, 2023

I see some new faces out there this morning, which is wonderful. If you're visiting with us whether with family or for the first time on your own, we welcome you to this place. We're really glad that you're here. We want you to know that as a family of faith we've been working through a worship series this summer. We've entitled it Psalms of Summertime, and we've spent time in the Psalms together. We're spending the whole summer there trying to learn what it is that scripture has to teach us about ourselves, about God, and about our faithfulness to God here through the church. And so we're learning together about all the different ways that the Psalms speak to our lives of faith this morning, and we are going to reflect on Psalms of Personal Lament, Personal Lament, so this won't be a sermon for everybody actually. If you are not in the midst of grief now or walking alongside someone who is grieving or mourning, this might not hit you in the same way that you would hope; but what I would say is that at some point in your life, this sermon and this Psalm and the message that we hear this morning will be one that will be incredibly important. Each of us knows that we will experience grief and suffering, and that is what the psalmist articulates in Psalm 13. We're going to read together from it in just a moment, but before we do, let us go to God in prayer.

Gracious Spirit, move amongst us. Move amongst us this morning as you moved over the waters of creation. Draw forth from us something new and beautiful, something good and faithful. Open our ears that we might hear your word for us this day and our hearts that we might live it out. For we ask it in the name of Jesus Christ. And all God's people say together— Amen.

So in my middle school—Northwood Middle School—we had Portables during seventh grade. Greenville was growing so quickly that we had to add these different buildings all across campus. Maybe you remember that—doing class in a portable. My science class was taught by Miss LaGrande. Miss LaGrande was a wonderful lady, and it was in a portable just outside the gym. And I remember the fateful day. Sean Kemp—this is, this might seem like a random story' it's going to come to a point— Sean Kemp was a basketball superstar on the SuperSonics out in Seattle, okay, and he was known for really powerful dunks, and he was teamed up with a guy named Gary Payton, and they were just really, really good basketball players. And Sean Kemp

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, July 23, 2023

came out with a basketball shoe. It was called the Kamikaze basketball shoe; and it might have been the ugliest, the single ugliest, basketball sneaker you have ever seen. It was green and black and white and this weird combination, but something about my seventh grade heart was set on getting a pair of Kamikazes, okay? But Dick Powers was a frugal, frugal man, so when we went to uh, we went to the shoe store, and he saw that they were about 75 dollars, he said, "I think I got a solution." And we drove down the street to Payless Shoes, and instead of Reeboks, he got me a pair of Regent fake Kamikazes. To my seventh grade eye they looked pretty similar. I was a little disappointed, but that was okay. But I walked into Miss LaGrande's seventh grade science class, and I sat down at my little table uh right there with three other buddies of mine—or people I thought were buddies at the time—and I said, "Y'all!" and I slammed my foot up on a desk, and I said, "I got the new Kamikazes." And they were really quiet for a second, and they said, "David, those are fake." And I said, "No no no no no no, we...we went to this store. They're, they're real." "No, David, those are fake. You're just faking it. You just want to be cool." I mean it really turned quickly.

And I brought my foot off the desk and I stood up, and I asked Miss LaGrande if I could go to the restroom, and she said sure. And so I took a little Hall Pass, and I made my way right past the restroom straight to the nurse's office, told her I'd thrown up several times, and got a note to go home immediately. I told my dad that night, "I am never going back to Miss LaGrande's class ever again." I was so embarrassed. For me, I told him, my world has ended, right? When we're young, even when we're older actually, we can have moments when we think our world is ending. It's coming to an end. Moments of crisis that maybe in hindsight are silly, but for us in that moment were actually real and heavy and difficult for us. So some fake shoes, yeah, some imitation shoes were mine in seventh grade and probably countless other times. I lamented at that time, thinking that's what the end of the world for me looked like. If we live long enough, then we learn that pain can be more real than that, that strife can strike us and our lives and people that we love in ways that are more impactful. It doesn't diminish those times when we were younger. It just changes them. The psalmist in Psalm 13 knows a bit about what pain looks like, what it feels like, what it looks like to live with anger and angst and brokenness.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, July 23, 2023

The psalmist says these words, and I want you to hear, I want you to hear with new ears the words that the psalmist speaks this morning.

Psalm 13

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemies be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemies will say, 'I have prevailed';
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

The truth about lament and how we understand it personally is that our lives teach us lessons about what lament looks like and what it feels like.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, July 23, 2023

I've told this story before, but as an adult I was at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia, at a Presbytery meeting, when I got a panicked call from a hospice nurse telling me that I was needed in...in Greenville quickly, because my sister was...she needed to be put on hospice, and I was her Power of Attorney. I was in the narthex of Covenant when I began to cry after I'd hung up the phone, feeling the weight of that moment and the decision that I was being forced to make because of my sister's health. I remember the drive from Covenant in Augusta, where two of my best friends pastor now, all the way up Augusta Road actually to Greenville, my home. In Greenville the roads are mostly named after the towns to which they go, so there's Lawrence Road that goes to Lawrence, and there's Augusta Road that goes to Augusta, and there's Woodruff road that goes to Woodruff. I had driven Augusta Road probably a thousand times. I had no idea when I got on Augusta Road in Augusta and made my way back to Greenville what that drive would have in store for me. I remember crying most of the way there, unable to listen to any music, having to roll the windows down because the weight of the moment seemed too heavy. Lament as a young person, lament as an adult brings with it a weight.

Perhaps you've had a moment like that.

The weight of the pain or the sadness, the anger or the frustration has overwhelmed you to the point of tears.

Maybe it's a call from the doctor with a new diagnosis, or it's the news that the chemo just isn't working the way they told you it was going to work or you had hoped it would.

The lament of the psalmist is so raw. "How long?"

I know many people who have asked that same question. Maybe you have.

"How long?"

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, July 23, 2023

“How long in marriage, how long in parenting, how long in caretaking, how long in depression, how long in joblessness, how long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?”

Eugene Peterson translated or paraphrased scripture for us in a different way in the message translation. I want you to read, I want to read for you that translation this morning.

“Long enough, God.

You've ignored me long enough. I've looked at the back of your head long enough. Long enough, I've carried this ton of trouble, lived with a stomach full of pain; long enough, for my arrogant enemies have looked down their noses at me. Take a good look at me, God. I want to look life in the eye, so that no enemy can get the best of me or laugh when I fall on my face. I've thrown myself headlong into your arms. I'm celebrating your rescue. I'm singing at the top of my lungs. I am so full of answered prayers.”

The psalmist feels like sometimes perhaps you have the abandonment of God.

The psalmist can't see God in the difficulty of their life.

Walter Brueggemann tells us that in our Hebrew scripture there are movements of lament. Last spring we actually studied the stages of grief. Walter has a play on that that is deeply rooted in our tradition. It says there are six movements when it comes to lament.

The first is a naming of God in an intimate way.

There'll be a...a call to the Lord or to God or to some other name— Abba Father. First there is a naming, and then there is the proclamation of a complaint. Then there is a movement towards petition. So you name the complaint, and then you ask for its relieving.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, July 23, 2023

But love for us to the psalmist is not always enough, and so the psalmist will often add some additional motivation. “You’re good and gracious, Lord. You should relieve me of this pain because of your goodness, not of mine.”

Then the fifth movement feels particularly human to me. The fifth movement of lament is a dash of vengeance. Good for self is asked for by the psalmist, but then bad for enemy as well.

And then the final move, and here's what Brueggemann says about the sixth movement of lament. After naming and complaint, and petition and added motivation, and even a measure of vengeance, Brueggemann says this. “Oddly enough, when the need, the hurt, the demand, and the venom are fully voiced, something unexpected happens in the psalm. The mood and the tone of the psalm change. Israel's anger and protest appear to be spent.

And pain characteristically moves to a positive resolution.

The speaker is, at the end, confident of being heard and dealt with bountifully, and so ends in rejoicing and praise.

It is not at all clear what happens to permit such a turn, but it is clear that such a turn belongs regularly to the pattern and genre of Lament. It may be that the long protest is cathartic and enough said finally suffices, or it may be, as many scholarly readers think, that there was in the middle of the utterance a communal, liturgical intervention of assurance that permitted a new posture of confidence and well-being and gratitude. Thus the poem of Lament, the Psalm of Lament accomplishes something, and the speaker is, at the end of the poem, in a very different place.”

That's the pattern of a lament in our Hebrew text. It's a pattern that perhaps resonates with you. It's a pattern that I've seen play out in a number of different ways, even amongst people that I love, even within myself—this calling out to God, naming the complaint, asking for a specific

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, July 23, 2023

resolution, saying why it is that should happen, and then after a dash of perhaps decided vengeance, there is a turn that happens without explanation.

Ann Weems has an important book that I commend to you. It was commended to me by Beth Simpson. She gave it to me just before I headed off a couple weeks ago to travel in Scotland and then around Europe.

Psalms of Lament isn't, it's an odd thing to read at a French cafe drinking coffee on a Sunday morning, but that's what I was doing about a month ago.

She begins her prologue like this. "On August 14, 1982, the stars fell from my sky. My son, my Todd, was murdered less than an hour after his 21st birthday."

Many people surrounded Ann after her son's murder. One of them was Brueggemann, a friend and a confidant to Anne. He was consistent in his communication with her. He was doing some work on Jeremiah, and he asked if he could call her.

When Ann picked up the phone, they exchanged pleasantries, and then he asked her an important question to his work with Jeremiah. "Will Rachel be comforted?"

If you're familiar with the prophet's book, you then are familiar with the cry, the outcry of Rachel upon the death of children.

Ann says, "I remember answering with little hesitation. No, no, Rachel will not be comforted, not here, not now, not in the sense of being ultimately comforted. Rachel will be comforted only when God wipes the tears from her eyes."

That is the difficult part about personal Psalms of Lament. While there might be six stages of lament, we don't necessarily move through them with the rapidness of six verses.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, July 23, 2023

But in quiet times, Weems says, “In quiet times this image keeps coming to me, this image of Jesus weeping.” And here's a poem that Anne wrote:

*Jesus wept,
and in his weeping, he joined himself forever
to those who mourn.
He stands now throughout all time,
this Jesus weeping,
with his arms around the weeping ones:
“Blessed are those who mourn,
for they shall be comforted.”
Jesus stands with the mourners,
for his name is God-With-Us.
Jesus wept.*

*“Blessed are those who weep, for they shall be comforted.”
Someday. Someday God will wipe the tears from Rachel's eyes [and yours as well.]*

*In the godforsaken, obscene quicksand of life,
there is a deafening alleluia
rising from the souls
of those who weep,
and of those who weep with those who weep.
If you watch, you will see
the hand of God
putting the stars back in their skies
one by one.*

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, July 23, 2023

‘How long?’ the psalmist asks. “How long?”

If this morning you find yourself in a place of deep hurt and angst and grief, and you find yourself asking that same question, the psalmist wants you to know you are not alone, that this pain that you are experiencing, this Godforsakenness has been felt by many across millennia.

And the faithful response in those times is not only “Let it be with me according to your will.” It is also, “How long? Are you going to forget me forever?”

The personal Psalms of Lament, if we lean into them, I think they teach us something about what it means to be human, to sit with pain, and then to allow the spirit of God to do something within us, something beyond explanation that oddly enough...oddly enough accomplishes something within us, so that at the end of our psalm we are in a different place than we were when we began. My hope for you, if you weep or if you are close to those who weep this day, is that you might be reminded once again that the spirit of God that was called out to by the psalmist is present within you and around you this day, waiting to listen, waiting to comfort, waiting to be present amongst your grief. So let's rest in that today. And let us share it with those who need to hear it.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.