

Longing and Lament

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
in Fremont, California,
on June 7, 2020, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.

Scripture: Psalm 13

Copyright © 2020 by Brenda Loreman

I wonder if your experience was similar to mine. When I was growing up, I was not allowed to complain. If I did, was told to stop, and was admonished that whining and complaining would not get me closer to what I wanted.

If I continued my whining, I might be told that I had it SO much better than many children in other parts of the world, and that my circumstances were definitely much better than those of my parents at my age. Sound familiar? Somehow, this information didn't really make me feel any more grateful or less like whining. But it did usually make me stop complaining.

Now that I'm a grown up, I have this programming in my head that complaining really doesn't help make things better. It might make me feel better in the short term, but it doesn't help in the long term, and it doesn't help to solve the problems I might be complaining about.

When we started sheltering in place about three months ago, I certainly had lots to complain about. It was frustrating to be cooped up in the house most of the time, I was sad not to be able to see and hug my friends and family, the endless Zoom meetings and increased email volume were exhausting, and I began to dread the logistics of a twice-monthly trip to the grocery store. But really, I knew I was better off than so many people. My beloved and I still have jobs and are able to mostly work from home. Our health remains robust. Our home is safe and comfortable and spacious enough that we can both work from home without annoying each other too much. Whining and complaining about all this wasn't going to help me get used to our new circumstances. It was only going to make me feel worse about all the conveniences I'd been missing. I learned to express gratitude for my blessings. I learned to love the new pleasures of more time and spaciousness in each day.

But as our confinement continued, and we learned more about how the virus spreads, I realized something that was devastating to me: because singing in a group produces more aerosol particles than talking, and because you really can't sing with a mask on, it will probably not be possible to sing together until there's a vaccine... and that may take months, or even years.

Those who know me know I love to sing. I probably learned to sing right along with learning to talk. I learned to sing from my mother, and singing is a way to remember her and honor her memory. And because I grew up singing in church, singing together is one of the primary ways I express my spirituality. Singing is one of the ways I feel the presence of God. The thought of not being able to sing together in our sanctuary, of not being able to make beautiful music with the Mission Peak Chamber Singers, broke my heart. It felt not like a mere inconvenience, of having to learn a new routine, but more like part of my spirit was torn away. I've been in mourning about this for several weeks now.

And then the last week of May happened. The United States reached 100,000 deaths due to the virus, more than any country in the world. And George Floyd was murdered by men who were sworn to protect him, and the people poured into the streets in anguish. My heart broke all over again.

When our hearts are broken, when our tears cannot be stopped, when the world seems so shattered that it will never be repaired, it is time for us to lament. Lament is not the same as crying, and it is not merely complaining or venting about our problems. Instead, a lament is a form of prayer. A lament talks directly to God about the things that are breaking our hearts. A lament doesn't fix anything, but it gives voice to the pain we carry inside. Lament is a deeply appropriate and theologically grounded response to our suffering and the suffering of the world.

The Bible is filled with laments, with songs of people in sorrow crying out to God. Over a third of the psalms are poems of lament. The book of Lamentations is an entire book of laments, mourning the destruction of Israel. Even Jesus lamented. He wept at the death of his friend Lazarus, and, on the cross, he lamented in his pain and suffering, quoting Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The most important thing about the lament, though, is not that it gives us the opportunity to pour out our sorrow and name our grief—though that is very important. The most important aspect of a lament is that it helps us grow closer to God. When our hearts are broken, when we are deep in sorrow, our tendency is to turn away from God—and each other—and to isolate ourselves in our pain. But lament has the specific purpose to move us out of that isolation and help us return to God. Because a lament talks directly to God, it helps us move toward the Divine, rather than away, and helps us reconnect with the Holy and renew our trust and confidence in God's goodness and love for us and for the world.

Notice how this happens in Psalm 13. The psalmist begins by addressing God with their sorrow and grief:

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

They then ask for God's help:

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

Finally, the psalmist recalls God's goodness and love, and returns to trust in God's help and steadfastness:

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

The author Paul Miller reminds us that:

There is no such thing as a lament-free life...To love is to lament, to let your heart be broken by something. If you don't lament over the broken things in your world, then your heart shuts down. Your living, vital relationship with God dies a slow death because you open the door to unseen doubt and become quietly cynical. Cynicism moves you away from God; laments push you into his presence.¹

Friends, our hearts are breaking, and the events of the world right now are just too much to bear on our own. We need to lament. We need to express our grief and longing, our fear and sadness. We need to move away from isolation and into trust in God's goodness and love. We need to reject easy cynicism and move toward the deepening faith that will help us through even the depths of our sorrow.

I encourage you, in the days and weeks to come, to practice lamenting. Read the psalms. Write your own lament and pray it out loud to God. And trust in God's steadfast love.

I leave you with another translation of Psalm 13, a modern interpretation by the poet and translator Stephen Mitchell:

How long will this pain go on, Lord,
this grief I can hardly bear?
How long will this anguish grip me
and agony wring my mind?
Light up my eyes with your presence;
let me feel your love in my bones.
Keep me from losing myself
in ignorance and despair.
Teach me to be patient, Lord;
teach me to be endlessly patient.
Let me trust that your love enfolds me
when my heart feels desolate and dry.
I will sing to the Lord at all times,
even from the depths of pain.²

Amen.

¹ Paul E Miller, *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2009), 173.

² Stephen Mitchell, *A Book of Psalms: Selected and Adapted from the Hebrew* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 6.