

Homily – The Ven. Kristi Neal
Archdeacon, Western North Carolina
Lent 2C
February 21, 2016

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18
Philippians 3: 17-4:1
Psalm 27
Luke 13: 31-35

In my Ash Wednesday sermon, I talked briefly about lament
This season of Lent speaks to us of things our culture wants to ignore
Lent is about penitence – our culture is about blaming others
Lent is about going deeper—our culture is about superficiality
Lent is about lament – our culture is about avoiding pain

So what is lament?

The Oxford Dictionary says lament is “a passionate expression of grief or sorrow.”
Lament can be corporate or it can be personal
Lament is first and foremost truth telling
It declares something is not right in the world

Lament allows us to call on God who weeps with us
It puts us in solidarity with those who are suffering for it is only
In our own suffering that we can enter the suffering of another
But lament is more than giving voice to our passionate sorrow
Lament is also about calling upon God’s grace and power
Lament is about trusting that God is with us
Even in the most painful parts of our lives.

Over one-third of the Psalms are songs of lament
Remember the book of Psalms is a songbook
It is still sung at every service of the hours in many monasteries
And is used in synagogues and temples
A study was completed by a copyright agency that licenses
Contemporary worship songs
They found that of the top 100 worship songs in 2012
Only five of the songs would qualify as a lament
Most of the songs were celebratory praise
Praise is an integral part of our worship and prayer

But perhaps we have lost a necessary and important piece
Of our relationship with God
When we leave out lamenting over suffering and pain

We know that burying our feelings can cause physical problems
It is important to our physical wellbeing to allow ourselves to feel

And express those feelings in a way that is authentic

Many “Christians” deny negative feelings—that is denying a part of who God made us to be
When a friend of mine was six years old, his four-year-old brother
Died having his tonsils removed (anesthesia was an inexact science in 1952)
My friend was sad and angry – but his parents told him
Anger was not OK—that is was a sin
I don’t think they understood Psalm 44 or 109
The psalmist raged against God
The consequence for my friend was that he has never really learned
To express anger or sadness or sorrow—and his life isn’t as full

We see lament all through the readings today
Abram is lamenting the lack of an heir; a child to carry on the family name
He is in despair knowing that with his death, everything he loves will perish

Look at today’s Psalm and the words of the psalmist as he talks to God
“hide not your face from me” , “My father and mother forsake me” ,
“false witness have risen up against me and also those who speak malice”

Even Jesus is lamenting in today’s Gospel reading
“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.”
For Jesus knows he is on his way to Jerusalem for the last time
He knows the evil of the world will require his death
Soon Jesus will cry out in lament again as he hangs from the cross
“my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

To lament is to cry out to God with our doubt
It is to cry out to God in agony
To cry out to God with pain and anger
To cry out to God in confusion, and when we feel alone
Lament moves us toward the darkness of heart-rending sorrow
That doesn’t make sense and seems to be a contradiction of God’s love for us
Lament cuts through insincerity and pretense

We lament when we hear the news of a cancer diagnosis for a loved one
We lament when we read about the murder of a 16 year-old in Asheville
We lament at the systematic destruction of public education
We lament when we read of children being conscripted into armies
We lament as we hear of the widespread mutilation of women in Africa

But here is the good news---and there is good news
Ultimately lament is a prayer
And as a prayer it has the potential to change a heart
Lament is truly asking, seeking and knocking

To comprehend the heart of God
A lament involves the desire to search for truth
Lament allows us to sit in an uncomfortable space
Acknowledge that bad things do happen
And experience the injustices in community

Lament acknowledges injustice, but it also voices hope
Hope in a God who will turn things around
Hope in a people who will not let evil triumph
Hope in a future that is greater than the past
Hope that help will come
Until then we lament, we cry, we holler, we wail, we moan
We shake with anger
But we always live in hope

To lament—to cry to God with our doubts and fears
Is the context for surrender
For giving our hearts to him, asking for mercy
And receiving restoration

To be disciples of Jesus is to be a people who can weep
Weep for ourselves and weep for each other
And weep for our communities
Weep for those without homes
And those who are hungry
Weep for women and children sold into slavery

To be disciples means that in the midst of our cries and wailing
In the midst of fear and isolation and uncertainty and loss
We hear a sound that muffles all the noise of agony
The sound of the still small voice of Jesus calling our names

The voice of Jesus who experienced human sadness, and pain, and agony,
Jesus who saw injustice and discrimination and wept with
People in the midst of turmoil and pain
The voice of Jesus calling our name and saying
*“do not fear, for I am with you,
do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you,*

Why is it so important that lament be a part of worship?
Lament embodies the sorrows of our hearts,
The fight against injustice
And the proclamation of hope

W.E.B. DuBois wrote about the sorrow songs sung in the historically
African American churches:

“Through all the sorrow songs, there breathes hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is the faith

in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes an assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond."

Pain separates

To be sick in any way is to feel like our body has betrayed us
To suffer the loss of a loved one is to feel separated from the world
Of happy families
Pain, anger and confusion deepens our loneliness
To lament together is to befriend one another
And to realize we are not alone
Even if no one can fully comprehend our pain right now

The awareness that we are not alone

Gives us the courage to allow the community and God
To walk with us and love us through the pain and confusion and anger
To lament together holds forth a vision of healing and wholeness

As we walk through this season of lent, let us lament together

About the injustices and pain and sorrow in our world
Knowing that as we walk toward the crucifixion
That death will not prevail
There is resurrection on the other side

We are so often afraid of allowing people to see into our hearts

Or we have received messages in our childhood that it is weak
To share our internal struggles
We want to have answers where often there are no answers
And that makes us uncomfortable

But every Sunday as we gather around the table, people in our midst are struggling

Struggling with pain or anger or sorrow
We are all broken—lament allows us to admit our brokenness

And then we move from lament to reassurance

Reassurance that no matter where we are

God is there, too.

God is standing, waiting, with her arms spread wide, like the wings of a hen

Ready to gather us close and fold her wings around us
Ready to offer us succor and healing and love

For we know that it is only God

Who brings hope out of despair
Joy out of sorrow
And life out of death.