

## On Psalm 6

### Introduction to the Reading

Generally speaking, there are two types of psalms – hymns and laments. In the first two weeks of our summer sermon series, we read and sang hymns – psalms of thanksgiving and praise to God for creation, for the blessings of life, and even for life itself. And in the weeks to come, we will read others expressing confidence and trust in God’s good care for the creation.

But this morning we are listening to psalms of lament. These prayers of complaint, anger, grief, sadness and woe make up nearly half of the Psalter. Why? Because there has to be some reaction to the evil and injustice people feel in the world...and the first reaction is to lash out, to protest in some way to God, who, we affirm, created the world and is responsible for it.

Psalms of lament have some elements in common that you can listen for:

- The address to God –“my Lord”. The lament is not spoken to a stranger but rather to a trusted sovereign who is listening intently.
- The complaint. The writer tells God specifically what the trouble is, including, maybe, that he feels that God has turned a deaf ear.
- The petition, often more a demand than a plea. “Turn, O Lord, save my life.”
- A motivation for God to do something. In this psalm: How can I praise God if I’ve gone to hell?
- Wish for vengeance against the enemy. Here, it is mild – shame – but often it is a plea to bring hurt or destruction. You can hear the depth of the psalmist’s own pain when he stoops this low for relief.

- A turn in mood toward positive resolution – a strong statement of faith and confidence in God to make things right so that the writer can again rejoice in God’s goodness.

## Meditation

In last week's *Bernardsville News*, I read of a lamentable situation – and it was not a story about crime or environmental damage or the budget deficit or the deplorable state of education. No, it was a text ad for the Grain House Restaurant in Basking Ridge. Listen carefully...

The headline was: “Something New is Happening at the Grain House Sunday Brunch Buffet”. The story/advertisement described the recently introduced, exciting new Eggs Benedict station, which has quickly become a favorite. “Each customer receives a customized version of the classic dish by virtue of a wide choice of tasty toppings that create a unique interpretation.” The writer goes on to name other highlights of the Sunday brunch buffet, including two carving stations, a table with homemade soups and bread, and other additions to the standard brunch fare. “Even the fussiest eater will go away full...and Sunday brunch is an activity that the entire family can enjoy together.” The Sunday brunch buffet is served at the Grain House from 10 am to 2 pm; reservations are recommended.

So, tell me, what are we all doing here?

The lament, of course, is issued by the Christian church, the Protestant Christian church in particular, and small congregations in particular, congregations like ours and our neighbors. And the content of our lament is that Sunday is no longer set aside for worship or Christian education or even for Sabbath rest. The functions of the church have been usurped by the activities of secular entities. You could hear that in the Grain House ad: “customized version of the classic dish; unique interpretation; table with homemade bread; the fussiest eater will go away full; something for the whole family to enjoy together.

The world no longer stops action on Sunday to pay attention to the spiritual life, to revere and respect God. In fact, Sunday has become another opportune time - a prime time - to play competitive sports, to shop, to host over-the-top parties. Indeed, some churches have rearranged themselves, changed the day of services or the time on Sunday, to be accommodating. They have contorted themselves in order to pay homage to what the world has become. Or, perhaps, just in order to try to still have some voice in people's lives.

The church's lament has not been well-voiced, however, unlike the laments in the psalms, which have an order and discipline about them. Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann says that "Israel knew how to order its grief, not only to get that grief fully uttered and delivered but also to be sure that ...it is not turned loose with destructiveness." (Weems x)

The church is not so put together. We're more like wringing our ecclesial hands in bitter and hopeless capitulation. I don't really like being a part of that "woe is me" mantra.

And I wonder what this scene looks like from God's point of view? Is God angry or disappointed with how we in the church have handled the message he has entrusted to us?

O Lord, do not rebuke us in your anger or discipline us in your wrath.

Be gracious to us, O Lord, for we are languishing...

We are weary with our moaning...we grow weak because of all our  
foes.

So let me tell you another story. I've talked before about Pam Hertenstein, the elder who moved with her husband Kris to Alabama to be closer to her family, as her brother Jamie was diagnosed with cancer. (Jamie,

by the way, is remarkably still living, but now failing). Almost immediately, Pam and her sister Kelly, in connection with Kelly's church, began a program to provide holiday meals for a group of needy and homeless people. The meal program developed into a soup kitchen, which now serves about eighty people a week. I believe they were also considering adding a used clothing closet to the meal program. And perhaps some of you recall that we took up a collection for the church's rescue efforts after the tornados raced with destructive force through Pam's part of Alabama.

Last week I spoke with Pam again and she amazed me with another announcement about ministry. "We thinking about starting a church," she said. Apparently, the people who come to the meal program, which is held in a fixed-up place called the Quadplex (and don't conjure up images of some grand arena) cannot get to the regular church and wouldn't feel comfortable there even if they could. So Pam and Kelly are going to bring Jesus to them in a way they can grasp and know and act upon.

I was reminded of articles I had just read in *Christian Century* about ministry to strays, ministry without the books of order and rules for worship - pure Jesus for people who long for a connection to God but have no formal community of faith. Frederick Niedner, who teaches theology at Valparaiso University in Indiana, writes:

A clergy friend's first congregation could pay him only half a salary. To support his family, he contacted every mortuary in the area and offered to conduct funerals for anyone who wanted a service but didn't have a church or pastor. The extra income helped, but this pastor soon found this work a meaningful form of ministry. The grieving families, starved for meaning and connection more profoundly than they knew, clung gratefully to the promising words he preached. (Niedner 13)

When something like this example or Pam and Kelly's venture can happen, we know that God has not left the church. And when a church like ours – here, now – can spawn the idea for such a venture, which in fact it did, we know that

The Lord has heard the sound of our weeping.

The Lord has heard our supplication; the Lord accepts our prayer.

In the verses from the letter to the Romans, which was we heard earlier, the apostle Paul suggests that the troubles of the present, which the early Christians were suffering, are nothing when you consider what awaits the believer at the end of time. The pain is the pain of new birth, God's redemption of creation through Jesus Christ.

I don't think Paul's words are limited to the end of time and I don't think Paul meant them to be so constrained either. The renewal of the creation and the renewal of the church of Jesus Christ are ongoing. In a memorable sentence at the end of the passage, Paul expresses the same confidence as the psalmist:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God,  
who are called according to his purpose.

A psalm of lament never ends with the lamenting. Listen to the final words of Psalm 28:

Blessed be the Lord, for he has heard the sound of our pleadings.

The Lord is our strength and shield; in him our hearts trust

The Lord is the strength of his people;

he is the saving refuge of his anointed.

O save your people and bless your heritage;

be their shepherd and carry them forever.

Amen.

Nieder, Frederick. "Among the strays" *Christian Century* 12 July 2011: 12-13.  
Weems, Ann. *Psalms of Lament*. Louisville: WJKP, 1995.

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