

Grieving with Jesus

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Jeremiah 8:18-9:1, John 11:32-44

Introduction

Six-year-old Brandon decided one Saturday morning to fix his parents some pancakes. He found a big bowl and spoon, pulled a chair to the counter, opened the cupboard and pulled out the heavy flour canister, spilling it on the floor. He scooped some of the flour into the bowl with his hands, mixed in most of a cup of milk and added some sugar, leaving a floury trail on the floor which by now had a few tracks left by his kitten.

Brandon was covered with flour and getting frustrated. He wanted this to be something very good for Mom and Dad, but it was getting very bad. He didn't know what to do next, whether to put it all into the oven or on the stove and he didn't know how the stove worked! Suddenly he saw his kitten licking from the bowl of mix and reached to push her away, knocking the egg carton to the floor.

Frantically he tried to clean up this monumental mess but slipped on the eggs, getting his pajamas white and sticky. Just then he saw Mom standing at the door. Big crocodile tears welled up in Brandon's eyes. All he'd wanted to do was something good, but he'd made a terrible mess. He was sure a scolding was coming.

But his mother just watched him. Then, walking through the mess, she picked up her crying son, getting her own pajamas white and sticky in the process, then hugged him and loved him.

To live is to carry lament. We lament our actions, and lament the actions of ones we love is something that all of us experience. All of us manage to screw up enough things in our lives that we can remain humble about our abilities, and often enough to remind ourselves of how much we need God.

These days in which we are living, we know all too clearly about the things that are out of our control – illnesses, deaths, and job losses. Globally, just this week, we've seen borders close, hospitals reach breaking points, friends and family and colleagues lose their jobs, whole states shut down in the face of a new disease. David Kessler, an expert on grief, writes that with this corona-virus we are also experiencing a loss of safety:

I don't think we've collectively lost our sense of general safety like this. Individually or as smaller groups, people have felt this. But all together, this is new. We are grieving on a micro and a macro level.

And in this community, we learned last week that our beloved pastor and friend, who had contracted cancer, died despite the best medical care in the world. While we knew Pastor Virginia might die, it still came as a hard blow when she did.

Some well-meaning folks think that lamenting, and finding something too hard to bear is a sign of spiritual immaturity. In a culture where "looking good" is a fine art form, it is almost embarrassing to admit how much we need each other and God. Some of us so want to be 'ok' that we don't want to admit that things really have gotten to be too much for us, and that we are in need of a healing balm.

In reality, anyone who belongs to a family or has close friends knows the aches we feel for ones we love. When they make mistakes, when they fall prey to evil forces, or addictions, or temptations, and must pay the consequences, we live the language of lament. We want the best for them, and for those they love, but it doesn't seem possible. We might even decide to throw ourselves into the fray, knowing it won't change much, but feeling as though we must do something!

That seems to be the picture we get in the passage from Jeremiah this week: in it, he is weeping over the destruction of the land and people, a message carried to God. He is hurt beyond his knowing, and he cannot see what the end will be. Jeremiah is not weak, Jeremiah is a tower of strength in his fidelity to God, but also his hope for the future seems to be at the breaking point.

Instead of finding that God's chosen "go it alone," there is a different picture if we delve into the Bible: Laments fill our scriptures. When God's people bear the burden of slavery in Egypt, they cry out to God. When David realizes his complicity in killing a good soldier to take a beautiful woman as his wife, he cries out to God. When the Jews were forced to leave Jerusalem and live in Babylon, they wondered whether God could hear their cries so far away from their own land.

Jesus models lamentation for us as well. When Jesus races to Mary and Martha's house upon hearing of Lazarus' illness, only to find his friend Lazarus dead, he breaks down. The language in this passage is even stronger in the original language.

These kinds of feelings seem to be how God feels about us a lot of the time. Looking into the history of God and God's people, it's easy to see the times when God's people

have managed to miss the point, head off target, or willfully choose another way. God also sees when people are subject to horrific things not of their own making. God embodies this amazing love that keeps calling to God and to us, trying always to find a way to get through, find a way that will penetrate shocked bodies, dull minds, hard hearts, distracted and distressed lives full of things that don't satisfy.

One image of lament that sticks with me is from a movie that I had very mixed opinions about, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. One of the stunning movie moments is when Mary, Jesus' mother, sees her son carrying the cross through the streets of Jerusalem. Mary plays out in her mind's eye a scene of Jesus as a little child falling along a path. In that scene, she runs to scoop him up and comfort him. This comforting remembrance jarringly intercuts Mary's viewing of her son carrying his cross to be crucified, a prophet being killed in the city of Jerusalem. Her mother's heart is there, but all she can offer is her presence at the horror.

If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jeremiah's and Mary's burdens. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Meanwhile, this is the most vulnerable posture in the world -- wings spread, breast exposed -- but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand.

If you have ever been in the position of loving someone you could not protect, then you know that bearing laments in life is bearing laments *for life*. In lamenting, we see death where life could have flourished, or at least so we think. Lamenting is, in one point of view, one of the most hopeful things we can do, because it means that in fact, we can see a different reality, we can see with the kind eyes of a loving God who also laments over God's children.

Jeremiah poignantly asks some questions at the end of the passage: Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician? Balm was a special ointment that came from a tree east of the Jordan, so what he is asking is -- is there no healing for the people from God? And because these words come down to us millennia later, we know that others must have heard them too.

See, the language of lamentation is also a way in which we can bear our burdens to God as a community, and it is in the sharing of those burdens to God and each other that we can find the balm that will heal us. If we become vulnerable with one another, the healing can multiply beyond our imagining.

When we are brave enough to share those burdens in a safe place with God and others, wherever that safe place is for you – well, that's the start of the healing process for us, because it is when we share those burdens with those who love us that we find ourselves changed by that experience. Like the mother who enveloped six-year Brandon, God awaits us to hold us in his arms too.

Amen.