

## LAMENTATION OPTION

Sermon delivered by The Rev. Andrew F. Kline

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St. John's at Diocesan Center, Norristown, Pennsylvania

Ezekiel 37:1-14 | Psalm 130 | Romans 8:6-11 | John 11:1-45



I would never have admitted this until now, but given that “everything has changed”, I have been watching stupid videos on YouTube and Facebook. Of special interest, of course, are the genre or meme of “How to survive a Pandemic” or “The Four Stages of Sheltering in Place” etc. Some are quite funny. And, alas, very much all the same....

- Guy or gal walks in house loaded down - groceries, toilet paper and cleaning supplies. Out of the bags and on to the counter go a ridiculous amount of toilet paper, as well an enormous pile of of junk food: sodas, chips, candy, cereal, donuts, frozen pizza and pigs in a blanket.
- Before putting anything away, our hero sits down, so we are told, to binge watch everything on Netflix.... Camera fades out. Camera fades in.
- Having watched everything on Netflix.... Our hero proceeds to break open the processed feast of added sugars and empty carbs awaiting him on the kitchen counter. Camera fades out. Camera fades in.
- End of Day 1. Our hero, so bored, so tired, so bewildered, looks around wondering what happens next. On the TV screen is the order to Stay Inside!!! And the voice of the well intentioned expert telling us that what we must do is make a PLAN.
- OK! We create a schedule. We imagine what is going to be routine and normal. Perfectly sensible. Our hero grabs a ruler, a calendar, and scrap of paper to write a list on, and starts marking up the future. Camera fades out. Camera fades.

- End of Day 2. Together we realize that we have no idea what our days will look like. Given what little structure we can put on them, they will be what they will be. For once, it may be starting to sink in. We are not in control of this thing. We are not in control of any thing.

What do you do when you realize you really are in a desert, where there are no signposts and no well trodden paths? My friends, we truly are in the final bewildering stages of our Lenten journey. What do you do when you realize there is not even “a new normal.” How will this time of pandemic unfold, when much of the world seems to be coming to a stop. What will we do on Day 15? What should we do on Day 30? What will get us through to Day 60?

Thankfully, God’s Word today shows us something we can do. In the outline of the dust just ahead of us we see a band of pilgrims, and yes, we also make out a sound. From some very deep place. A measured breath. In and out from the diaphragm. From there! A cry. A song.

Psalm 130 is called a Song of Ascent. Sung on pilgrimage, on the way to the great feasts in Jerusalem. It is, O my soul!, a lament.

- <sup>1</sup> Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord;  
Lord, hear my voice; \*  
let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication.
- <sup>2</sup> If you, Lord, were to note what is done amiss, \*  
O Lord, who could stand?
- <sup>3</sup> For there is forgiveness with you; \*  
therefore you shall be feared.
- <sup>4</sup> I wait for the Lord; my soul waits for him; \*  
in his word is my hope.
- <sup>5</sup> My soul waits for the Lord,  
more than watchmen for the morning, \*  
more than watchmen for the morning.

6 O Israel, wait for the Lord, \*  
for with the Lord there is mercy;

7 With him there is plenteous redemption, \*  
and he shall redeem Israel from all their sins.

De profundis. From the depths. Cry Out. Call Out. Don't stifle that sound within. Grieve. Grieve. Grieve. Wait. Wait. Wait. Plead. Plead. Plead. Speak from there.

Apparently, dear friends, it is time to LAMENT. As reality washes over us, it is time to pour out our soul. To acknowledge the pain, the confusion. To grieve. To say in every language of body, soul and spirit. This is not right. This sucks! And to realize that lamentation is not just a last resort. It is what God is up to as well. An ancient strategy for finding our way.

Until now, no doubt, everything about our culture has been designed to make "Lamentation" optional, unnecessary. No more. We can't pretend anymore that we are in control of our lives. Like Ezekiel. Like Jesus. Like the Creator and Sustainer of all. Let's learn how to lament.

Here what happens to my soul as we join Ezekiel and look out over the Valley of Dry Bones. And stand with Jesus, Martha and Mary in front of the grave of our friends Lazarus.

- On the one hand, things are IN PIECES. Looking at the entire populace of a once great nation as hopelessly disconnected, I face and embrace a reality, that life like that Jungle Gym project splayed out in a million pieces on your lawn with no instructions, and no idea where to begin, and no way it is all getting put back together. Nothing but 'dem' dry bones. Lament.
- On the other hand, the things we thought mattered don't really matter any more. It's funny how standing in front of this cave, this place where they have put the bodies, all kind of reflection and regret and emotion arise. But there is no where for it to land. No exit. No next step. One big fact. STOP! Time's up. You're done. It's over. And no one, especially

those who love you and care about you seem to be able to do a thing.  
Lament.

- But then, precisely because we are mortal and this is how we are made, we discover that there is just one more thing that we do. Take the next breath. Whether in the valley or in front of the cave, in these fearful places, it's not that we reach for the depths, we FIND something in the deep. In the depths, we catch our breath. We Breath. Well, because we have to. From the deep place you breath again. And again. Formulate a question: Mortal can these bones live? Is this sickness unto death? How is God glorified in this?! Weep. Lament.
- And from that breath, from that enacted question, miraculously, we can make a SOUND. It doesn't really matter what kind of sound. In the end, that sound is meant, as we gather with others who have stumbled on to its miraculous existence, to move us to action. All of this is still an imperative. Lament. Right here in front of our obstacle, our dilemma, is where we are supposed to be. With our cries, our tears, and yes, our songs. Lament!

Do you hear God's Word today. People of faith, it is not enough just to take the next breath. Step in front of your obstacle and address it. Prophecy to the breath! Speak. With intention. With whatever sight you have. Hope against against hope. Speak. And take another breath. In front of your darkest place. Clear your throat. Open the eyes of your heart. Look into the future. Call it forth into sunlight. Declare it "Unbound." Yes. Sound its melody. A song of Ascent. A single note. Lament.

This will require, from time to time, getting offline, turning off the TV, just truly being with ourselves. But it will not require us to forget that there are others, so many others, just six feet away, just on the other end of this special kind of prayer, this corporate grief we share. Let us all together now.... Give up our plans. Give up the pretense of a certain kind of knowledge. Of where we will go. What we shall do. Let us all together now.... Prophecy to the breath. Breath! And sing a new song that is the best doorway to our future.

Our lamentations of course are a form of inquiry. They form questions, that help us form answers. Can God set a table in the wilderness? Can God make from these lifeless stones, these dry dry bones, children for Abraham? Will God show up this time, right on time, and weep with us. Do we not realize that we lament, precisely because this is what God must do with and for us. Jesus wept. And then he called forth his friend Lazarus.

The process of Lamentation, from things going from “being in pieces” to “it’s all over” to engaging body, soul and spirit in our deepest longing, is all here in the Gospel lesson.

Jesus said to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” Martha is trying to put the pieces together. Martha looks at him in bewilderment. Sure. A numb, textbook reply. Let me go find my sister.

Mary knew how to activate this process in Jesus. That was how close they were. “She knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?”

Only from there – in front of your obstacle, your terror, do you find your breath, your most honest voice, your most troubled soul - is your life renewed.

Martha can put it together intellectually. Mary can move things forward. Mary gathers herself, prostrates herself, fills her lungs with air, and calls forth the creative Spirit of God.

Today is a day we can claim what Jesus said to Martha, with the intention of Mary. With whatever we have at our disposal, we not only give up control or fighting the inevitable, we join with the one who is drawing near to us, and see the tears on his face.

De Profundis. From the depths. Lament.

In every gesture of complaint, grief, despair and honest bewilderment, we can yet throw ourselves down and cry mercy. Because we know our God joins us in this. From there he breaths with us. He says the words that raise us up. Lazarus, will die again, but today he will be lifted! Raised up to live another day.

Prophesy to the breath! Call forth from your deepest place the Lord of Life. And discover that he laments with you.

Come! Lord of Life. Come Holy Spirit. Sound us out. Call us out. Unbind us. Though dying we live. So living and believing – that this is not ever the end of the story!

Amen.