

SERMON: LAMENT (part one)

Bob Stelter

We are living in unprecedented times! I'm hearing that often these days from commentators and experts. We are living in unprecedented times.

We hear often of wars with Israel and Palestine, with Russia and Ukraine. But there are more wars currently being fought: Civil wars in Ethiopia, Sudan, Myanmar, Central African Republic. Gang wars in Haiti. Wars with Houthi-Saudi Arabia, Kivu, Columbia, Ethiopia, Sudan. And now, Russia colluding with China and Iran. This is a violent, dangerous, warring world. Unprecedented times indeed.

And nationally, we are not one nation, indivisible. We are divided. It seems like the goal of partisan politics is to divide us. You don't need me to go over the laundry list of our nation's current drama and trauma. I can tell you that my pastoral care load, the amount of people meeting with me for prayer and conversation, has

doubled since the beginning of the year.

People are anxious, angry, depressed, fed up, disgusted. What's your hot button? If you are not angry, you haven't been paying attention.

Yes, we are living in unprecedented times.

This certainly feels like one of those times in our lives. It seems like the worldwide reality is one big hot mess.

One of the fun things I like to do with the Bible readings each week is see if I can identify with one of the readings. This week, it is right in front of me. Like David in today's Psalm lesson, I find myself calling out to God, asking, "How long, O Lord? How long? Will you forget me forever? How long, O Lord." (Psalm 13:1)

Whether the looming disaster is a global situation or a current American crisis or even something personal, like our health or the loss of a loved one or a financial

challenge, we can't help but wonder where is God in this time of despair and disaster? We find ourselves questioning God's presence, God's goodness, God's provision. How long, O Lord?

Worse still, after going through this intense phase of doubt and questioning, often guilt grows for having ever wondered about these things, ever questioning God in the first place.

And we do question God. "Why God? How God?" That is normal, even healthy. I encourage you to ask such faith questions.

It is also normal for us to hear others raise questions of God's presence amidst the storm as a critique on God's character. We then feel pressured, obligated, to defend God since God is under attack. As if we, mere human beings, were being asked to come to God's aid.

God does not need our defense. Instead, God welcomes our questions.

Sometimes, especially now in this worldwide season of unprecedented times, we need to lament and grieve. We have genuine questions and concerns. And that is ok.

This is the season for lamenting. A lament is a strong expression of grief, puzzlement or sorrow. There is a time for all things under the sun. The Old Testament philosophical book of Ecclesiastes so eloquently puts it, there is a time for laughter and dancing, but there is also a time for weeping and mourning.

Our years on this earth are full of seasons. Ups and downs that shape us and change the trajectory of our lives. Many among us have known pain and tragedy. Our stories are marked by wounds and scares. We spend years trying to understand our past, trying to work our way through the grieving process, trying to emerge from the dark night of the soul.

We attempt to fully comprehend our pain and try to understand God's purposes in each situation.

We search to reconcile our past as we carry complicated family relationships, deal with an unexpected illness, as we grieve, as we grapple with our own stories.

Remember, it is hard to fix the world when we haven't done the work to fix ourselves first.

We are learning to embrace change. We are learning to be suspicious of resistance couched as tradition. We are learning to focus on what we've found instead of what we've lost.

Why does God allow suffering? We don't know. I suppose the answer to "Why does God allow suffering?" is YES. Yes, God does.

Maybe that is our mission as a congregation, to provide room and support and encouragement for lamenting. To allow space for people to lament. To wonder why. To ask questions. To work through grief.

Maybe we need to not be a people of quick and easy Sunday School answers, but instead be a people of soft hearts and listening ears.

My New Year's resolution this year was four words: Talk less, listen more. I'm not saying I'm any good at it, but it is my goal. Talk less, listen more.

Perhaps the best thing we can do for each other in our deepest lament is to remind each other of who God is, not with our words, but with our actions. Let's be living embodiments of God's grace and love. Let's find ways to be the helpers that people can turn to in times of personal storms. This is storm season. Be a storm shelter.

To those of you deep in the midst of your own personal storm, of deep lamenting, please know God hears your cries, even those that go unspoken. Your lamentations are welcomed and heard.

It is okay to lament. The Bible is full of laments of faithful people with problems. King David is a

good spiritual role model for us. In today's psalm reading, he is showing that it is ok, even encouraged, for us to take our expressions of pain and grief straight to God.

In these unprecedented times, let us learn to cling to God and allow God to give us the strength when we have no strength. It is not about an easy life or even changing the circumstances of our lives. Sometimes it is about getting through it, of surviving. Of trusting God even when things are falling apart. After all, these are unprecedented times.

Today's Psalm (13) begins with David crying out to God, asking "How long, O Lord?" Let us not be afraid to approach and speak so directly with God in times of great need. May we, like David, place our trust in the One who promises to be with us in our lamenting.

And may we be a people who come alongside the hurting, even if all we can offer is a warm embrace and a listening ear.

Yes, these are unprecedented times. It feels like a long season of worldwide lament. There can be good in the lament. Our lamenting draws us closer to God. We pray and praise out of our pain.

As a nation and as individuals, we have been more traumatized than we originally thought. Trauma is accumulative. We have lamentation work to do. Let us say, “God, this is the way I feel. I leave it to you now.”

And in our search for meaning and purpose, let us never settle for shallow easy answers. God never says to us: “Do not worry, you will understand everything. You will have all the answers fully revealed to you.”

No, our human need to understand can only take us so far. Let us speak our confusion to God and trust in God’s presence and power.

We will survive. We will survive these unprecedented times, survive global warming, survive racial animosity, survive hatred of

immigrants, survive suspicion of the LGBTQ+ community, survive this time of heightened national animosity, survive a world where fourteen current wars are being waged, survive whatever is next, survive even death itself.

It is not lamenting. but the failure to lament that reveals our lack of faith. This is an unprecedented season of worldwide lament.

God is always within shouting distance.

How long, O Lord?