

2.21.2024 Lenten Midweek Prayer

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Lamentations 3:19-26; 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

“Hope and strength in weakness”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

This year’s Lenten midweek series is titled, “*Holy Lament: God’s Presence in Times of Distress.*” The word “lament” is familiar to all of us, but just what is “lament?” Lament is an expression of grief, regret, or mourning over the loss of something or someone. Lament is a cry or prayer of need, appealing to God for help, rescue, or guidance. Though the biblical form of lament very ancient, lament is also very universal, revealing painful and urgent human feelings. As modern people we give voice to lament in our moments of despair, depression, sickness, and trauma. Lament is a visceral cry to God for help in the face of our very real human need.

Each week in this series there will be two biblical texts, one from the Hebrew scriptures and one from the New Testament. Tonight’s texts are from the Book of Lamentations and 2 Corinthians. The first thing to notice as we begin is that both texts are written in first-person singular, making their words of lament intensely personal. In the reading from Lamentations the word “affliction” also means poverty and misery, while the word “homelessness” means wandering, straying, and restlessness. These words help us understand the “wormwood” and “gall” of this reading as a feeling of bitterness about our physical and spiritual poverty and waywardness.

Perhaps you have experienced a problem so personal and bitter that you have not been able to sit still or to concentrate. Perhaps you have been woken at night by a problem that has made you restless and miserable. Yet notice how the writers of these texts also discovered God present in their distress.

This discovery of God in our restless laments reminds me of St. Augustine’s words in his *Confessions*, “[God,] you made us for yourself, and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.” Our restlessness of heart, mind, and spirit is relieved as we place our distress and anxiety with God in prayer. In doing so, we discover God already present with us.

There is much in modern life that both causes us to lament and reminds us of the laments of others. Daily, we are surrounded by heart wrenching laments in the news we hear and see, both in this nation and around the world. I don’t think it is overstating things to say that modern people are losing a sense of optimism about the future. We have been educated to believe that

scientifically and societally life will progressively improve and get better. These narratives of progress that we assumed would always be true are not quite accurate. Though we have been educated in a post-Enlightenment worldview to believe that given enough time, money, and resources, all human and natural problems can be overcome, we have also realized that many of our problems are greater than our limited abilities. Worn down by our relentless burdens and laments, we have also realized with great cynicism and despair that we are the cause of many of our problems.

To further our feelings of lament, increasingly many in this world no longer participate in a life-giving religious narrative. In 1944 Dietrich Bonhoeffer described our modern dilemma writing, “Humanity has learned to deal with itself in all questions of importance without recourse to the ‘working hypothesis’ called ‘God.’” Bonhoeffer was pointing to something that was already commonplace nearly a century ago, namely, that in questions of science, the arts, and ethics, human beings make decisions every day without any recourse to or dialogue with God. As modern people, we often cry out in lament before God, yet without an abiding sense of God’s presence.

The season of Lent is an opportunity to acknowledge our laments of loss, grief, and despair. Lent is a moment to return to God with sorrow for doing the very things we know are wrong: oppressing the weak, making war upon our neighbor, violence against those who are different, and for our own human brokenness. For those who may say, “I have done none of these,” Lent is a moment to realize that each of us participate in cultural and economic systems that benefit some while excluding others. It is my daily lament that we have the scientific and medical expertise to deliver care and to heal many, yet we have created a system that profits from human suffering, and from that system many are excluded.

The words of Lamentations are still describing us! We are poor in spirit with hearts that are restless and wander. Yet Lamentations also reminds us of God’s strength in weakness. Hoping upon God, we say, “*O Lord, great is your faithfulness.*”

Please focus your attention upon the cross at the high altar. Paul had the cross of Jesus in mind when he wrote, “*Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.*” The cross reveals the weakness of God is who is pushed out of this world onto a cross, where Jesus suffers human intolerance, bigotry, and hatred. Jesus takes our human cries of lament onto the cross, and this is

how he gives us strength by suffering with and for us. Paul heard Jesus saying to him, “*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.*”

When we cry with lament about our lives, this world, and the pain of others, we feel furthest from God, yet the cross reminds us that in these moments we are actually the closest to God. Jesus suffered in our humanity so that we might never lament and suffer alone. In our weakness, Jesus offers his strength so that renewed we might bear the laments of others.

The next time you are woken in the night, restless and fearful, take your cares to Jesus in prayer. You are not alone in your laments. Your voice joins many other voices who also are restless in the night.

God will strengthen you in the morning light of day so that you might live with hope for your neighbor. Amen.