

“Faith Like Jazz”

Scripture Readings: Lamentations 3:22-33 and Psalm 30

What happens to a church deferred? Delayed, distanced, divided?

Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?

Or cling like molasses to nostalgia for the should-be forgotten?

Does it sink like a stone in the culture war soup?

Or freeze in the tundra of habit in the guise of tradition?

Maybe church deferred just sags like a heavy load.

Or does it explode like a field of flowers in bloom?

May Langston Hughes forgive me. Pray with me.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

So as we reaffirmed this morning we are the church of? ... “the open door”... good, very good, you’ve got the tag line down. It’s a good tag line. I like it. It communicates welcome and invitation and a promise.

The first church I served we didn’t have a tag line, at least not officially. I was at my first Presbytery meeting in my first call – it is a gathering of pastors and lay leaders across a geographic region. Ours included churches all across Colorado and even into Nebraska. I was one of a handful of clergywomen at the gathering and I stood out for my age. I was invited to the young clergy group which was for people 55 and under...so at 27 I was a little at sea. I ended up making some great friends in that space eventually but on my very first meeting I was approached by an elderly gentleman, a ruling elder – a layleader - who introduced himself and when he asked my name, and I answered, he frowned and said gruffly... “oh. You’re at that justice church.” I smiled because I genuinely had no idea what to say to that. Yes? Thank you? Thank God? Our conversation quickly folded after that exchange but as I grew in love with that congregation I served, I thought about that man often and wonder about what he thought he knew. And all that he didn’t.

What he didn’t know about us was just about as big as the mountains that dominated our landscape. He didn’t know we had a thriving kid’s music program with kids playing cello and violin and clarinet in worship, or a fledgling youth group that was born out of two kids and blossomed into something sprawling and good. He probably didn’t know we had ten – yes ten – retired Presbyterian clergy in our small congregation including a man who had been chaplain at Kent State when the shootings happened, had walked on the bridge at Selma, and had served in the Korean war. He probably didn’t know about Nell’s shortbread we used for Holy communion, so buttery and delicate that it was not unusual for kids and the occasional adult to ask for seconds at the holy table. Of course... we should eat our fill there, always. And I’m not sure he knew just what an amazing thing it said about this community in a 120 year old historic church building that they

decided to take a chance on a fresh out of seminary pastor from the north suburbs of Chicago who knew no one in and very little about this part of Colorado. They were chance-takers, the type of people to embody what it means to take a leap of faith. He didn't know so much about us, and it shocked me. He knew us by a single story – we did justice things, and by his tone, I think that was a mark against us.

That lovely church community is indeed a justice-oriented church. And many other things as well. They aren't a single story, no church is, and certainly a community as vast and as full as First Congo cannot be a single story. We have reputations in the community – reputations that have shifted over time. The once “country club church” has become and is becoming something else. And that's all good because God created us to have full and complex stories. And the Bible makes it clear that God isn't a single, linear story either, but more of a prismatic gem, something that changes depending on how you hold it and when you look at it.

We try to make the Bible into a single story. It's just human nature, it's how we make sense of the world. We try to narrow it down to Jesus, mostly, with a handful of Old Testament stories that leave out the gory bits, and from there, down to the stories of healing and being kind to little kids and widows, tossing in the manger on one end and the cross at the other. Neat, nice, easy to follow. It's much more palatable that way. Easy to digest. But it's untrue or at least incomplete. It is just one story.

There is a danger in knowing only the single story. Speaker and author Chimimanda Ngozie Adichie gives a brilliant TED talk on the danger of the single story and I highly recommend looking it up when you get home. In it she shares about growing up middle class in Nigeria, and feeling pity for all the poor people living in a nearby rural village. She says “All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them.”

Adichie continues, “Years later, I thought about this when I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States. I was 19. My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my “tribal music,” and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey. She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove. What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals.” She goes on with other examples, and affirms “So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.”

Adichie tells it better than I ever could. She tells the story of what happens when people only wail Lamentations, or only shout Praise, and miss the story of all the good contradictory complexity of life. The book of Lamentations is where we get that complexity revealed to us in ways that the Gospels don't always hit.

The entire text of Lamentations would take months of Sundays to explore properly in sermons, and it appears in the lectionary but rarely, so I'm glad we get to spend time with it. It's a gift of a book. Just 5 chapters – you could read it this afternoon no problem. Much of it is written as an acrostic – with each line starting with the subsequent letter of the ancient Hebrew alphabet – which would've been used as a good memory device to aid in the chanting or even singing of these passages. It's a book of poetry, written in the sixth century BCE, when Babylon had invaded and Jerusalem fell.

The sense of betrayal the Hebrew people must have felt in that time cannot be overstated. Hope is absent because God is silent. The people are crying out in fear and sorrow and God doesn't say a word. This is the kind of gut-wrenching anguish of a people who believe their nation is coming to its end and their steadfast God is ... nowhere. They are alone.

And the poems of Lamentations – usually ascribed to the prophet of Jeremiah - blame God. They do. Now we get funny about that in protestant circles, and I don't personally ascribe to a theology in which God makes terrible things happen to some people like some vicious, invisible chess player. But that doesn't really matter. Because the poets did. They believed it. There's a line just before today's scripture reading that says "I am the warrior who has seen the woe by means of the anger of God's rod." It's like a direct juxtaposition to those lines, so comforting like a warm spiritual blanket, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me". As if the results matter very little and the rod will be used just exactly as God feels like it. The authors spend the next 19 verses blaming God's abandonment for their pain. It's a difficult story. But an important one. The lament goes on, and forgive the gendered language here, but it goes:

I am one who has seen affliction
under the rod of God's wrath;
² he has driven and brought me
into darkness without any light;
³ against me alone he turns his hand,
again and again, all day long.

⁴ He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,
and broken my bones;
⁵ he has besieged and enveloped me
with bitterness and tribulation;
⁶ he has made me sit in darkness
like the dead of long ago.

⁷ He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;
he has put heavy chains on me;
⁸ though I call and cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer;
⁹ he has blocked my ways with hewn stones,
he has made my paths crooked.

¹⁰ He is a bear lying in wait for me,
a lion in hiding;
¹¹ he led me off my way and tore me to pieces;
he has made me desolate;
¹² he bent his bow and set me
as a mark for his arrow.

It gets bleak. Not hard to understand why these verses don't make it into the common lectionary. Yet this is a part of the story of God too. God's people feel not only abandoned but directly persecuted by God. That is their moment and their experience and we are remiss if we wash away that hurt because it makes us uncomfortable. It's a mistake to render part of the story mute just because it's uncomfortable or incompatible with where we are in our story at that moment.

We're so quick to stick to our single story of ourselves – to jump back to life, and find the silver lining, and insist that people just buck up when they're facing the really painful parts of life. But that isn't who we are. We are also people who can sit in the dark beside those in suffering. Because God is bigger than our sorrow, and bigger than our anger, and even bigger than our accusations that we have been abandoned.

By the time the authors of Lamentations get to today's scripture, things have taken a turn. In verse 21 the Lamentations say "*This* I call to mind and therefore I have hope." *This* is emphasized, it refers to the Hebrew word "Chesed", translated as "unbreakable devotion to the promise". That promise of God's everlasting mercies and in Hebrew, the word mercy is the same root as the word for "womb". A tender and powerful and tenuous link between all that is possible and all that lives. By the time we're into today's verses, the poets are reaffirming their faith, that the Lord will not reject forever, that yes, God is silent and yes God is absent right now, but the *chesed* that runs like an umbilical cord between God and God's children remains no matter what. Both of these stories can be true at once. God's people are alone in their suffering. And God's people maintain belief that God's love continues forever.

The lamentations then, I think, are most like jazz, like the blues. Richard Rohr puts it: While gospel music promised peace in the hereafter and the promise of God's presence, the blues became public theology, communal inquiry, and a critique of the church. . . . Under every stanza is the silent and unspoken question, "How long, oh Lord, how long will your people continue to suffer?" . . . No one thinks for one moment that when B. B. King sang, he was saying all that there was to be said about the subject. . . . Jazz is a way of being in the world. Jazz is the musical version of the communal response to displacement. When Miles Davis blows the cacophony that can barely be contained by the word *song*, we come closest to the unimaginable, the potential of the future, and the source of our being."

Put another way, Lamentations reminds us that God is more than just a single story. God is more than just someone always telling you what a great job you've done, a happy clappy toxically positive iteration of faith, that Jesus loves us, so everything's great all the time forever and ever amen. Yes, God is much, much more than that. And God is more than the intellectualization and philosophy at the expense of genuine praise. God is more.

So what are we in response to all of this? We, the church of the open door. Are we people who can arrive with our multiple rich, full stories and multiple understandings and experiences, and accept the complexity of life together worshipping a God who only reveals partial stories? Can we embrace that we hear only a few notes of the song at a time, and trust that there is larger orchestration at work? Can we believe with faith like jazz, that beauty and pain can co-exist in harmony?

And can we maybe be as a church more like a field of sunflowers? Sunflowers are heliotropes. They respond to the sun's presence, and even move to face it in the sky. And you know what happens when the sky clouds over or night falls? They wait, together in the dark, expecting the sun to rise again. Amen.