“Lament and hope”

Rev. Debra McGuire

Bethany Presbyterian Church

Matthew 23:1-12; Psalm 43

November 5, 2023

***Matthew 23:1-12***

***23 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2******“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’s seat; 3therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it, but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.******4They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others, but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. 5They do all their deeds to be seen by others, for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 6They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues 7and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have people call them rabbi******. 8But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers and sisters. 9And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father, the one in heaven. 10Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11The greatest among you will be your servant. 12All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.***

***Psalm 43***

***1Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people; from those who are deceitful and unjust, deliver me!
2For you are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you cast me off?
Why must I walk about mournfully because of the oppression of the enemy?***

***3O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.
4Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.***

***5******Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.***

“Yesterday, Secretary of State Antony Blinken took US calls for “humanitarian pauses” in the Israel-Hamas war to key Arab allies, who publicly insisted on an immediate cease-fire instead.”1

Mr. Ayman Safadi, the Jordanian Foreign Minister said, “We have to remind each other of our common humanity.”

Indeed.

I have a coffee mug that says the same thing, I’m sure. It says, “It shouldn’t have to happen to you to matter to you.”

Friends and colleagues say to me, “What a time to be preaching.” I say, yes. Not just preaching. Any communicating. What a time it is, to be having conversations with friends, classmates, family. What a time to be trying to make sense of the whiplash that is our daily, hourly news cycle. What a time to be navigating the world. I would rather be telling you about *different* news stories – like, for example, the news yesterday, just below the news of Secretary Blinkin – that a 63 foot Norway spruce from West Virginia is on its way to the White House, to be the nation’s Christmas Tree this year! What an insane juxtaposition of news stories on my feed.

I almost felt sad reading the headline about the tree, because I felt like what little innocence I had left had been stolen. I almost felt guilty for wanting to smile with glee at the idea of all of the joy that the holiday season has for us, as if feeling joy would negate my compassion for those who are suffering. As if I have to choose.

It’s all good though because the Holy Spirit was doing her job, bringing us Psalm 43 as part of the lectionary today. This psalm shows us that we don’t have to choose between what is dark and what is light. The psalm, a continuation of psalm 42, jumps back and forth between where are you God, I’m suffering and I know you’re there God and I will praise you again. The beginning of Psalm 42 might be more familiar to some of you. It begins with these words:

“As a deer longs for flowing streams,
    so my soul longs for you, O God.
**2**My soul thirsts for God,
    for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
    the face of God?
**3**My tears have been my food
    day and night,
while people say to me continually,
    “Where is your God?”

The idea of longing for something. A longing you can feel pulling from your heart; I can hear it in the long pull of a cello bow across a string. The idea of actually having a biological need for (thirst) God goes so deep! If you have ever been in deep anguish about anything, you know how it feels when your *“tears have been (your) food day and night.*” At the same time, the rest of psalm 42 speaks of times the writer remembers how joyful it was to lead the throngs to “*in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.”* I’m suffering, but I remember the other feelings at least. Continuing into psalm 43, we hear questions put to God such as, *Why have you forgotten me? Why have you cast me off? Why must I walk about mournfully because of the oppression of the enemy?* Again, the writer still remembers the days in which he took refuge in God. Back and forth, back and forth. Crying out to God, three times in these two psalms, *Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?* Where are you, God?

*This* is our common humanity.

In Gaza, of the two million people who live there roughly half are under the age of 18. All of these air strikes are wiping out children. How can our humanity not cry out?! Our common humanity *must* be the basis for all else. Whether it is the horrific images we see from Israel and Gaza (false information lives in photos too), Ukraine and Russia, the images of nature’s destructive forces, the suffering we know of from our own lives or from the work we do on behalf of others, or from what we see as we go about our day, our common humanity is what makes things matter to us even if they haven’t happened to us.

As much as this psalm gives us permission to rail against suffering of our own or on behalf of others, this psalm does not separate the love God has for us from those cries. Because God has been our refuge, we remember that God will be our refuge again. Because we remember our joyful celebrations of God in our midst, we know that we will “lead the throngs in procession, with glad shouts of song and thanksgiving, multitudes rejoicing” again. The power of God is that we can cry out to God when there is no one else. The psalmist cries out to God, “where are you?” while at the same time *remembering* that there was a time when he *could* feel the living God; when God was his refuge; when he knew that the God he can’t seem to find, is still the one who will vindicate him, will defend his cause, will deliver him from those who are deceitful and unjust.

Our common humanity also means that heartbreak does not need to have the last word. We are all capable of compassion and empathy.

The psalmist sets hope right in the midst of the cry. We don’t tell God about our suffering and remain there. We don’t cry to God for vindication and defense and deliverance, if we don’t also hope that God is the one who can do these things. Each of the three times we hear about the suffering, “*Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?*,” we also hear about the hope “*Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.*

I shall again praise. In the midst of the cry of complete emptiness, still there is hope in God. God is the one who has light and truth that can be sent to us. Send out *your* light and *your* truth the psalmist says. Those two, God’s light and truth are things I can follow. Even while suffering, the psalmist knows that there is a holy hill, there is a dwelling, there is an altar of God, and there is still exceeding joy within him. Even after the cries for help and the sorrow of being forgotten, cast out, the final word is certain. Hope in God, for I shall again praise God, my help and my God.

We need to look for, seek out, recognize all of the God moments in our lives so that when we can’t find God, hopefully we can remember those moments and feel confident that we will find God again. What are those moments like for you? Sometimes it’s a feather on your cheek in the middle of the night, a messenger about something. Did something happen, that you later ascribed to God’s presence? Have you had a strong feeling of God’s presence at some time? I get shy about praying sometimes even when it’s just me. Sometimes I start a two way conversation in my head with me and the “other” me. Somewhere along the way, I get a response from the “other” me voice that came so fast I couldn’t have made it up. I probably told you before about a spiritual director who said to me many years ago, “Oh, so if it came from your imagination, it’s not from God?”

Our faith is something we practice. We think things, we try things, we have experiences, we reflect, we hope for things, and somewhere along the line God makes an appearance that we hadn’t seen before. For those of us who might be at a point today overwhelmed or stuck in that place of doom and gloom about the world, the country, something specific or something global, this psalm is for us. Remember the hope, even as we cry out.

Let’s end with a reading of the entire Psalm, 42 and 43 together. If you want, you can follow along in your pew bible on page \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
    so my soul longs for you, O God.
**2**My soul thirsts for God,
    for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
    the face of God?
**3**My tears have been my food
    day and night,
while people say to me continually,
    “Where is your God?”

**4**These things I remember,
    as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng
    and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
    a multitude keeping festival.
**5**Why are you cast down, O my soul,
    and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God, for I shall again praise him,
my help **6**    and my God.

My soul is cast down within me;
    therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
    from Mount Mizar.
**7**Deep calls to deep
    at the thunder of your torrents;
all your waves and your billows
    have gone over me.
**8**By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
    and at night his song is with me,
    a prayer to the God of my life.

**9**I say to God, my rock,
    “Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
    because the enemy oppresses me?”
**10**As with a deadly wound in my body,
    my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
    “Where is your God?”

**11**Why are you cast down, O my soul,
    and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God, for I shall again praise him,
    my help and my God.

Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause
    against an ungodly people;
from those who are deceitful and unjust,
    deliver me!
**2**For you are the God in whom I take refuge;
    why have you cast me off?
Why must I walk about mournfully
    because of the oppression of the enemy?

**3**O send out your light and your truth;
    let them lead me;
let them bring me to your holy hill
    and to your dwelling.
**4**Then I will go to the altar of God,
    to God my exceeding joy,
and I will praise you with the harp,
    O God, my God.

**5**Why are you cast down, O my soul,
    and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God, for I shall again praise him,
    my help and my God.

Amen.

1<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-11-04/arab-envoys-reject-blinken-s-call-for-limited-war-pause-in-gaza>