

October 2, 2016

Singing God's Song in a Strange Land
Lamentations 1: 1-6

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Do you remember this commercial?

the irony was obvious to anyone who partook of fast food,

There was so little beef in the patty, it was hidden by the bun...

She was left looking for something of substance, she thought she was promised, and found it didn't measure up.

There are times that we have the same uneasy feeling about faith....and even worship.

When things are going well we are often content to skim the surface of faith, content with worship as a quiet hour, that makes us feel good....

But at times particularly in difficult times we recognize a deeper need and when it is more difficult to find the substance and the cry becomes a metaphor for our faith as we wonder "where's the beef?"

On the other hand, many of us are used to hiding our true feelings in worship....

When I was growing up, girls had to wear hats and gloves to come to church

WE got dressed up in clothes we did not wear at any other time....

Although it was considered a sign of respect and reverence for God,

Unfortunately, we also had a sense that we had to put on a pretense for God,

be shiny and bright to be in worship, the way we have learned to show our faith....

We may pretend we are fine so others don't judge our wobbly faith, so we don't offend God

For this reason and many others, today many of us are afraid to express true feelings in worship

So what are we missing? What are we to do when our world crashes around us?

Scripture including passages we read and sang this morning offer us a way of lament,

Of bringing our heart cries to God...

The Israelites, prophets, dared to show their true feelings to God and weren't afraid for others to hear.

They dared to pray their anger and disappointment.....as well as their joy and thanksgiving.

So today, we sit by the waters of Babylon and consider our faith....and what we can learn about the balance of lament and praise in our lives and in worship.

For Jeremiah and the people of God, things were not always difficult

As a nation, they had prosperity through export of finest wheat, wine and olive oil.

They believed their prosperity was evidence that God was pleased with them.

Trusted God was more powerful than the gods of the enemies.

Believed that their acts of worship ensured God would keep the temple and the city itself safe.

Then the inconceivable had happened.

Jerusalem was overcome by invading Babylonians.

Buildings were reduced to rubble.

Friends, family, loved ones had been killed.

everyone who was anyone was taken into exile, those left behind were without leaders, or resources.

Survivors were left trying to come to terms with what had happened.

At first they were too shocked.

But little by little unwanted thoughts flitted through their consciousness.

Perhaps the gods of the Babylonians were stronger and more powerful than their God.

Perhaps their God no longer cared about them.

Perhaps God had grown old and tired, as tired as they felt.

Perhaps God no longer existed.

They were disillusioned, disappointed, discouraged.

For us, like the Israelites, it is easy to trust that God is taking care of us when things are going well.

But we live out faith in the midst of lives where bad things happen to good people,

When we lose our security, when relationships fail, when the doctor's words chill our hearts

when friends let us down, or tragic events turn our world upside down.

We may find ourselves alienated in worship, even resentful of others who seem to have easier lives.

our song may be reduced to the question: where does our hope come from? Where's the beef...

When hard times hit, we may no longer feel strong enough or brave enough

It may seem that our prayers bounce off the ceiling and echo around us

As our familiar lives and ideas no longer satisfy we can find ourselves strangers in a strange land

We may find difficult prayers that might sound like challenges....

"I was once so sure, so excited, so enthusiastic!

But things haven't happened the way I thought they would.

You can do anything, answering this prayer would be nothing for you Lord...why don't you?

Sometimes late at night fear constricts our hearts and made breathing difficult

As we wonder-- if God is there—

We want to believe.

Yet we grow tired, discouraged, disillusioned.

I believe that Jeremiah and the Israelites can help us in such times.

They provide us with a model of how to be real and bring our disappointments or laments to God

And in the Praying of such raw and difficult thoughts,

People of faith like Jeremiah remind us that God is with us, even amid devastating circumstance.

Rather than suffering in silence,

Jeremiah trusts his feelings and disappointment to God, trusting God would hear.

In this way, Jeremiah points us to a truth about God,

Rather than being far off when trouble hits,

God has not abandon them, but walks with the prophet and the people

Even in, or especially in the difficult time, God was continuing to love and cherish,

to hear prayers, to speak to and reassure God's people.

In scripture we have a strong tradition of lament for us to learn and model for others.

In other words, Jeremiah was not the only one to pray his disappointment, anger or despair to God,

Even Jesus used the words of a psalm of lament often used in worship as he hung on a cross...

We are given examples of both individuals and whole communities lamenting in prayer,

Congregations and nations show deep faith as they trust God with their sorrow and hurt, their anger and fear.

The uncomfortable truth for us in a world that wants quick fixes

is that God does not always, (or even often) take us out of a situation,

Rather God weeps with us, sorrows with us so that difficult times are never the last word,

God's word is always the word after that.

Jeremiah was right to trust God...and to help others to trust God was with them.

There was no quick fix, but in time, God led the people back from exile and Jerusalem was rebuilt

And God has continued to fulfil all God's promises throughout history

Today, as we read this, we are reminded that the life of faith is lived in the messiness of life,

WE need not be afraid to voice our lament, for God will not strike us for sharing our feelings,

God who walks with us, continues to listen to our prayers and reach out in blessing in all situations

We do a disservice when we pretend for God in worship...

Or if by our actions portray that faith is only shown in happiness

Jesus said to worship in spirit and in truth, lament and joy are part of the walk of faith and authentic worship in the sanctuary, as individuals...for all of us.

Our hope is found in this that God continues with us in thick and thin, in doubt and faith,

It is this that we celebrate today at this table, where the substance of faith is not hidden...

It is the table where death is turned to life, and hope is found among the ashes of former dreams,

Here we remember that Christ became flesh to walk with us and show us that God is with us.

We can trust God who died for us and rose again, will listen to our prayers no matter how raw.

As we share our deepest hurts with God we open ourselves to God's healing,

As we are honest about our lament, we open our hearts to align with God's heart,

As we seek to voice our anger to God, we affirm we believe and our need for help in our unbelief....

The truth is --Faith is not an ideal, but a way of living life in balance, trusting God

We are not called to be perfect but to trust God is with us in our imperfection, in both our lament and praise

And as an act of faith, we join together, partaking of a meal that reminds us that we are not alone.

God is with us. God is with us, Amen