

Lenten Sermon Series: Preparing for the New Creation-“The Lament”

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18, Luke 13:31-35, Psalm 27

Salem United Methodist Church; March 17, 2019

Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling

Today is the second Sunday in Lent. Last week we talked about the challenges we face in life as well as the challenges we might have in keeping a holy Lent through the spiritual practices of prayer, fasting, giving, and serving. Which spiritual practice did you choose for Lent? And how are you doing with the practice? Are you lamenting or complaining about your choice of spiritual practice? Are you ready to give up? These are great questions for us as we look at the important role the lament has for our journey.

There is a lot of whining in today's world. People will whine all the time about anything and everything. Comedian Matt Bellassai is making a career as a whiner. He has created an online video show called, “Whine about it,” where he has whined about being an adult, online dating, annoying couples, kids, and clothes shopping, to name a few. Don't get me wrong. Whining has its place. We all need to have a trusted person with whom we can unload and complain about what unnerves us, about the things that are out of our control, or about the things that are unfair or wrong. Whining and complaining can be cleansing and good for the soul and so can a lament. However, a lament is not a whine, but a complaint of sadness or regret. We lament when there is a loss, when we are afraid, when we regret doing something, when we wish we could change things and aren't able to, when injustices are inflicted on us and others. Laments are complaints in faith offered usually to God. When our world is turned upside down, we plead, “Why?” or “Why me?” Lamenting is part of our faith journey. Some insist that people of faith should not lament. Not true! God wants to be our faithful listener. We can trust that we can take all things to God, including laments. There are many laments in the Bible. There are three in our scriptures today.

First, we heard Abram's lament to God, “Where are the children you promised would make me into a great nation?” Second, we heard the Psalmist wanting to trust God on one hand, but in his reality, God is hiding, not listening, and is neglectful, so he laments to God, “Listen to me when I cry out, have mercy on me, answer me!” Third, we heard Jesus lament over the city of Jerusalem, the seat of religious and political power. This capital city had a history of unjust kings and self-serving prophets. For generations the residents of this city and those in power have not been about doing God's work of healing people and caring for those in need. They have killed prophets who scorned them for not caring for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant. And Jesus knows that he will be killed, too, when he enters Jerusalem's gates. Jesus yearns for something better for this beloved city. He grieves for the city that will kill him. He expresses his frustration, sadness, and regret with his lament, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem.” Instead of going into a hateful rage or planning revenge, Jesus chooses to love his enemies. He offers a motherly lament, yearns to gather them, and protect them under his wings, like a mother hen protects her chicks.

When I realized that St. Patrick's Day was the same Sunday that I had already planned to preach on laments, I wondered if it would be possible to connect the two. Then I refreshed my memory about Patrick's life. Oh, yea! It is possible. There is much we can learn from St. Patrick's faith story. He was born Patricius in 385 C.E. to a wealthy British Roman family. At the age of sixteen he was kidnapped while at the family's country home by Irish raiders and taken to the Emerald Isle where he was forced into slavery. His primary duty as a slave was to look after the sheep. Before he was kidnapped, Patricius did not believe in Christianity as his parents did. For six years he cared for the roaming sheep on the Irish hillsides. He had little to no human contact. As he experienced loneliness, hunger, being wet and cold, he began to talk to God. One can only imagine the laments he expressed out of pain, anger, and loneliness, “Why, God? Why me?” During these six years, he grew so close to God that he heard God's voice tell him to escape and catch a boat home. And he did.

As an adult, Patrick became a priest and later a bishop when he heard the call to return to Ireland and share the Christian faith with the pagans there. Still suffering from the trauma of being a slave, he reluctantly decides to forgive them for what they did to him and returns to Ireland vowing to love his enemies. In his forties Patrick becomes the first missionary of the church since the Apostle Paul. During his forty years as a missionary in Ireland, Patrick established churches, dioceses, monasteries, and convents; ordained priests and consecrated bishops. Challenging? To say the least. When Patrick stepped onto the Emerald Isle, the Irish were warring raiders and rustlers. Intertribal warfare and indiscriminate killing was the norm. Patrick was able to break through this

hostile culture by building relationships with the people and loving them. He found ways to intersect the tenets and the rituals of the Christian faith with their pagan beliefs. However, he was well aware of the risk. Patrick wrote that “every day I am ready to be murdered, betrayed, enslaved-whatever may come my way.” In the midst of fear and threats, Patrick was creating a new people, new followers of Christ, a new creation. At the end of Patrick’s life, he was able to witness the end of the slave trade in Ireland, the end of intertribal warfare, and a new society that was not structured on the sword. Throughout these years, Patrick fought prejudices from the British Roman church. The Irish people were not Roman citizens and because of this even though they were now Christians, the British Romans viewed the Irish as non-humans.

How often has one group of people viewed another group as sub-human or non-human? Thomas Erich, the author of the book, *Lent: The Gift of New Creation* was traveling across the United States when he wrote the book. When he was writing about Jesus’ lament for Jerusalem, he was driving through the Native American reservations in Arizona and New Mexico. There he sees the great price the natives paid for the greed and cruelty of the Christian whites who wielded their power over them. The natives were taken from their fertile land and placed in the desert where nothing grows. As the author witnessed this injustice first hand, a lament swells up in him filled with anger and betrayal. He reflects, “Life doesn’t end when we fail God. We might even think we have gotten away with something, or maybe that we have been smarter than God. But sins accumulate, and until we ask God to remove them from us, the burden just gets heavier and heavier and our behavior becomes worse and worse.” He continues, “Until people confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors, until we root out and cease the behaviors of yesterday, yesterday stays alive.” Jesus witnessed how Jerusalem’s sins of the past produced the Jerusalem that would kill him. Later we see how the sins of the British Christians accumulated from the fifth century through the early part of the twentieth century when part of the Emerald Isle gained their independence from England. Over the course of 1500 years, the British continued to view the Irish as less than human and persecuted them severely. Their land was taken from them. Their native language and culture were banned. And they suffered severe religious persecution from the English Protestants. The root cause of the Great Famine which began in 1845 was not a potato fungus, but the fact that the British would only allow the Irish tenet farmers a small plot of land in which they could use as gardens. In our own country, we also see how the sins of slavery have accumulated into racism today. Lamenting can express the pain of past sins which impact our present and our future. These sins will continue to accumulate unless we admit them, confess them, and seek reconciliation. There is much to lament in our world. We are lamenting the murders of those from all religious communities. This weekend we lament the murders of the worshipping Muslims in New Zealand. Many in our denomination are lamenting the decision of the Special Session of the General Conference that excludes a group within the church. So we cry out, “Why, Lord?” and “How long?”

St. Patrick had every right to lament to God about his challenges, the threats against his life, and the Roman British Christians, but instead he writes, “...I am not afraid of these things, because of the promises of heaven; for I have put myself in the hands of God Almighty.” St. Patrick turned his laments of pain, suffering, and hate into acts of mercy, forgiveness, and love. Somehow in the middle of having Druid priests and Irish kings threatening his life; and the British Christians who refused to recognize the newly created church in Ireland, Patrick focused on Christ. He recognized that this mission was not his, but Christ’s and he persevered. The prayer called St. Patrick’s Breastplate, or sometimes called the Deer’s Cry, Patrick is to have written it while being pursued by the Druids who were seeking to kill him. It is called the Breastplate because it is prayer for Christ’s protection. It is also called the Deer’s Cry because St. Patrick saw himself as a deer being hunted by the Druids. In the midst of being threatened, St. Patrick did not lament, but wrote this beautiful prayer of faith that proclaims that the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit surrounds us as we go through our trials, pain, and suffering. Can we like St. Patrick in the midst of adversity, suffering, and threats rise with God’s strength and claim our faith?

Reflection Questions: What suffering do you have? What suffering is there in the world? How do you express that pain? How do you pray a lament of faith to God? What sins of your past or in our history is impacting the present? How might confessing those sins create a new creation in you, in our church, in our nation?

Resources: *Lent: The Gift of New Creation* by Thomas Ehrich; *How the Irish Saved Civilization* by Thomas Cahill