

Living in the Space Between: Lament and Hope

Luke 13:31-35

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Several years ago, not long after I came here as the associate pastor, I spoke to a woman who had just decided to stop attending this church and find another. When I asked her why, she said, “This church is too positive. It feels like everyone has to be happy all the time. You can’t be real about the hard parts of life - like it’s not okay to be sad or angry or afraid.”

I hadn’t been here long enough at that point to agree or disagree with her. If she said that to me now, I think I might say, “if ever that were true, it certainly hasn’t been for the last six years.” Because, FUMC, amazing church that I love, since March of 2019, less than a year after I became senior pastor, we have together faced one significant challenge after another - the disastrous General Conference of 2019 which led us to consider disaffiliation from our denomination, a global pandemic which caused us to close our doors and find new ways to be and do church together, the steady decline of the mainline church in the U.S., the fallout of the Boy Scout sex abuse scandal, the construction of a huge monstrosity of a building right across Washington Street from us, the racial unrest ignited by the murder of George Floyd, a political environment which started as divisive and has now progressed far from the values of the kingdom of God, the decision to sell Green Wood, the ultimate splitting of our denomination, and even more.

Any one of those challenges would be difficult for a congregation to get through, but together, we all have been faithful and resilient despite fear, discomfort, loss, anxiety, worry, and change. And I’m proud of how our congregation has weathered this six-year storm! We haven’t come through unscathed, but we are still here and stable and looking toward the future. We have been strong and courageous together, and we will continue to be, as we seek to live in the space between lament and hope.

The season of Lent is a season for self-reflection and renewal of faith when we return to the path of growth and discipleship Jesus has laid out for us. This is the second in our Lenten sermon series on “Living in the Space Between” - an examination of how we stay on that path without being consumed by extremes. While neither lament nor hope seems like an extreme emotion or experience, either can devolve and become destructive to both individuals and churches. Lament, when not expressed, can lead to complicated grief, grief that remains debilitating long after most people have integrated their grief into their lives. Hope, when unchecked, can become naivete, avoidance, or a delusion that nothing bad or difficult is happening in the world.

Both lament and hope have deep roots in Judaism and Christianity. But before we get into that, what is lament exactly? Is it simply a synonym for grief or is there something more complicated or nuanced in the meaning of the word? The Oxford English dictionary gives three definitions of lament - 1) to mourn, 2) to express one’s deep grief about, and 3) to express regret or disappointment over something considered unsatisfactory, unreasonable, or unfair. The addition of regret is what I think gives lament its unique meaning - one which incorporates grief but also adds the layer of wishing things were different.

Expressions of lament are found throughout the Bible, but the most concentrated examples are in the book of Lamentations, of course, and in the Psalms. Almost half of the Psalms are what we call Psalms of Lament, and they have a predictable structure. They start with the author calling out to God. Then he describes what is happening to him - his pain and suffering. This is followed by acknowledging his dependence on God. Finally, the author finds hope in God's faithfulness and goodness and ends the psalm with praise.

However, when Jesus laments over Jerusalem, he deviates from this pattern. Rather than speaking to God, he speaks to Jerusalem through the eyes of God. "Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem" - you can hear the grief in his voice as well as a touch of regret or disappointment. In just a few words, "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it", he tells so much of the history of God with God's people. A history in which Israel rebels, not wanting to face the consequences of her human mistakes, over and over again. And God, like a hen with her chicks under her wing, yearns to protect them and set them straight again. But now, the fox, Herod, is right there in their midst, and Jesus cannot protect himself or the Jewish people from him. It is a lament laden with history as well as foreshadowing.

Jesus also deviates from the psalm pattern because there is no expression of hope at the end of what he says. Yet, we know, and Jesus does, as well, that while death and despair seem to be the end of his story, we have hope, always, because of his resurrection. So, there is this duality - lament and hope. Of course, we have many reasons of our own to lament. I gave you a whole list of them at the beginning of this sermon. Yet, when we place our faith in God, there is always reason to hope.

Here is an example. I know that many of us are lamenting recent events in our country. We can imagine ourselves like Jesus, looking out across a land we love, and saying, "Oh, America, America" with the same tender grief we hear in his voice. The massive cutbacks in government programs threaten the livelihoods of people we know and potentially the health of others. Cutting funding to NIH will lead to massive loss in our scientific research including research at the University of Michigan. Department of Education cuts leave us concerned about our children with special needs and how young people will afford college. And cuts in the aid we give to other countries have already impacted individual lives and whole societies outside our borders.

But, with the assurance of our faith, we can look to the past for hope. Humanity's history is full of the struggle between power and justice, condemnation and compassion, but our overall trajectory has been toward the good. There have always been and will continue to be those individuals and nations that speak out against destruction and in support of peace, reconciliation, and love. Christians have always been and will continue to be among them. It's right in our baptism vows. Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves? Those are words of hope to both inspire and sustain us.

Another example is the lament we feel about the accelerated decline of mainline Christianity that has been happening over the last few decades. We bristle at words like "post-Christendom" and grieve for the church that once was. When we look around on Saturday evening/Sunday morning, we notice there are more empty chairs/pews, and some people who were once regular attenders have not returned. Our youth group and children's ministry are

smaller. Fewer people are volunteering to sustain the ministries we value. All of this change worries us, scares us, sometimes even angers us.

Yet, again, we can look to the past for hope. The Christian Church has gone through some sort of massive upheaval every 500 years or so. First was the fall of the Roman Empire in 476. Christianity had never existed outside of the context of the empire. Would it survive? Would it thrive? Could it fill the huge void left by the Romans? Then, in 1054, the Christian church split in what is called the Schism of 1054. Pope Leo IX excommunicated the whole eastern half of the church, and their leader excommunicated the western half. The third massive change happened in 1507 with the advent of the Protestant Reformation, another significant split in the church. Now, we are in 2025, and it seems we are part of another massive shift.

I give you this history because it reveals that God is always doing something new, and as faithful people, we can find our hope in that. While the church as we know it is becoming less and less relevant in today's society, we can trust that God will create something new. We don't know what it is, but we can trust that it will happen. In the meantime, here at FUMC, we are intentionally, purposefully planning for how this church can remain healthy and sustainable to be part of whatever God does next. Even as we lament what is lost, we can turn toward the future in hope and encourage others to join us in the future that unfolds.

Finally, I know we all have personal reasons to lament. Perhaps you are lamenting over a broken relationship with a family member - someone you haven't spoken to in many years. Or, maybe as you grieve over the death of your spouse or friend, you also regret that you didn't say I love you the last time you spoke. Perhaps you are lamenting lost opportunities or decisions you made that now you can't undo.

We can't go through life without reasons to lament. It is the inevitable result of loving. Yet, God gives us just as many (or more) reasons to hope. Not the idealistic hope of those who choose not to see the darkness but the concrete hope of those who have walked through darkness with the assurance that the dawn will come.

May it be so. Amen.