

Resting, Wrestling and Responding in Christ

Psalm 139:1-18, Matthew 2:1-6, 13-15, 23,
Micah 5:2 and Hosea 11:1

Opening remarks: we gather this morning, here at Trinity, as a community of fellow pilgrims, sojourners, as followers of “the way”. As we gather, I am deeply aware that this journey is both one of wrestling and one of resting. How we wrestle and how we rest determines either a closeness to the Lord or a sense of distance. The way we wrestle and the way we rest is in truth the way that we respond to Christ.

Life is hard and for many it seems to get harder the older we get. Each season having its own unique struggles and challenges. While some of these change and fade others remain the same, reminding us that we are just dust. Life seems so fragile, so vulnerable.

Our scripture readings this morning locate us in the timing, places and events surrounding the arrival of the Messiah, ancient and seemingly contradictory predictions that He would come from Bethlehem and from Egypt. We will return to the significance of this later.

At this point it is important to note that the coming of the one who rescues us from our desperate condition, redeems us from our sin, fixes our brokenness and heals our wounds, was accompanied by tremendous suffering, as foretold by the prophet Jeremiah and confirmed by Matthew’s gospel account of Herod’s murder of all infant boys in Bethlehem following the birth of Christ: “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”

Mark Vroegop in his book *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament*¹ explains that as humans we will suffer, it is inevitable, unavoidable. The first sound that comes as we leave the warm and protected confines of our mother’s womb is a cry. To cry is to be human. We don’t stop crying after birth. It continues because the world is broken. Mark writes that “while tears and sorrow are part of our humanity, there is an often-neglected prayer language in the Bible for our travels through a broken world: lament.”

¹ Vroegop, M. (2019) *Dark clouds, deep mercy: Discovering the Grace of lament*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

The Bible addresses this, it is recognised. It elevates the sacredness of our cry to what it refers to as "lament". It is for us as pilgrims and sojourners the method, the way to cry. The Biblical texts are an invitation to use lamentation as prayer.

Psalms 13 offers some help in this regard. There seem to be 4 essential elements. Lament requires that we:

- Turn to God. Lament begins with an address to God. "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Psalm 13:1)
- Bring our complaint. "How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" (Psalm 13:2)
- Ask boldly for help. Lament is to seek God's help while in distress. It is an expression of faith. "Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, 'I have prevailed over him,' lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken" (Psalm 13:3-4)
- Choose to trust. "But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me" (Psalm 13:5-6).

It would seem that while pain and distress is central to being human, lamentation is more than just crying, it is a flow of faith in action. It is a choice we make. It is an expression of belief that God is sovereign, all loving. God's character and goodness can be trusted. We express this belief not when times are easy but indeed when times are most difficult.

We do this also because we have hope. "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:27 NIV).

We do this because we know that "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:17-18 NIV).

We all know that this is easier said than done. It can be just a platitude. The reality is that it is a wrestle. It is difficult, at times seemingly impossible. Exhausting. But as the Imago Butterfly finally emerges from the cocoon with its wings strengthened, its wrestling has meant that it is strong to fly! "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." (Revelation 21:4 NIV).

Testimony about my dad who died in my arms....

This experience changed me in so many deep ways. It taught me how life is not just about wrestling and struggling, but also about resting. Here are a few things that I learnt:

1. It matters that we live a life as close to creation intent as possible. Life as our true selves not false self.
2. While we need to let the Holy Spirit comfort us in Christ in time we need to let the Holy Spirit "... seat us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus". (Ephesians 2: 5-7 NIV). We need the big picture.
3. Why things happen is speculative. Not very helpful. What is better is to ask the Lord: "Where are you?"
4. He is closer than your breath. This issue is not that He is far. It is that we are not experiencing Him. The great poet Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote:
"Dark is the world to thee, thyself art the reason why; For is He not all but thou, that hast power to feel "I am I"? Glory about thee, without thee; and thou fulfilllest thy doom, making Him broken gleams and a stifled splendour and gloom. **Speak to Him thou, for He hears, and Spirit with Spirit can meet – Closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet.**"
5. At some point in our journey, we need to have enough faith to believe that we are really loved, known, accepted, recognised, valued, a unique being a disciple that will live forever. It is this person that we need to get to know. To love and like. Because it determines how we love and like others.
6. Although so very difficult, we need to self-forget. Life is about the other. But we can't do this if we are not comforted in our lament by the Holy Spirit and rested in Heaven Places in our creation intent.
7. Our pilgrimage and sojourn as a pilgrim, where we live lightly and walk carefully, is designed for accompaniment by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Christ in us, between us and among us.

In conclusion.

Some thoughts on Trinity Presbyterian, Lynnwood, having already entered a new season, started a new chapter in its story. Your story!

- Calling of a new minister.
- New members joining.
- New families still to come.
- Invitation to community
- Shared lamentation
- Deeper resting

It is an invitation to each of us:

- For personal private daily practice
- For prayer and intercession (big challenges in the world)
- For ministry
- For finding that unique place and invited space.

As to the readings of today from Micah and Hosea who as contemporaries more than 700 to 750 years before Christ prophesied² his arrival: for the one that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, for the other from Egypt. In the fullness of time it became apparent that He would come from both.

- Micah 5:2 (NIV): "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."
- Hosea 11:1 (NIV): "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt, I called my son." Matthew 2:13-15 recounts how Joseph, Mary, and the infant Jesus fled to Egypt to escape King Herod's massacre of infants. They stayed there until Herod's death, and then, in fulfilment of Hosea's prophecy, returned from Egypt.

Let us be open to have the Lord appear from an unexpected place. Let us be open to the Lord pitching up in our own lives and in the lives of those we love, unexpectedly. What is clear is that He is always on time.

Let us pray.

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² Micah prophesied from approximately 737-696 BC. Hosea began his prophetic activity during the reign of Jeroboam II (786–746 BC).