

Raising Our Lament

**A reflection given by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on March 29, 2020
Friendship Presbyterian Church**

*My joy is gone, grief is upon me,
my heart is sick.
Hark, the cry of my poor people
from far and wide in the land:
'Is the Lord not in Zion?
Is her King not in her?'
(‘Why have they provoked me to anger with their images,
with their foreign idols?’)
'The harvest is past, the summer is ended,
and we are not saved.'
For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt,
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.
Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then has the health of my poor people
not been restored?
O that my head were a spring of water,
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
so that I might weep day and night
for the slain of my poor people!
(Jeremiah 8:18 – 9:1, NRSV)*

*The thought of my affliction and my homelessness
is wormwood and gall!
My soul continually thinks of it
and is bowed down within me.
But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
[God’s] mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul,
'therefore I will hope in [the Lord].'
(Lamentations 3:19-24, NRSV)*

If you joined us last week, you may remember that we took to heart the witness of the Apostle Paul. We saw how his capacity for rejoicing in the Lord always, in the midst of all that he faced,

was rooted in his profound sense of the Peace of God. And he urged his Philippian friends to live into that Peace themselves by freely offering up to God their prayerful, earnest requests, with thanksgiving.

We might hear echoes of Paul in that beloved hymn “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” Remember these words? ...

*Oh what peace we often forfeit,
Oh what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer.*

And so often, we don't, and so we miss the Peace which God offers. We often fail in this, because we've become so accustomed to *nursing* our feelings ... *nursing* our worries, our fears, our grief, even our anger ... holding them in, that we scarcely know how to express them.

And God forbid that we *should* express them, lest anyone think we're not “staying positive”! No, in fact, we're encouraged by our culture to put up appearances that all is under control ... that everything is “fine” ... when we know it isn't. And so, we deny, and ignore, and suppress these chaotic, disruptive, raw forces churning within and without.

But Paul knew that neither of these paths was the path to Peace. He knew that the path to Peace was to release our hold on these feelings, and to not deny them, instead giving voice to them – carrying them, expressing them, to God.

This kind of prayer isn't comfortable. It's not “sweet” or “inspiring.” It's not polite. It may even seem like faithlessness – but it's not. It's *all through* the Bible ... and especially in the Psalms, the songbook of scripture, which expresses every dimension of the human heart, of human experience. Praise and thanksgiving, yes ... the reclamation of memories ... but also expressions of the most profound grief, brokenness, even anger.

Psalms of this latter kind are known as Psalms of Lament. They are poems and songs in which the psalmist gives voice to these feelings, calling us to open our hearts to God with honesty and vulnerability, naming where we are, that we may, in the midst of the storm, live into hope ... live into a *new* day, that can only be made by God. There are so many of these ... including Psalms 6, 10, 13, 22, 42, 55, 69, 74, 79, 83, 88, 102, 130, 137, 142, 143, and more.

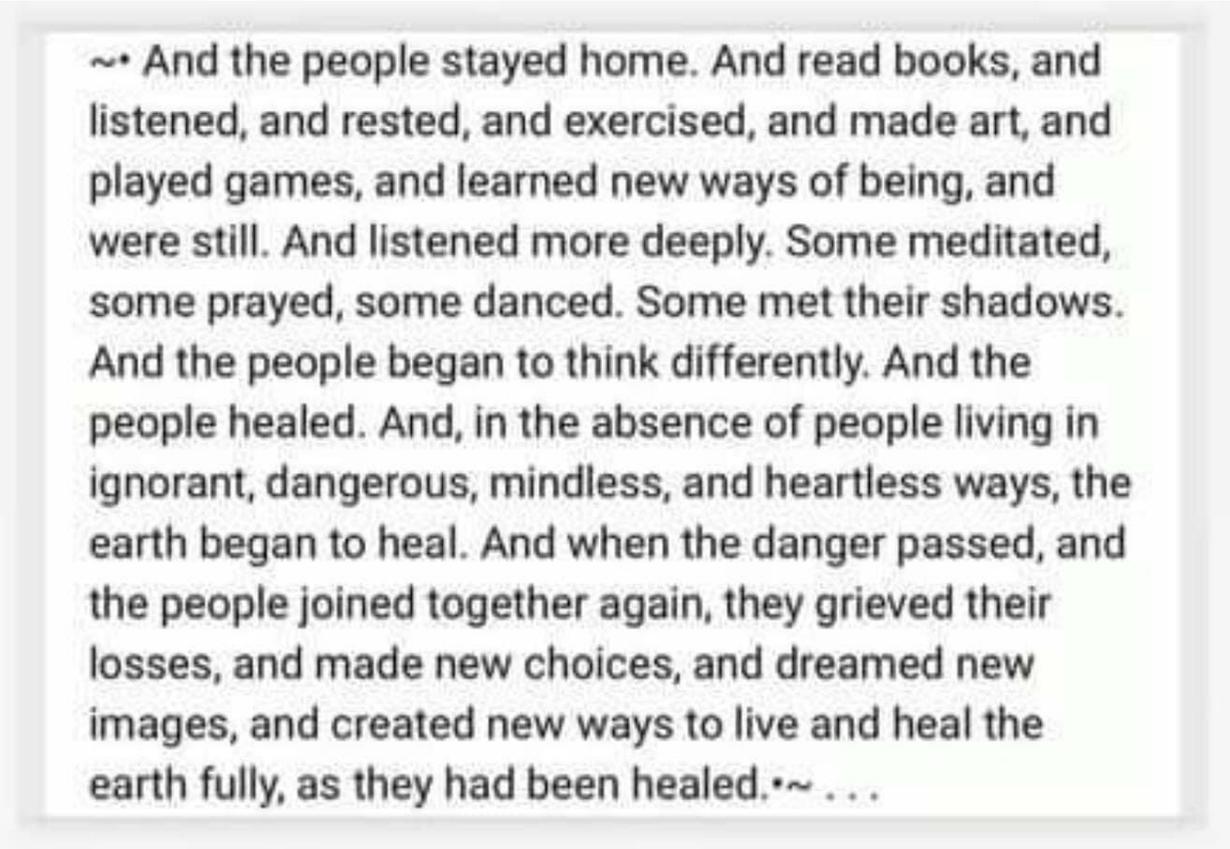
[Read these in your own Bibles, and meditate on each]

- **Psalm 13 ... Psalm of David, individual lament**
- **Psalm 88 ... Lament, without expressed hope of deliverance; profound loneliness**
- **Psalm 74 ... Plea for help in national crisis ... Destruction of Jerusalem. Hope rooted in God's past deeds ... “Have regard for your covenant”**

The Psalms speak honestly of this disorientation and pain, and they give us a language with which to express our own ... as individuals and as a people. And sometimes the pain is so raw, that the psalmist – and we – can scarcely find the words for hope. But whether those words are found or not, there *is* a surrender, a recognition, that only *God* can deliver now. Only *God* can bring Newness out of this Nothingness, Life out of this Death.

And when God does, those in the scriptures who prayed thus, discover that God is interested in far more than restoration, returning things “back to normal.” The God of Newness doesn’t do normalcy. The God of Newness works *Transformation* ... and out of our pain and brokenness, calls us not back to the good old days, before things fell apart, but into a New Life, a *better* life – redeemed and re-made ... re-oriented by God’s Justice ... re-purposed in God’s Love.

This Facebook meme has made the rounds of social media. I wouldn’t normally share something like this, but it makes the point perfectly:



~• And the people stayed home. And read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still. And listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently. And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal. And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed. •~ . . .

To the Glory of God. Amen.