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Psalm 31:1-5, 9-10, 14-16

FAITHFUL LAMENTATIONS

Each Tuesday morning I meet with a small group of pastors to talk about the scripture passages for that coming Sunday. Since the pandemic hit, we have been forced to meet virtually. This past Tuesday morning we were delving into the scriptures as usual, making our very wise and learned conclusions about the scripture passages, when one member of our group suddenly shocked us by sharing the news that the previous evening his wife had gone to the hospital with Covid-19. And he wasn't able to go see her. And they were both scared. Suddenly all our profound theological assertions seemed hollow.

We know that faithful, devoted, followers of God are not inoculated from suffering and hardship. We know that bad things can and do happen to good people. We have seen that throughout this pandemic. Loved ones can get life-threatening illnesses. People's businesses and livelihoods can be lost virtually overnight. Death has descended and thousands of lives have been lost. And people of faith, people who love God, do not get a magic pass from suffering and loss and death.

So as people of faith, how do we respond when suffering descends upon us or those we love and care about, when suffering falls upon our nation and world?

Let me caution us from using simplistic phrases like: "everything happens for a reason," or "it must be God's will." These are really not accurate statements of faith. Because, not everything that happens in this world is God's will. That is why we pray what we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "*thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" Because not everything that happens in this world is God's will. Sin is not God's will. Evil is not God's will.

Cruelty is not God's will. Injustice is not God's will. And suffering is not God's will. And we cannot presume to be so arrogant as to always know what is God's will.

Instead of offering clichéd answers, sometimes the most theologically appropriate thing we can do when we or a loved one is suffering, when our world is suffering, is to lament. A lament is a cry of anguish. The Bible, and especially the Book of Psalms, is filled with examples of people of faith lamenting their circumstances to God: sometimes in pain and sometimes in anger.

Psalm 31 is an example of a lament. We do not know what specifically the writer was experiencing, but we hear the writer plead with God to be rescued. We hear the writer cry aloud, "Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress." And the writer begs God to become a refuge, a fortress, a place of protection from harm and suffering.

I find this psalm and others like it very comforting because they give us permission to be weak and in pain and in need. We are not told that we have to have a stiff upper lip in the face of hardship. We are not told we have to be strong in all things. Instead, the laments in scripture show us people who are honest with God about their vulnerabilities and pain, even their doubts and uncertainty. We are shown people who love God enough to sometimes even quarrel with God. We remember that it was Jesus himself who when he was on the cross cried out his own lament: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The proper theological response to suffering is the lament.

That is what our psalmist does in today's reading. Maybe that is what you feel like doing in your life right now: as you deal with your personal hardships in this pandemic, as you worry about loved ones, as you listen to the news stories about other people's sufferings, as you feel helpless and vulnerable. Sometimes in anguish, hope is hard to find. And when we find

ourselves incapable of proclaiming hope, scripture gives us a great gift: the permission to lament, the permission to cry out our distress and our doubt and our pain and our fear and our anger. We are given permission to be honest with God.

But there is another aspect that is important to notice in the lament we find in Psalm 31. First the writer begs God to *be* a rock of refuge and a fortress of protection, but then later the writer states, "You *are* my rock and my fortress." The psalmist declares, "But I trust in you, O Lord." In one moment the writer is crying aloud in anguish and in the very next breath the psalmist is voicing hope in God as a great protector. It appears then that the lament is comprised of two ingredients that would seem to be mutually exclusive: anguish and hope. Here they are, anguish and hope, simultaneously co-existing. Have you ever experienced anything like that in your life--where despair and hope co-exist? They are contradictory emotions. But in the lament, they somehow reside together.

We can see this in that phrase the psalmist uses in this passage. "Into your hand I commit my spirit." You may remember Jesus himself uttered this phrase as he died upon the cross--"Into your hand I commit my spirit." We hear Stephen make a similar statement in today's reading from Acts as he is being stoned to death. "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Both Jesus and Stephen are dying when they make this statement but death cannot take away their hope.

Their hope in what? Clearly neither Jesus nor Stephen were saved from suffering or saved from death. So what did they place their hope in? I think they found hope in the ultimate goodness of God to prevail in a world of great suffering. I think they found hope in the fact that their lives rested in the hands of this God of great goodness--even if goodness wasn't happening at that moment. I hear this same hope voiced by the writer of today's psalm who states, "save me in your steadfast love." It is God's steadfast love, God's steadfast goodness that saves us. Even

as these ancient people lamented their suffering, even as they felt despair and anguish, they paradoxically held on to hope in the God of goodness and steadfast love. God's goodness was their refuge.

Does that make any sense? Maybe not. I know that in my darkest times, I simply want the miracle. I want God to fix my problem, save my loved one, rescue me from suffering. I do not deny that God can work miracles, but I also know that not even Jesus was spared suffering in this life. But he believed in and lived out the saving goodness of God. Jesus invited us to find refuge in the goodness of God and in living out God's goodness and love in our lives. Goodness and love become our refuge no matter what life hands us.

I see evidence of the saving goodness of God in what you see here behind me. In this time when our nation and world are enduring a season filled with lamentations, this season of pain and death and suffering and loss, in this season of lamentations, here we can see God's great goodness made tangible. People are being fed. And other people are making that happen. And God's goodness is being revealed. And we can take shelter in the goodness of God.

When hardship falls upon us, when difficulties arise, instead of finding refuge in a million other things--in bank accounts and retirement funds, in possessions and social status and education and exercise programs--instead of finding refuge in these kinds of security--our refuge is lodged in the great goodness of God revealed to us in the way of Jesus Christ, the way of goodness and love. That is our fortress and our refuge in the midst of hardship.

The hope we have is that God is on the side of goodness and love. And if God is on the side of goodness and love, that is where we will stand as well. Even and while we lament.