

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, C  
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18  
Psalm 27  
Philippians 3:17-4:1  
Luke 13:31-35

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There's a t-shirt I've seen that has one of those big red circles with a slash through it. In the middle is the word "whining." No whining.

I can picture that t-shirt being worn by a parent, because heaven knows parents deal with whining every day. According to the parenting books, when the whining gets to the level of nails on a blackboard, you're supposed to say in a calm, matter of fact way: "Mommy's ears don't work when they hear whining. Mommy's ears can only understand words that are said in a normal voice." And that approach would probably work if you could muster up a calm and matter of fact tone of voice yourself. The problem is, whining can be contagious.

It can also be demoralizing. It's not empowering to be around a friend or coworker who complains and snivels in a helpless kind of way. In general we prefer a "no whining" policy. Instead of bemoaning our fate, we try to adopt a can-do attitude. Look on the bright side. Make it a nice day. Even force a smile, if we have to.

But there is a catch. What happens when we truly do have something to complain about? A grievance that needs to be spoken? How do we express ourselves when we're in real trouble and need others to know it, and when we most of all need God to know it?

The Bible gives us a model. Read through the Book of Psalms and you will find that many of psalms, perhaps even most of them, contain expressions of lament and complaint. These are cries of pain and need. They are heartfelt and real. In the psalms people feel free to cry out to God about enemies who are abusing them, betrayers who've stolen from them or ruined their good name. They cry out about those who abuse the poor and take advantage of the vulnerable. Or about illness and dangerous situations they face. They voice complaints about loneliness and loss.

These people are not whining. They are lamenting, praying in a heartfelt way that brings their pain and the world's pain before God. According to a wise pastor, Richard Beckmen, "this kind of prayer tells God the situation is too big for you to handle." It says honestly that things are not right and are too overwhelming for you to change. (see Richard Beckmen, *Beginning Conversations with God*, Augsburg 1995, p. 55ff)

Often Christians have not been willing to express their pain or fear or anger. Maybe they're afraid others will think they're "not Christian enough" if they admit they're suffering. Instead, they paste on that smile. No whining, right? Maybe they even do this toward God. They may feel somehow it would be disrespectful to include complaints or negative thoughts in their prayers. Even in our Lutheran hymnals, until very recently, almost all the psalms of lament and complaint were edited out. The church only printed the happy psalms, the joyful, praising ones, because that's what they thought worship should be like. But our new hymnal contains all 150 psalms – both the lovely, joyful, confident ones and the angry ones, the sad ones, the ones expressing fear.

That's because our relationship with God can never be all praise and joy-- no more than a marriage could be all smiles and positive thoughts. God doesn't want us to be dishonest or superficial or fake. God can handle the tough stuff, and God wants to hear it. Because God loves us well enough to go through our pain with us. In Christ we see just how much suffering God is willing to bear, just how close God is willing to get with us, just how honest and steadfast God's love is. There was nothing beautiful about the cross, but God was willing to go there. And it may seem strange, but Christians have often observed that the place of our deepest pain is exactly the place where God meets us. Because that's how deep God's love is.

So when we are hurting or confused or sick, we cry our laments to God. We cry out our loneliness and our questions. We don't have to explain ourselves, just voice our feelings and needs. Not wallowing or whining, but giving these things over to the One who can do something about them.

Very often we lament on behalf of other people. When we see injustice or something that's just not right, we call God to account. We say, why should this be? Why are so many people homeless? Why do the rich get richer and the poor get poorer? Why does war just go on and on? Why does addiction ruin so many lives? Pastor Beckmen calls this "the cry of righteous anger." We voice our frustration to God. We say: God, look at this mess! This problem is too big for me, but I have confidence in you. Do something, God! Act, change, help, rescue, shake things up.

And we ask what God would have us do. We shouldn't be surprised when God moves in a way that helps us begin discerning some steps to take, like learning more or responding in some way. Lament can be the first step toward a new ministry, because when we are personally moved and stirred up by some struggle in the human family, it can mean we are being called to get involved in exactly that place.

In our scripture reading today, we hear Jesus crying out his own lament, for the city of Jerusalem. Jesus looks toward the capital city and sees the hard-heartedness of so many people in power. He sees how greed and self-interest have corrupted them and closed their hearts to change, and he realizes they will never be open to the new life he's bringing. It breaks his heart:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!

When Jesus looks toward Jerusalem, he knows one day he will die there. And yet – what we hear from Jesus is not so much righteous anger or hostility, but sadness. Tenderness. Longing. Like a mother hen, he wants to gather all of them under his wings. Shelter them, protect, cradle them. But they always turn away.

It seems to me that Jesus' lament is not only for those people in that time, but for all the ways human beings refuse God and turn against one another. The ways we serve ourselves without regard for anyone else. The ways we perpetuate systems and behaviors that endanger the earth and humanity. The ways we deny our need for God. Jesus' lament is for every hardened heart, and his tenderness and longing are for every person who turns away. Even us.

But, and this is astonishing, Jesus himself doesn't turn away from Jerusalem. Not even to save his own life. No, the force of his lament propels him right into the heart of those corrupt, resistant, stubborn people. In fact, Jesus says, that's exactly where I *have* to go. Because that's where God is and ever will be.

For us it is a profound word of hope. It means that Christ is present, right in the center of all the hurting places, the ugly places, the sinful and struggling places we lament. It means that God really never does give up on God's children. It means that God has given and God keeps on giving God's life for us. Calling for us to turn and be reborn. Calling for us to be gathered in again.

I wonder where you are in this scripture passage this morning. Maybe there is some personal loss or grief you bring with you today. Maybe you bring regrets. Maybe you bring the weight of the world on your heart. Maybe you've felt Jesus calling you to be gathered to his protective care.

Know that Jesus *is* calling you. Covering you with his wings. Covering your sin with his forgiveness. And Christ is ready to begin transforming your cries of lament into thanks and praise.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

