

“The Lost Octaves”
Romans 8:22-25; Lamentations 3:14-24
17th Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

I need some help as I begin the sermon today.
The person I need help from...is Mark Kemp.

Mark is here with me this morning, to record the sermon.
But before we dive in, Mark is standing right now next to the organ.

Mark, could you play the note on the organ that you believe is the HIGHEST note that a member of our choir here at Westminster can sing?

Not everyone can get that high, but at least one person in our choir can hit that note, according to Mark.

Now what’s the lowest note that a member of our choir can sing?

The very high octaves, the very low octaves...most of us in the pews don’t stand a chance of getting up that high or down that low.

Now keep that image of high and low octaves in mind,
but let’s move out of the world of SINGING, for a moment...

In a novel by the late author John Updike,
one of the characters comments:
“Westerners have lost whole octaves of passion.”¹

¹ I first heard this quote in a lecture by the Rev. Dr. Craig Barnes at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary’s Midwinter Lecture series in February, 2012. Subsequently, I found the Updike book: it comes from *Roger’s Version*, New York: Random House, 1986.

Do you know what Updike meant when he wrote those words?

I think I know what he meant.

Updike wasn't writing about music.

He was writing about the EXTREMES of life...

Unbridled joy, unspeakable loss.

Not that we in the Western Hemisphere don't know joy and loss.

But just like the very high and the very low notes are out of our range...extreme demonstrations of emotion are not comfortable ground for many of us.

I wonder if this why LAMENT feels so unfamiliar to us.

Lament is an OUTWARD show of something we often KEEP INSIDE—

of grief, of loss,
of outrage, of anger...

Shaking one's fist at God!

Collapsing in despair before God!

“Westerners have lost whole octaves of passion,” says the character in Updike's novel—but he then points out that there **are** people in the world who have not lost that range, people who “can still make an inhuman piercing grieving noise right from the floor of the soul...”²

Of course, that piercing, grieving noise Updike's character refers to...it CAN be found in the Bible.

² John Updike, *Roger's Version*, New York: Random House, 1986.

The Bible is full of laments.

Psalm 137, which was sung just a few minutes ago—that's a lament.

Of course, one of the most direct expressions of lament comes in the book of Lamentations.

When was the last time you read Lamentations?

A marvelous book!

An intriguing book!

It's all poetry in Hebrew, and the writer is in anguish.

The author is not lamenting the loss of a loved one.

The author writes because of the loss of LAND.

The loss of HOME.

Scholars believe the book was written in response to the fall of Jerusalem in the 6th Century BCE, when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon sacked the city and took its inhabitants into exile.

In other words, the book was written during a period of CHAOS & UPHEAVAL...

What's fascinating about this book is not just the historical context of the poetry—it's the way that poetry is constructed.

The first four chapters of the book are alphabetical acrostics.

What does **that** mean?

Well, the Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters.

Take a look at chapter 1 in Lamentations...how many verses are there? 22 verses.

And in chapter 2? And in chapter 4?
22 verses in each.

There's no way to know this from reading the book in English translations, but in Hebrew, each of these verses begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

How many verses in Chapter 3?
66.

In three successive verses, the same Hebrew letter is used in that chapter!

Why would the writer do this?

Perhaps there is a THEOLOGICAL message that springs from this structure...

You see, there are intense verses of grief in this poetry.

*“He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
and made me cower in ashes;
my soul is bereft of peace...”*

But those expressions of loss are not left to WANDER ALL OVER, on their own, in a big chaotic mess, with nothing to guide them and support them.

The author provides a STRUCTURE for them.
An organized way of holding these feelings up.

In other words, there is a vehicle for the writer, for US—to be HONEST about the deeper octaves of our lives. That's the first thing lament gives us—the opportunity to be honest about the deepest feelings of our lives.

In 1982, Ann Weems' son was killed less than an hour after his 21st birthday. One of her responses to this event was to write a book, entitled *Psalms of Lament*.

In the preface to that book, Weems says:

“... I know my psalms are not finished.
 Anger and alleluias careen around within me,
 sometimes colliding.

Lamenting and laughter sit side by side in a heart
 that yearns for the peace that passes understanding.”³

Order and disorder, anger and alleluias...

I think that the writer of Lamentations would agree:
GOD WANTS BOTH!
 God does not want us to always have everything buttoned up.

Lament is necessary, because first and foremost it's an honest thing. It gives a particular structure and disciplined way of turning our grief over to God.

But not just an honest thing.
 Lament is also a COMMUNAL thing.

I'm thinking, for example, of the Jewish tradition of “sitting shiva.”

³ Ann Weems, *Psalms of Lament*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995.

Do you know what this is?

Shiva is Hebrew for seven, and in the Jewish faith, when someone dies in the family, there is a traditional practice of “sitting shiva”.

Many years ago, a good friend of my parents in Michigan lost her husband. This friend and her husband, they were Jewish, and so our family friend--she sat at home in mourning for 7 days.

During that time, my parents and other friends were invited to come by her house to pay their respects.

The idea is that for ONE WEEK, life as one knows it stops, and everyone recognizes and honors that it has stopped for you, and this practice is INGRAINED in the fabric of the Jewish faith.

Sometimes, those moments of lament are not even structured. Sometimes, they become somewhat spontaneous.

Do you know what happened a few days after John Lennon was killed?

Lennon’s widow, Yoko Ono, requested that his fans around the world observe 10 minutes of silence in his memory.

Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor was in New York City that day, but NOT because of John Lennon.

She remembers:

“Because my Sixties was sit-ins, not love-ins;
because my song was *We Shall Overcome*,
not *I Want to Hold Your Hand*...

I felt it would be a bit hypocritical for me to go to Central Park and light a candle for John Lennon. BUT because I believe that John Lennon was a righteous brother, I wanted to do something.

So I met with several of my friends for brunch about 1:30.

Nobody announced 2 o'clock—

--but when it came...we knew.

A remarkable thing happened.

The café became absolutely silent.

The café became magic, for ten minutes.

[Ten minutes] that transcended generations and culture and color and politics.

Former flower children,

ex-black militants,

old longhaired Marxists,

young shorthaired ad execs,

shallow barflies,

deep intellectuals...

...all came together in grief and fell silent.

Most had their heads bowed.

A few had tears.

None was embarrassed."

“My grandmama used to say, ‘Prayer changes things’—and for 10 minutes [that day in New York City], it did.”⁴

All those different people, gathered together,
many in prayer...it was a scene of lament.

⁴ As told in *Listening to America: Twenty-five Years in the Life of a Nation, as Heard on National Public Radio*, edited by Linda Wertheimer, National Public Radio, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995.

But it was also a scene of HOPE.

All those different people, gathered as ONE.
That's where lament takes us.
From honesty...to community...to hope.

Biblical scholar N.T. Wright says that during the pandemic, the first response of the Church...is lament:

“I was talking to a senior church leader a few weeks ago,” he says, “...and [this church leader] remarked: “You know, Tom, we don’t do lament very well.

What we mostly seem to do is complacency.”⁵

Complacency is the OPPOSITE of lament.
And 6-7 months into the pandemic, complacency may be the Church’s greatest temptation.

If the virus is affecting a different neighborhood, or people who we don’t know...complacency means shrugging our shoulders.

It means we don’t care, or can’t take the time to be bothered
with someone else’s anger, or pain, or isolation...

Lamenting says: I will be bothered by all that.
I will shoulder these burdens too.

Let me get at it like this.

⁵ From an interview in *Christianity Today*, found at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/july-web-only/god-pandemic-nt-wright-coronavirus-aftermath.html>.

I read something a while back by a woman named Deirdre Sullivan. I don't know who she is, but what she wrote—well, she could've been speaking for me:

“In my humdrum life, the daily battle hasn't been good versus evil. It's hardly so epic. Most days, my real battle is doing good versus doing nothing.”⁶

Do you know how Sullivan says she fights complacency?
By going to funerals.

***“My father taught me that,” she writes.
“Always go to the funeral.”***

“The first time he said it directly to me, I was sixteen and trying to get out of going to calling hours for Miss Emerson, my old fifth-grade math teacher.

‘Dee,’ he said, ‘you’re going.’

“So my dad waited outside while I went in. It was worse than I thought it would be: I was the only kid there. When the condolence line deposited me in front of Miss Emerson’s shell-shocked parents, I stammered out, ‘Sorry about all this,’ and stalked away.

And yet, because of “that deeply weird expression of sympathy delivered twenty years ago, Miss Emerson’s mother still remembers me and always says hello with tearing eyes...”

Sullivan goes on.

“Always go to the funeral” [is about more than going to funerals.]

⁶ Deirdre Sullivan, “Always Go to the Funeral,” appearing in *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*, edited by Jay Allison and Dan Gediman, New York: Henry Holt, 2006.

It “means that I have to do the right thing when I really, really don’t feel like it...I’m talking about those things that represent only inconvenience to me, but the world to the other guy...

“In going to funerals, I’ve come to believe that while I wait to make a grand heroic gesture, I should just stick to the small inconveniences that let me share in life’s inevitable, occasional calamity.”⁷

Sharing in life’s inevitable calamities...that’s what lament is about.

We don’t lament just because it’s an honest thing.
Or a communal thing. Or a hopeful thing.
We do it because it’s a DIVINE thing.

As N.T. Wright puts it:

“The point of lament, woven thus into the fabric of the biblical tradition, is not just that it’s an outlet for our frustration, sorrow, loneliness... The mystery of the biblical story is that God also laments.”⁸

It’s what the Apostle Paul is referring to in our Romans text for today, when he says, “*the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.*”

When we throw every RAW and BEWILDERED part of our soul at God, and when we walk with others through their unraveled and sorrowful seasons, what we’re really saying is...

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ From an article in *Time* magazine, N.T. Wright, “Christianity Offers No Answers About the Coronavirus. It’s Not Supposed To,” March 29, 2020.

we trust God with that bewilderment,
we trust God with that grief,
we trust God with the greatest losses of our lives—
because God laments with us.

Returning to Diedre Sullivan for a moment, she writes:

“On a cold April night...my father died a quiet death from cancer. His funeral was on a Wednesday, middle of the workweek. I had been numb for days when, for some reason, during the funeral, I turned and looked back at the folks in the church. The memory of it still takes my breath away. The most human, powerful, and humbling thing I’ve ever seen was a church at 3:00 on a Wednesday full of inconvenienced people who believe in going to the funeral.”⁹

Full of people, in other words, who know the importance of LAMENT.

Now I know that during the pandemic, it’s impossible to put 500-600 people in this room, cheek to jowel.

You don’t have to be in a sanctuary to do this.

There are places out there, people out there, right now—who need God’s Church not to FIX them...but to walk with them,
to listen to them,
to LAMENT with them.

Maybe that is the Church’s calling right now.
Find that person.

⁹ Sullivan, “Always Go to the Funeral”.

Find that place.

It's the place where we can trust God with *all the octaves* of our lives.

Amen.