



Week 5: Honesty Leads to Hope | Lamentations 3:19-24

I like to think in black and white. You'll notice one of my favorite snacks is...

Oreos! I love Oreos. Beautifully black and white.

And here is a picture of one of my cats, my favorite...but don't tell Walter that.

Gabe! Gabe is a CHONK! With a big Tom cat physique. He is my favorite breed of cat called tuxedo. Always dressed to impress, sporting a gorgeous black and white pattern.

These guys make me smile and giggle.

These guys do NOT!

Black and white thinking can represent your favorite snack or pet. It's comforting to put things in clear cut categories.

But thinking in black or white doesn't always allow for nuancing more complex issues in our lives.

For instance, grief is not black or white. It's not like you are grieving one day and not the next.

Regret, anger, jealousy, feeling betrayed, fear. Emotions are not either/or, especially our deeper and stronger emotions.

And neither is our relationship with God, black or white. God defies being put in a box of our own thinking.

God is both mystery, beyond our comprehension AND sharing and revealing who he is in scripture and in our daily relationship.

God meets us in the grey areas of doubt and confusion. Faith itself is not black or white because it is about a relationship with God.

So, we probably shouldn't be too surprised when we come to this new truth about lamenting. Our need to let go of thinking about lament as black and white or with an either/or mindset.

Instead, a better approach is to embrace a "both/and" way of thinking and processing. In a binary world, of black or white or "either/or", lament often brings us to a more honest place of "both/and".

We can BOTH wrestle with the full weight of our sorrows AND experience hope in our faithful, loving God.

We lament and hope. Both, at the same time.

Fleshing this out from my own life. I used to have two older brothers, Jay and Mark. Jay is the oldest and Mark was the middle brother. But Mark took his life in December of 2010.

He slowly drank himself to death over 25 years and then ended it one night consuming 2 liters of vodka.

And I have my lament, this hole in my heart is healing but still needs tending. I grieve.

And now this next thing I am going to say...is not minimizing or diminishing that loss. It's an example of both/and.

There were some good things that came out of Mark's passing. There are things that, I would not say I am "celebrating", but there are threads of grace and gratitude.

Places in which I can see God bringing healing, bringing good out of a bad situation, where hope has taken root.

For instance, how my brother's passing has helped me connect with many others who have addiction, and/or homelessness, and/or an ending of life in their family.

I know what it is like to have a family member who keeps making choices that are bad for them. And it hurts to feel so hopeless, just watching them suffer.

But I understand that kind of pain. And it makes me more connected to others in their pain. His passing has made me more empathetic and caring, and more seasoned in my faith.

I am both a pretty upbeat kind of person AND I also know being a Christian is not all "rainbows and unicorns". I have weathered seasons of deep difficulty and grief.

I am more connected to those who have lost a loved one by that fateful choice, when the pain becomes too great that ending your life seems like the only option.

I do not judge my brother for his choice and I don't believe God does either. But we are left to grieve and live around the crater their decision makes in our hearts.

And through my losses my faith has also been refined around issues of death and dying. I have learned deep into the core of my being...death does not get the final word.

I deeply resonate and celebrate proclaiming at funerals, "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? But thanks be to God, who gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Can I get an amen?

With my brother's addiction, homelessness, and ending his life I've had experience in BOTH the grief that those realities carry AND the hope God is bringing into my life through those hurts that is also just as real.

Both/and.

We can carry them and feel them simultaneously. We can acknowledge them side by side, we can hold sorrow and celebration at the same time.

Even weddings can be a place of both/and...both a joyous joining of two lives AND missing those who have died. Sadness because they couldn't be there to witness such an wonderful life affirming event.

What is our story at BUMC? We can join in with the psalmist from our text...lamenting our struggles and wanderings. As a community, we have experienced afflictions too.

We have shared experiences around the difficulties we have face...covid, declining membership, changes in staff.

We often want these afflictions to just stop. For God to fix them. And yet scripture shows us that we can both express ourselves in lament AND find hope at the same time.

Let's look at God's Story.

In Lamentations chapter 3 we begin with one who is honestly facing their pain. "I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me."

Bitterness and gall. There is no minimizing or sugarcoating! He directs his pain to God because God exists. He brings his lament before God whom he ultimately trusts.

We too lament before a steadfast, loving God who cares about us every day. This differs from mere "complaining;" in the sense that lament contains a hopefulness born of trust.

I am wondering if the invitation to lament sounds a bit like an invitation to just grouse and complain. We are Minnesotans after all. We don't complain because it could always be worse.

But if one brings their pain directly to God, it is not complaining. It is a holy and sacred thing to draw near to God, to prayerfully pour out your pain in God's Presence.

The God of All Comfort receives us, accepts our pain, and brings comfort that we desperately need. God gives us rest from our anguish, a safe refuge, as we wait for our healing.

We also receive perspective from God. We will not always feel these feelings. Things will change, hope is on its way.

It is possible, even a good thing, for lament and hope to dwell in that same space and at that same time. We can lay our heavy sorrow down for a bit.

And yes, at some point, we get back up. But we are strengthened to do that in a spirit of hope.

Because our sorrow isn't exactly the same as when we laid it down in prayer, either. Our lament shifts, and we are changed in God' Presence.

For one, God is willing to carry our burdens with us. And God will continue to comfort and counsel; continue to bring strength and peace and guidance and healing.

Particularly with grief, it almost MUST be both. Having the space to be honest and pour ourselves out before God, gives us the ability to get up, live, serve and be.

We don't abandon lament or hope for the other- it can be fully both/and at the same time.

We see this dynamic in our text. In verses 19 and 20, we've covered the author's honesty, his pain directed to God.

Now verse 21.

Did you notice how hope begins to enter the picture in verse 21? Did you hear where hope begins to soothe the lament?

"Yet I will call this to mind and therefore I have hope."

(As in hair will grow back from our Early word.)

Also notice how this person is encouraging and ministering to his own soul.

(Sometimes others can bring balm to our souls, like Pam's dad.) Other times, like here, we are reminding of our role to recall truths about God, helping us apply the balm of hope to our wounds.

We can remind ourselves that God sees our pain, God is moved by our pain and is working to bring comfort to our hurts.

Eventually, as we lament, our suffering becomes a scar instead of a raw wound.

The section we are covering only covers a verse or two on lament and then brings in hope. But chapters 1, 2 and 3, up to this point, are full of lament and grief and sorrow.

And the verses after our text remaining in chapter 3, and chapters 4 and 5, describe a slushy mix of lament and hope.

Contrary to what our short few verses might imply, if taken out of context, shifting from lament to hope is not this quick nor this linear. Important to note that.

Now notice these next two verses bursting to overflowing with hope, "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. 23 They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."

The writer recalls God's character. He grabs with two fists the hope we have in God. God's love, compassion and faithfulness are not anemic or wimpy. They are great and never fail! Grab them!

And when we look back on past griefs or painful experiences and see how God sustained us through them...we grow in hope.

Remembering how God has brought us through so much. Remembering is one way that we nurture hope for the future. Good remembering of being brought through by God.

As well as, remembering who God is. God is steadfast even when we waver. We learn God is worth trusting fully and will bring us through.

Because of who God is, we come to our final verse, "I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." We learn having God as our portion, our friend and Father, is a tremendous place of comfort and contentment.

God with us is enough. God is more than enough.

Back to our story, in light of these truths. Even if we are not currently going through difficulties ourselves, we are called to walk alongside one another who may be hurting, serve those who may be lamenting.

We are to be a safe refuge for you. As you wait for God's help, God's compassion and love and faithfulness to bring you through.

As we journey together in following of God, we can help each other face life's challenges honestly. With God's help, we will both bear our pain and face our future with hope.

After the service...want to bring something to the cross? In a word or two, jot down what you are both grieving and hoping for and give it to God, nail it to the cross.

For us now to reflect...name in the silence of your own heart a situation or relationship in which you are both hurting AND looking towards God in hope.