



3.10.24 Being Honest in Community | Esther 4:1-5

What does it mean to lament as a faith community?

In our sermon series for Lent called Through the Valley, a series on lament, we've covered some important topics as it relates to Biblical lament, the kind of authentic prayer, gut honest prayer God is inviting us to embrace.

For example, our need to take our concerns directly to God in prayer. Lament is not crying into the empty night, it is crying out before God's throne. We lament because God exists.

And we've been reminded that we can be completely honest with God with our feelings because God already knows what is on our hearts anyways. We lament because God knows.

And that surrender and trust are also needed when we lament. As we follow in Jesus' footsteps to do the Father's will above all else. We lament but God is still to be obeyed.

But now we add another layer or two to our growing Biblical understanding of what it means to lament. Now we lament in community as we ask God to fix an injustice in the world.

This coming together as a faith community as one layer. And then crying out, asking God to bring change to something that is wrong and broken in our world as another layer.

Let's begin to root these concepts in some lived experience.

I was in 8th grade when three-year-old boy Kevin Jay Ayotte and his six-month-old puppy Flash wandered away from home one afternoon and were never found. But had he really wandered away or had he been kidnapped? We still don't know.

On your left, a picture of when he was 3 years old. On your right, an age progression of what he might have looked like at 36 in 2015.

That day rocked our town of Bemidji and the smaller outlying communities. I lived only 13 miles from where it happened.

My neighbor friend Jay and his mom invited me to come along to drop off a hotdish at Kevin's home. Jay's mom had made some food to help feed the family and volunteers who gathered to help with the search.

My role was small, Jay and I sat in that station wagon all afternoon. We weren't allowed to join in on the search in the thick woods and bogs because we might have ended up needing to be found.

I remember it was a cold overcast autumn afternoon. I was sitting in the back seat of their station wagon, confused, bored, and sad. Mostly sad. And at some point, I remember being really afraid. Was I still safe playing outside?

I think I prayed he would be found before another nightfall, before another night outside in the cold and dark.

And I remember it felt good to be doing something, felt proud of our community efforts and support.

Just a small example of coming together and trying to fix something that had gone bad. Maybe not a whole community or church event, we didn't officially pray to God.

But if baking brownies, if making and delivering a hotdish, if gathering to search those woods...if those activities were group lament wrapped in action? Well, then we were praying, we were lamenting, asking God in our quiet Minnesota ways to fix this tragic wrong.

Here is a bigger, not better example, but bigger and larger example of addressing an injustice and drawing near to God to fix it. For that, God has given us a great example in the book of Esther.

The book of Esther retells the amazing story of God's intervention and deliverance of the Jewish people in ancient Persia.

Esther, through a variety of events, becomes queen to King Xerxes, despite her Jewish heritage.

Also present was Haman. A villainous court official, second only to the King in power. His massive ego was only matched by his massive vanity and massive appetite for violence.

Haman had just convinced the King to authorize a killing edict against all the Jews living in Persia. The edict, listing the date of the Jews demise, was sent off to all provinces in the kingdom.

Which brings us to our text for this morning, our first verse as we read, **“When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly.”** Mordecai begins his very vocal public lament.

And we see, here is Mordecai's honest and faith-based response to a massive injustice. An injustice based on prejudice and hatred of his people involving probably millions of Jews.

But Mordecai was not alone, he was joined by Jews all throughout the kingdom as we read in verse 3, **“In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.”**

I have read Esther many times and never noticed this huge faith response of the Jews. This massive communal element of this lament.

Their lament, not so much in words at this point, but carried and exemplified in actions of their faith...tearing clothes, wearing sackcloth, pouring ashes over their heads, crying in public.

This visible, upsetting, loud, massively communal lament did draw attention and response.

But before we dig into that more, let's look at some of the obstacles that Mordecai was facing in his lament. Obstacles that are still with us, still to be overcome at times.

But this experience of Esther and Mordecai shows how they can be overcome through faithful lament.

Mordecai first obstacle was power. In the second verse we learn that Mordecai could not enter the King's gate.

The king did not want to see the suffering of his people and so he put up a barrier to prevent any ugly or unpleasant thing getting too close.

Xerxes didn't want to be bothered by their pain. Pain he bore the responsibility for authorizing. Isn't that just like power though? Powerful people all throughout history have caused pain and suffering. And then block it out.

They prevent people from being able to express their struggle. Moving somewhere the poor cannot afford to live and putting up huge gates.

The power dynamics in the book of Esther involve cultural diversity, prejudice against the Jews, and classism. We have eunuchs, concubines, slaves, commoners, royalty, officials and patriarchal structures.

Making us maybe notice this, who is kept “outside the gates”? God's chosen people, Mordecai and his lament.

Who is being kept “outside the gates” in our world or communities? How has our power limited or buffered us against seeing the needs around us?

Another obstacle Mordecai faced and overcame was apathy. Didn't seem like people cared. Esther was initially embarrassed and tried to cover up Mordecai's lament by offering him a change of clothes. But he refused.

Thankfully, Esther remained open to Mordecai's lament. He was a father to her, having adopted her after her father and mother had passed.

Her love for him engendered this response, she listened. Her love for him helped her listen more deeply to his lament.

Where is God calling us to listen? Where is God calling us to listen more deeply, to truly listen and see life from another person's experience?

Are we persisting, are we remaining open like Esther to other people's experiences of injustice? Are we pressing in to explore different options when the first or second or third doesn't work?

Sometimes lament is more private and individual, just between you and God. But sometimes it does need to be public for the sake of calling out injustice and making change.

In our own history, one driving component for the Civil War was the liberating of the slaves. Slavery had to be dismantled and it required great sacrifice to bring about that change in how people are treated. It was a beginning.

While Mordecai's behavior got Esther's attention. His actions caused her to listen and then ultimately risk it all.

Are there any injustices for which we could "wear sackcloth and ashes"- to live/act out our lament with enough noise and display to get attention?

All of the above dynamics and responses are impacted and made more complex by the fact that Esther is navigating a cross-cultural life, across gender roles as a Jewish woman living in the household of a patriarchal Persian king.

What also makes Esther a real elder in the faith, a role model is she was in a challenging situation she did not choose for herself, chose to advocate for her whole people, all while risking her own life.

And like Esther, but on a much smaller scale, we might find ourselves in situations we didn't ask for. But following her example we might learn, if we can stay open to God, that God has put us there for a reason.

We might keep in mind Mordecai's challenge to Esther two verses later in chapter 4, **Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?**

And we know Esther responded with righteous action. She approaches the King uninvited, putting her life on the line to save her people.

She reveals her Jewish identity and pleads for their rescue. And the King reverses the edict and the Jews are saved.

A perfect example of communal lament that cries out to God to change an injustice.

As we bring this all home for us and wrap things up, we might want to consider where God might be inviting us?

How might God be preparing us to be ready for the next opportunity for communal lament and to fix and injustice? To get ready for what will come next? To address a wrong and help heal what has been broken.

And then I remembered this, I really see God in this, putting things in order we didn't know we needed!

Months ago the Leadership Team decided to dedicate half of our Easter Offering to Terebinth Refuge and half to camp.

Terabinth is a Christ-centered shelter and safe home that brings hope, healing services, and freedom to sexually exploited and trafficked women.

God provided us our next injustice to contribute too before we got to this sermon series and sermon! Isn't that cool?

And now, thru God's Word to us today, we are more ready than ever to give to that offering. We've been prepared even more to partner with God, to help bring healing in these women's lives.

I think we can be grateful not only for this ministry but now our more informed opportunity to give, to give in response to our morning together.

You don't have to wait until Easter. But when Easter comes let's be generous.

As we turn to our time of reflection...

After the service, don't forget our opportunity to go to the Cross. It is another place to interact with God. Today, write down an injustice you'd like to see removed from the earth. Nail it to the cross, Jesus died for it.

Now as we reflect...is there an injustice in the world you have a passion for? Bring that to God in prayer.