

When We Can Not Sing.

This morning we continue our focus on song, hymn and music in worship. It has been good hasn't it – to take time to remember what a gift from God music and song is. How it helps to connect the heart and the head. How its beauty touches deep places within us – and how its words give voice to emotions and beliefs that we ourselves have trouble articulating.

We have been looking at song and music – in the context of worship – remembering how the songs and hymns we choose – the music we play – is not self serving – it is not meant for us alone to enjoy – but it is meant to direct our attention to God in worship. It is meant to open us the presence of the God who is with us in Christ Jesus – and it is meant to give voice to our response to the God who provides for us, who heals our disease, binds up our woundedness, forgives our sins, teaches us to be human, to have compassion, mercy, and love, - who saves us.

Our songs and hymns give voice to our adoration and praise, our thanksgiving and hopes, our acts of confession and joy in forgiveness.

A couple weeks ago we were reminded that these songs we sing do not come out of some void – but instead they come from the encounters of men and women with the living God. We saw how the giftedness of these men and women – to put words to music – became the words and music that serve us today – in specific ways – as we look for the language to worship.

Last week, our Minister of Music, James Thompson reminded us that in the reformed tradition the hymns, songs, and music we use in worship are all meant to reinforce the proclamation that we make as scripture is read and the sermon is shared. He reminded us that these hymns, songs, and music we use are a gift that we have been given – and that we are to take and use that gift – develop that gift – expand on that gift.

This morning our reading comes from the Book of the Psalms (The Song book of the Church). The 137th Psalm is a song of lament. The best and the brightest of God's people – Israel - have been taken captive – removed from the Promised Land – by their Babylonian captives. The holy city of Jerusalem lays in ruins – the temple – the place of God's dwelling – it has been destroyed.

Their captives torment them saying, 'Sing to us one of those songs of the great city of Jerusalem.' The response is this corporate song of lament.

Prayer

Scripture

Matt Lynnⁱ who is the Student Ministries Worship Leader at Casas Church in Tucson, AZ – says, in his recent blog, that the Psalms might be the most influential piece of literature in shaping the music that has been used throughout the history of the Christian Church. – And I would agree with him.

They bear witness to God – who God is – and the height and depth of God’s creative and saving work.

“O Lord, you have searched me and know me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up.” (Ps139:1-2a)

“O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.”
(Ps 136:1)

“God is our refuge and strength a very present help in times of trouble.” (Ps 46:1)

The Psalms are a powerful expression of thought and emotion. The Psalms reflect praise and thanksgiving – hope and longing.

“I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord” (Ps 122:1)

“I love you, O Lord, my strength.” (Ps 18:1)

“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.” (Ps 42:1)

They are also honest expression – real and raw – sometimes disconcerting.

“O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?” (Ps 74:1)

“Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? (Ps 10:1)

“By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept – when we remembered Zion.” – Ps 137:1

“Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock! (Ps 137:9)

Matt Lynn – says in his blog – just 2 weeks ago – that as we gather in worship communities – we are pretty familiar with song and hymn – that give praise and thanksgiving – that speak of who God is (How Great is Our God. How Great thou Art) – that tell of our purpose in gathering and invite God in.

In fact he says that if we were to compile our 150 favorite worship songs – to which I would add our 150 favorite hymns – if we were to compile our own Book of Psalms – what would inevitably be missing is lament – those songs – hymns – tunes – that can express our sorrow, our feelings of being wronged – our wonderings about where God is and if God really cares.

Matt Lynn asks the question: *“...if it would inappropriate to occasionally craft spaces and moments in our corporate worship gatherings that allow for honest expressions of lament.”*

Lament is not whining – it is not complaint – it is not the Winnie the Poor companion E’ore – in all of us that only sees the worst in life. Lament is an honest and heartfelt expression of loss – of grief – of despair. Lament dares to speak what is left unspoken. Lament dares to question what is normally left unquestioned. Lament dares to demand action – justice – in the face of injustice.

I think lament is hard for us culturally as Americans and as Iowans. We live in a culture where our theme song is ‘Don’t worry be happy.’ We face our losses – whether it is the death of a loved one – the loss of a job – the loss of our health and independence – the loss of our hopes and dreams – by moving on – getting on with life – and getting over whatever loss we have faced.

My 101 year old grandma would say –“Kay Sera Sera – whatever will be, will be.”

We live in this culture – where one of our inevitable rights is the pursuit of happiness. So we face our losses by heading to the mall – or to our favorite restaurant – or we head off to some vacation spot. Or we simply fake it until we make it.

Remember how we were told – in the face of the tragedy of 9/11 to go shopping – remember how we have been encouraged during this economic depression – to pay down our debt – but also to keep spending.

Lament is the serious work – of dealing with our losses – and for us – with our God in ways that are real – and often raw – that are honest.

To be in relationship with God – is to be honest with God – honest about our feelings and our thoughts – it is to be honest in trusting – that God can not only handle our complaint – our raw feelings and thoughts - but that the language of lament allows us to grow closer to God – it allows for a trusted relationship to flourish.

Worship is a place that we learn to be God's people – Disciples of Jesus Christ – it is here in our corporate worship – that we learn to serve our God – through praise and thanksgiving – through adoration – through our listening and our responding – our offering. And song – music – is one of the most powerful ways that we do this.

There is a place in worship for lament. In fact there are times when lament is an important response – because without our lament – we simply ignore – and forget.

What do we say – about the tragic events that are taking place in the Horn of Africa – where drought has turned to famine – and famine has led to the deaths of 100s of thousands of the most vulnerable of people (infants, children, the aged). Do we sing How Great is our God / How Great Thou Art?

What do we say – when a tsunami – hits the coast of Japan or Indonesia – taking everything in its wake – killing millions. ‘All things Bright and Beautiful – the Lord God made them all?’

What do we say – when one of our youth is killed by a drunken driver – what do we say when the woman with a family dies of an overdose of drugs. “What a friend we have in Jesus?”

What do we say – when we are dying and we cry out to our God but there is no answer? “It is well with my soul?”

Lament – teaches us how to be human – to hurt – to feel the losses of life and living. It teaches us how to be honest with God – about those feelings – and gives us a way to demand justice.

Lament – reminds us as well – that God is in the midst of these things with us – not as a unconcerned bystander – but someone who joins us in our laments – and our demands for justice.

Lament – reminds us – of the God who has been there in the past for us – and promises to be with us in the future.

Lament in its corporate form – reminds us – it reminds us – of our own intolerance when we are the ones who are faced with the loss – when we are attacked or deprived – (we say – they did that to us – we demand our own form of justice – hunt them down and kill them justice is what we sought for those involved with the 9/11 attacks). But it reminds us – too – as we turn to God to demand that justice - that justice is not about retribution but it is about doing what is right.

I would like to tell you – that we have a wide variety of laments to sing – a large variety of dirges or music in the minor key to help us give voice to lament and help us learn to lament. The fact is that we don't – and so we might have to seek them out – to find them where they might dwell – we might have to use the old songs – the Psalms – to lead the way – because times when 'We have no Song to Sing' we will need the songs of others to help us lament.

¹ Matt Lynn from a blog posted August 15, 2011 on his blog site aluminumSoil [dot.com] ; <http://aluminumsoil.wordpress.com/2011/08/15/should-we-sing-more-songs-of-lament/>