

SERMON

5/17/20

Holding the life we're living before God and each other

When I see your faces appear on Zoom each Sunday, I long to have the chance to have a conversation with each of you. I want to ask: *How are you doing? How are you and yours holding up and finding your way these days?*

I'm curious: Are you like me – badly in need of a haircut!? Also - experiencing a mix of emotions which can vary week-to-week, day-to-day, even hour-to-hour? Some nagging fears; and flashes of anger. A heart full of gratitude when seeing people's compassion for others. Tears that come unexpectedly.

I'd also like to know: What have been the hardest part for you of living with the stay-at-home orders in place? What is bringing you peace these days? Have you stumbled upon any surprising moments of joy along the way?

Living life during this pandemic

Like everyone, I'm finding my own way these days; and I notice how much I want to hear the pandemic stories of others. When friends or family or even people in the news share their unique experiences in the midst of all this, it helps me to more fully grasp the scope of what we're going through. It also often reminds me of what is universal in our experiences.

Mennonite historians have started collecting stories of life and faith during the reign of COVID-19. They are already asking the question: *How did Mennonites live and respond to this global crisis?* (If you'd like to contribute your experiences, see the bulletin announcement...)

As we all know, there's no easy-to-follow blueprint for navigating life in the midst of a global pandemic. As a colleague of Dave's used to say, "We're building this plane as we fly it!" We staff and lay leaders have certainly felt that way many times over the last eight or nine weeks!

Given the sweeping and unprecedented nature of this pandemic, we'll be processing our experiences for years. But where does that leave us now?

As Soren Kierkegaard noted, “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.” In the moment, that means we’re often left stuttering - searching for the words to express, grapple with, and begin to integrate what’s happening around and within us now into the bigger story of our lives and faith.

Reading Psalms as spiritual memoirs

The book of *Psalms* is associated with divine worship in Israel. This anthology of poetic prayers includes hymns of praise, liturgical words, individual and communal laments, and wisdom teachings. In the later Jewish and Christian traditions, followers have learned to pray with psalms - finding in them words to express the most deeply felt experiences of life.

In this sense, I think *Psalms* can also be approached as a collection of spiritual memoirs of a community of people. Stretching over a period of more than 500 years, these “memoirs” reveal a rich and varied story of human beings in frank and holy conversations with God and one another. Since their writing, the honesty and depth of these conversations have challenged generations of people to have brave and sacred conversations of their own.

I think the book of Psalms offers a timely example for us as individuals and a community now in the midst of this pandemic. As we grapple with our own life experiences, what happens when we express our own laments, fears, faith, doubts, and praises in conversation with God and one another? How might more intentionally doing this help us begin to make sense of these experiences and weave them into our life stories in ways that are meaningful for us and others?

This week, I happened to read a journal article that our son, Alec, wrote about the German novel *Peehs Liebe* (*Peeh’s Love*) – a story about Rosarius, a man with an age-related disability, and Annie, his caregiver. The novel sounds so good it made me wish I could read German!

Having had a stroke that makes his speech difficult, Rosarius communicates with Annie through phrases from *Hyperion*, an ancient piece of literature that he had long-ago memorized and that she is inspired by him to read.

By reciting lines from Hyperion, telling their stories in order to establish (or rewrite) their stories, and listening to one another, Rosarius and Annie...

forge a special bond... Throughout the novel, literature and life flow into and out of one other; when Rosarius's speech is faltering, he recites lines from Hyperion to... communicate what he really means to say...

Rosarius and Annie experience the struggle for meaning that surrounds words and find that the poetry...

helps them to be more present to themselves, cope with their memories, losses, and fears, as well as build relationships in the present moment.

Alec's article struck me because I think this is what can happen when we engage psalms as spiritual memoirs – especially at times when life experiences threaten to overwhelm us. It's often then that we struggle to find words, our own speech faltering in the face of whatever is happening. It can be a comfort to be reminded of a people whose life experiences threatened to overwhelm them, too. When we hardly know what to say, their words can calm us. Even the patterns of a psalm can feel like a lifeline.

Psalm 22 is one of my favorite psalms for just that reason. It begins with the verse Jesus himself turned to while being crucified; then the psalmist's struggle between faith and doubt continues:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Yet - you are holy... in you our ancestors trusted... and you delivered them.

But - I am a worm, and not human - scorned and despised

Yet - it was you who took me from the womb;

you kept me safe on my mother's breast.

On you I was cast from my birth,

and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

Do not be far from me,

for trouble is near

and there is no one to help.

Many bulls encircle me...

I am poured out like water...

Dogs are all around me...

*But - you, O LORD, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!*

Then the writer of this spiritual memoir speaks of rescue and deep gratitude. He immediately looks forward to sharing the whole story with the rest of the community, already anticipating that future generations will hear and recount it:

From the horns of wild oxen you have rescued me!
*I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you...*
From you comes my praise in the great congregation...
All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD;
*Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,
and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.*

In frank conversation with God and each other, our past and present experiences – including our own fierce swings between faith and doubt – can also be a deep spiritual well from which we can draw. As we come together before God, our tentative confessions, rambling prayers, and hard questions stand in this long and varied tradition of psalms – a kind of spiritual memoir that can be meaningful for ourselves, as well as for others.

Holding our lives before God and each other

Our life as church at CMCL is already enriched by the many ways that we wrestle with life and faith together – through music, poetry, art, and *This I Believe* reflections, for example.

Perhaps there are other ways we might do that, too. Maybe through a writing spiritual memoirs class or intergenerational *StoryCorps* type conversations? Please let me or Susan know if you might be interested in something like that or if you have another idea.

Right now, Worship Committee has invited us to write personal psalms to share. In closing, Elizabeth Nissley agreed to read the one she wrote.

A Psalm of Lament and Hope

by Elizabeth Nissley

Is there quiet in the Land? Is there hope for living?

No - the noise of pestilence afflicting many, bringing death, sobbing, gasps for air, confusion, and fear.

No - the noise of anxiety of pounding hearts, of misinformation, of crowds threatening

with shouts and guns.

No - the noise of anger with black men being killed without reason, at incompetent

leadership, at the multiple injustices that have been part of our "normal".

No – the noise of poverty, hunger, and inequality.

No – the noise of hatred, ignorance, selfishness, and narcissism.

Is there quiet in the Land? Is there hope for living?

Yes – in many loving connections with loved ones and friends.

Yes – in quiet meditation and imagining antibody production while confirmed to my

"cell," knowing also the power of prayers of others.

Yes – in nature blooming, returning, and recovering as we humans take a break.

Yes – in leaders with decency, courage, compassion, tenacity and "lion heartedness."

Yes – in finding grace around this moment, even in the cracks.

There is quiet in the land; There is hope for living.