

Lamentable Elevator Music

^{NRS} **Matthew 26:26** While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."²⁷ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you;²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.²⁹ I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."³⁰ When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

During the first Gulf War my favorite singer/songwriter, John Gorka, remembers sitting down the watch the nightly news. And he experienced a feeling that every single one of us knows well, I think: he felt the terrible burden of seeing and hearing about tragedy and knowing there isn't much he could do personally to fix it. And he found himself wondering which is worse- to watch until he was gloomy and depressed; or bury his head in the sand and pretend he didn't know anything was going on. He puts it much better in his song The Gypsy Life:

There is nothing in my head today

Nothing awful there to ponder or confuse me

Go ahead in what you have to say

And I will listen as I listen to the news

I know the whole truth there is horrible

It's better if you take a little at a time

(And here are the really great lines)

Too much and you are not portable

Not enough and you'll be making happy rhymes

Of all of Gorka's music, and I've got every CD he ever made, I think these lines may be my favorite: Too much (information) and you are not portable; not enough and you'll be making happy rhymes. He articulates better than anyone I know the tension we all feel knowing so much about the world around us today, with the Middle East, with Darfur in Africa, just to name a couple of the worst regions right now, and also knowing how little any of us individually can do about it all. If you dwell too much on what you can't change, it can leave you feeling hopeless, defeated. But if we just ignore the problems around us- why every time we turn away we are a little more diminished, a little more glib, and a little less human- certainly less effective disciples of Christ.

And you know I really believe this is a problem almost unique to us and the so-called information age in which we live. It wasn't that long ago that the world was so much less connected, and we were so much more unaware of what was going on in the next county much less the next continent. I learned from my father in law a great example of this. When Lincoln was assassinated at Ford's theatre in 1865, it took three full days before the news arrived here in Portland. Three days. The message came by telegram- a brand new technology at the time. It took so long because a telegram at that time could only travel about 100 miles before the message had to be transcribed and re-sent. Now three days sounds bad, but had this happened a year or so before- the message would have taken three weeks to arrive by stage. Still, three full days to find out the president of the United States was dead. As a matter of comparison, a mere hundred years later, when John F. Kennedy was shot dead in 1963, nearly everyone in the country knew within three hours, if not three minutes. And now today information travels so quickly, and there's so much of it to be had- we find ourselves in the unique situation of

knowing vast amounts about events and situations that very few of us can individually effect.

And it leaves us forever wondering- so what are we supposed to do about all this? Iraq- whatever your politics, whether you're for or against the war- what can we do to bring about peace? Or the victims of Katrina. Or those miners in West Virginia- a hundred years ago most folks in Portland never would have even heard about miners dying in West Virginia much less wonder what can be done. Name any crisis in the world today and in every case our knowledge of what's going wrong far exceeds the ability any of us has to make a dent in it. And this is to say nothing of the myriad of personal situations each one of us walks in here with- the family members we wish we could change, or we wish we could help, but know it really isn't in our power. Or the work situations that seem intractable, or a thousand other problems we face.

Now, it is true that people change, and often the efforts of just one little person can make an enormous difference, and miracles in the world do happen- if I didn't believe that, I would be standing up here this morning. But it's equally true, and maybe a harder truth, that sometimes, sometimes the cup isn't taken away from us, and you and I face situations we simply don't have the strength to put right.

Back in Austin I remember sitting in a training session for pastors who were receiving interns from Austin Seminary. And this particular morning we were sitting with our interns, the facilitator, David Johnson (David Johnson Easter story), asked the pastors to name the single most important thing they thought every pastor needed to learn if they wanted to survive. And I'll never forget ol' Fred Morgan's response. Now Fred was a colleague of mine up the road a ways at Hope Presbyterian Church. Fred had been

a pastor longer than I've been alive at that point, and he had this huge beard and looked the spitting image of Jerry Garcia. He has this huge baritone voice and LOVES to talk. He jumped right in with the most interesting advice not just for pastors, but for Christians in general. He said if you wanted to survive, the most important thing you have to learn is how to be impotent. "How to be impotent?" I thought in my head with raised eyebrows. And I could see by the squirms in the room, especially in the men, I wasn't alone on this one. But he continued and I understood. Pastors (and anyone trying to live a life of faith) are always wanting to fix things and make everything right and take away the world's pain, he said. But the truth is, we simply don't have the ability to do this. When it comes to saving the world, we don't have the power- we are impotent in this regard. Our main job is to point as much as we possibly can to the one we believe has put things right. And if we don't get this, he said, we're in for a world of hurt. These are wise words. In fact my intern that year who I was sitting next to at the time would struggle with those words- wanting in the three months he spent with this congregation to be at every meeting, hold every hand, and go from stranger to trusted/beloved pastor after spending five minutes with someone. His heart was in the right place- but he wrestled with the frustration of realizing in the end how little there was he could do to really solve or fix nearly all of the problems folks had been wrestling with for years.

So what the heck do we do with all this? If the cat in the hat is right- and so many of our messes are too big and too deep and too tall that there's no way we can just make it all go away no way at all; *and* if burying our heads in the sand isn't an option (at least not a faithful option), what in the heck are we supposed to do?

Well, in a word- lament. We can lament.

Now, what in the world am I talking about? Well, I believe that the least well known and least practiced form of Biblical song and prayer I know is the form known as Lament. And, I believe it is the form of song and prayer we most need. Now, in case you were thinking about something else just now, like that small wager you made with your friend on the Seahawks or whether you bought enough avocados for the guac- or hazelnuts or dried fruit or whatever the heck Oregonians eat on game day, I'll say that again. When it comes to dealing with the anxiety of living in the information age, I believe that the least well known and practiced form of Biblical song and prayer, the form known as Lament, is the form of song and prayer we most need.

Now what on earth is lament? If you ever hear the word used anymore, you probably don't hear it used well. When I hear the word lament used today, I hear it used to express a kind of over the top, melodramatic kind of sadness and whining. To 'lament' today is to indulge in a kind of over emotional pity party that if anything just obstructs us from getting our sleeves rolled up and getting to the business of fixing what's wrong rather than just complaining about what's wrong. Now this is how we use the word today- but this is not lament in any Biblical sense of the term.

The Biblical form of lament is a uniquely Hebrew form of song and prayer in which we open our eyes and see and name what is broken in our world especially when it seems beyond our ability to fix, we ask God what in the world is so important that he isn't fixing the problems, and then, after letting this steam off, we then try to remember times when God has been faithful and we try to end in trust and in hope. See, real

lament, Biblical lament, isn't really about sadness as much as it is about seeing and remembering wounds that aren't going to go away anytime soon.

Now, it's not just because we need it that lament is so important- we simply can't understand scripture if we don't at least have a sense for lament. Lament makes up such an enormous part of the Bible- at least a third of the Psalms are what we call "Lament Psalms", there's an entire book known as Lamentations, and many of the prophets, especially Jeremiah, use lament to express their frustrations and also their hope. Lament songs and prayers are like a kind of elevator music in the Hebrew Bible- it just sits there in the background easy for us to miss, but constant nevertheless. But it's not just in the Old Testament either- it's what's happening in the text for this morning, too.

Our story this morning is such a familiar one to most of us- it's the story of Christ's last supper. Now, most of us forget that it's not just any dinner they are celebrating, but a special meal. Christ and his disciples sit down to a seder meal that night to celebrate Passover. Now, just like the seder meal we're going to be celebrating in a few weeks every part of the meal is symbolic, reminding the people of God of how they were saved from oppression in Egypt for a life of freedom in Palestine. From the dipping of the vegetable in the salt water reminding them of the passage through the red sea to the eating of the bitter herbs reminding them of their bondage in slavery, every part of a seder meal is carefully scripted. We can only imagine the absolute shock, then, when Christ breaks with tradition and utterly transforms this meal from one of triumph, to one of lament.

What do I mean? Well, when Jesus takes the bread and breaks it- he should be telling all at the table how the people had to flee from Egypt quickly and how they had to eat their bread unleavened and hurriedly. Instead, though, what does he say to them? He breaks the bread and he tells them, “This bread is my body. Whenever you eat of this bread- do so in remembrance of me.” And then the cup? There are four cups of wine we drink at a seder- this would be the second cup when they would tell more of the Exodus story and some liturgies include a prayer for the coming of Messiah. Of course instead of the Exodus, we hear: “This cup is the new covenant, sealed in my blood, shed for all. When you drink of it, do so in remembrance of me.”

And then, the part of this story hardly anyone notices, they all leave that table singing- singing wonderful hymns. And because it’s seder, we know exactly what hymns they were singing- they were singing what are called the Hallel psalms, Psalms 115-118, that end every seder. One of these Psalms, Psalm 116 is a lament. And it’s fitting, because that’s what Christ has turned this entire supper into in fact. It’s lament because Jesus and the disciples know they are at the end of their road together, that Jesus will be taken from them in violence, and there isn’t a dog gone thing they can do about- but rather than become so mired in darkness they can’t go forward and rather than just pretend it won’t happen- they choose to do something different. They choose to lament. They take that night to face losing Christ, to name it, and then to prepare themselves by singing and praying and hoping that somehow God will give them the faith to go on.

One commentator writes this: “Theologians speak of the Lord’s Supper as the sacrament of the real presence of Christ. This important truth must be balanced by another. In a certain sense it is the sacrament of the real absence of Christ. The

Eucharistic service forcefully reminds us Jesus was violently removed from our midst. Despite his spiritual presence, he is our absent Lord.” (Hare, p. 298-299) The disciples carried a terrible burden that night in the small upper room- they knew they were saying good bye and there wasn't a thing they could do to stop it.

And of course we're the same, too, aren't we. Each of us here has walked in with heavy burdens- situations and people we're concerned about but know there may not be much we can actually do to fix things. For some of us our concerns are global. For some of us our concerns are personal. The pain of not being able to make things right is the same.

And so this morning, in the spirit of the disciples lying around that table in that small, upper room- we have an opportunity to bring our laments to God as well. Under every seat this morning, you will find a note card and a pen. Between now and when you come forward to celebrate the Lord's Supper, I invite you to write down at least one thing painful in your life you know you can't fix and want to lift into God's presence. When you come forward for communion, place your note card in the offering plate on the table. Using these prayers, the prayer of the people after communion will be in the form of a Biblical lament. Please do not include your name. And if you would like to offer a lament and do not want it voiced in the prayer, that is absolutely welcome as well- just write private on it, and it will not be read.

Friends, lament and prayer- these aren't magic. They won't fix everything. What they do is bring us into the presence of the Holy One of Israel. What they do is help us

remember that even when we're unable to make everything right- we can still name what's wrong and pray that God's grace dwell on earth as it does in heaven. And this is no small thing, this is no small thing! Indeed, it is the very essence of what it means to hope.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, God of rejoicing, and Lord of Lament- **Amen.**