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Sermon

Lamenting with Confidence!

Psalm 27, Genesis 15:1-12,17-18

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Friday's massacre was appalling, shocking and frightening. Tucked away as far as we can go from the Middle East, 3 hours flight from our nearest neighbour, we have been spectators of world events. We have seen horrors reported in print and on our screens – but all from a safe distance. Suddenly, it was here. We weren't so remote after all. We have felt - violated. The murderous intent, the violence, the loss of lives puts us into a national lament.

As it happens our readings today all contain laments:

A lament over barrenness, a lament over violent men, a lament over Christians who are dominated by the desires of the flesh and Jesus' lament over Jerusalem and her people's rejection of God's ways.

Abraham and Sarah are old - nearly 100 years old. They have no child. Yet God had called them to follow him and promised them many descendants. So although God appears in a vision to Abraham with a very positive greeting, "Don't be afraid, I am your shield and your very great reward", Abraham seems less than impressed and responds with a complaint (v2):

O Lord God, what shall you give me? For I am still childless!
And the heir of my house, he is Eliezer of Damascus.
You have given me no seed, thus a "son of my house" will inherit from me!

He laments that they have no children - yet God had promised to make a great nation from him.

Abraham was not afraid to complain to God. And God invites us to be in touch with our deep hurts and best hopes – to be honest with him about what is happening in us.

Professor Rolf Jacobson of Luther Seminary in Saint Paul points out¹ that when we lament or complain to God we are doing three things:

1. We make our problems into God's problems. As we tell God about our deepest hurts and unmet hopes we involve God in those hurts and hopes.
2. To complain to God is to have faith that God truly present and faithful to his promises.
3. Where the Lord has made a promise, to complain is to remind the Lord of unmet promises.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4001

And God responds to Abraham by renewing and expanding the promise. You will have as many descendants as there are stars! God doesn't mind being involved in our problems. He expects us to believe his promises.

Abraham responds in trust and God's counter response is to make a covenant with him. Once again promising the land to him and also descendants. What to us is a strange business of cutting animals in half was the standard Ancient Near East way of making a covenant. Animals were killed and cut in two. Then the parties to the agreement walked between the halves of the animals saying, 'May the Lord do to me and more also if I do not keep this covenant.' That is, may I be cut in two if I break this covenant. Here extraordinarily, God cuts covenant with Abraham by symbolically walking between the halves of the animals in the form of fire and smoke – even as the Angel of Lord appeared in the wilderness leading the people for 40 years.

Let us turn to Psalm 27, where we find more on trust and lament; confidence and seeking.

There is a confidence in God's protection (v1-3):

The LORD is my light and my salvation--whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life--of whom shall I be afraid? ² When ... my enemies ... attack me, they will stumble and fall. ³ Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident.

It sounds relevant, doesn't it?

After expressing confidence in God's protection, the psalmist turns to pleading and lament:

Do not hide your face from me, do not turn me] away in anger Do not reject me ... Do not hand me over to the desire of my foes, for false witnesses rise up against me, breathing out violence.

Here is lament about the troubles that surround him. There is much to fear and he pleads with God to protect and help him. However, there is a pattern in the psalm of confidence and seeking God. Then when trouble comes, he seeks God and ends in confidence.

V8: 'My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, LORD, I will seek.'

And so he returns to confidence (v13): 'I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.'

Prof Amanda Benckhuysen, of Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids comments,

Trust does not preclude lament. Confidence in God's ability to overcome the darkest of evils does not require holding back our tears, our disappointments, our deep longing for more of God. Faith does not rule out doubt. Both trust and lament are proper expressions of faith in the context of hardship and suffering and often they go hand in hand. What they share in common is an unwavering conviction in the reality, the goodness, and the power of God, who is both worthy of our confidence [and] attentive to our cries for help.²

Lent is a good time for self-examination and drawing close to God. As we watch many reports on the massacre in Christchurch, as we feel the outrage and the grief, there are even more reasons to have honest conversations with God founded on the confidence that God is good and powerful and sent Jesus to save the world.

The Hebrew word for 'wait' encompasses waiting, expecting and hoping. As you move through these dark days may you be able to say with the Psalmist,

"I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD."

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² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3994