

Lament and Community

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THROUGH THE VALLEY / Lament; Community / Esther 4:1–5

When we recognize or experience injustice, crying out together in words and actions can move us closer to God's vision for humanity and stir us to make change.

Notes

UMH 117

UMH 519

Scripture Passage

[Esther 4:1–5](#) (NLT)

¹ When Mordecai learned about all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on burlap and ashes, and went out into the city, crying with a loud and bitter wail. ² He went as far as the gate of the palace, for no one was allowed to enter the palace gate while wearing clothes of mourning. ³ And as news of the king's decree reached all the provinces, there was great mourning among the Jews. They fasted, wept, and wailed, and many people lay in burlap and ashes. ⁴ When Queen Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was deeply distressed. She sent clothing to him to replace the burlap, but he refused it. ⁵ Then Esther sent for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs who had been appointed as her attendant. She ordered him to go to Mordecai and find out what was troubling him and why he was in mourning.

Focus Statement

- When we recognize or experience injustice,
 - crying out together in words and actions can move us
 - closer to God's vision for humanity and stir us to make change.

Point of Relation

- Before today's passage
 - the story begins with King Xerxes of Persia holding a grand beauty contest to find a new queen
 - after Queen Vashti's refusal to obey him at a royal banquet.
 - He had called her to the party and she refused to come.
 - As such he divorced and exiled her.
 - Following the Queen's exile,
 - young women from across the vast Persian Empire are brought to the palace,
 - where they undergo beauty treatments and preparation for their chance to impress the king.
 - Among them is Esther, a Jewish orphan raised by her cousin Mordecai.
 - Despite her humble origins, Esther captivates the king with her beauty and wins his favor,
 - ultimately being crowned queen.
 - However, Esther, following Mordecai's advice, conceals her Jewish identity.
 - Meanwhile, in the midst of Esther's rise to power,
 - Haman, an influential official, schemes to eliminate Mordecai and all Jews in the empire.
 - It is this revelation that sends Mordecai to the gates of the palace to seek Esther's help.

Things to Consider

- Let me ask you this:
 - When there is an injustice that people are lamenting/protesting, are we most concerned with protecting the comfort (and sometimes safety) of our people?

› Pause

- Or do we lovingly, compassionately, draw attention to injustices that need to be named and lamented?
- For instance, back in May of 2020, I chose to take a stand against racial injustice...
 - Because for far too long I had remained silent on the issue?
 - Why? Well, it was easier to stay silent...to not rock the boat...to not make people uncomfortable or upset...
 - But when George Floyd died, and the way that he died, I realized that my role is NOT to stay silent, but TO CHALLENGE people to represent CHRIST...and what JESUS would want.
 - And Christ would want me to risk my own comfort for what's right.
 - So, during that time I outwardly lamented...and joined others in lamenting...the sin of racism and bigotry.
 - It made some people uncomfortable...just Jesus didn't call us to keep the world comfortable.
 - That's NOT how Jesus ended up on the cross.

What Scripture Says

- Lament is most often communal (or on behalf of a community) in scripture.
- In this passage, we see Mordecai's honest, open, and very public lament (verse 1).
 - He was lamenting an injustice based on prejudice and hatred towards the Jewish people
 - (Haman's plot to destroy the Jewish people and the royal stamp of approval given by King Ahasuerus, see ch. 3).
- Mordecai was not alone in this lament; it affected the Jews in every province where the decree came (v. 3).

- And Mordecai's lament puts Esther at a Crossroads of choosing what's right over and above her own comfort and personal safety.
- This lament does not only take the form of words but also of actions
 - fasting,
 - weeping,
 - tearing clothes,
 - laying in sackcloth,
 - Covered in ashes
 - This visible, communal lament drew attention and response
 - In verses 4-5, it says:
 - “4 When Queen Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was deeply distressed. She sent clothing to him to replace the burlap, but he refused it. 5 Then Esther sent for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs who had been appointed as her attendant. She ordered him to go to Mordecai and find out what was troubling him and why he was in mourning.”
 - Explore some of the dynamics and responses to this lament. As you do, make connections with experiences of communal lament (or responses to injustice) today and the responses they receive, as well as the responses that are called for. As always, speak with prayerful discernment in and to your context. Several possibilities include:
- Let's explore some of the dynamics and responses to this lament. First let's look at **Power**.
 - Mordecai was not able to enter the king's gate (as we see in v. 2).
 - Those in the seat of power did not want to see the suffering of the people,
 - even though that suffering was at their own hands.
 - The power dynamics in this passage involve cultural diversity, prejudice against the Jewish community, classism (

- eunuchs,
 - maids,
 - commoners,
 - royalty,
 - officials
- and patriarchal structures.
- Let me ask us this:
 - Who is kept “outside the gates” in our communities and world today?
 - › Pause
 - How does that allow those in power to not see the effects of their power?
 - › Pause
- Next we can look at **Persistence**.
 - Esther’s first response to Mordecai’s lament is to send him a change of clothing.
 - He could have changed clothes, but he didn’t.
 - So, let’s unpack the message that Mordecai’s choice sends.
 - “Accept me as I am or not at all.”
 - Mordecai persisted in his lament.
 - He would not be “silenced”/conform to accommodate anyone or make them more comfortable.
 - In response to Mordecai’s persistence,
 - Esther is persistent too.
 - Her first attempt to support Mordecai (sending new clothes) didn’t work,

- yet she stayed open to his lament and took another step (as we see in v. 5)
 - to listen more deeply to what he had to say.
 - She did not give up.
- Where are we called to be persistent in calling out injustice in our communities and world today?
 - How do we react when others are persistent/insistent?
 - Do we try to “give them new clothes” hoping they will “just get over it”?
 - How are we called to persist alongside others, exploring different options and actions when the first
 - (or second, or third...) thing doesn’t work?
- Next let’s look at **Protest**.
 - In this passage we see how lament functions as a kind of protest that leads to action.
 - While some lament is individual (and only communal in the sense that the one lamenting needs community support),
 - some lament is and needs to be public.
 - For instance, when Emmett Till,
 - a 14-year-old African American boy who was brutally murdered in Mississippi in 1955
 - after being accused of flirting with a white woman.
 - He was kidnapped, tortured, and killed by two white men. T
 - ill's death became a catalyst for the civil rights movement in the United States,
 - as his grieving mother's decision to have an open-casket funeral allowed the public to witness the brutality of racism.

- While the two men were acquitted, even though they later confessed in an interview,
 - Mamie Till-Mobley,
 - played a crucial role in sparking outrage towards her son's lynching.
 - She wanted the world to see the brutality inflicted upon her son, hoping to expose the horrors of racism and injustice.
 - The images of Emmett's disfigured body circulated widely in newspapers and magazines,
 - igniting outrage and galvanizing support for the civil rights movement.
 - Mamie's courageous decision to publicly lament and mourn her son
 - helped to mobilize people across the country and shed light on the pervasive racism
 - and violence endured by African Americans in the Jim Crow South.
- And we all know what happened to George Floyd and the VERY PUBLIC lament that ensued following his death.
- While Mordecai's behavior may have been more common in his day than it is in ours (because of his culture's grief practices),
 - it was still dramatic enough to get Esther's attention and incite her to act.
- For what purposes do we need to "wear sackcloth and ashes"
 - to live/act out our lament with enough noise and display to get attention?

› Pause

- Or, we might even ask ourselves how we react when others protest or lament publicly?
 - Do we dismiss them as “irrational” or say that their problems are “not that bad”?
 - › Pause
 - Do we respond differently when the lamenter is someone we know or someone who has commonalities with us?
 - › Pause

Let us also look at the fact that Esther is dealing with Cross-racial/cross-cultural communities and callings.

- All of the above dynamics and responses are impacted
 - and made more complex by the fact that Esther is navigating a cross-cultural life and role
 - as a Jewish woman living in the household of a Persian king.
 - She is in a challenging position that she didn’t choose for herself
 - and she is not only learning how to survive it, but also to use it to advocate for her own people,
 - all while risking her own life.
 - In cross-racial/cross-cultural communities,
 - it is especially important to persist alongside one another, continue listening, and try different approaches.
 - As individuals, sometimes we find ourselves in cross-racial/cross-cultural spaces/communities
 - and we may not always want to be or know why we are there,
 - but we may find that God has put us there for a reason.
- In the book of Esther, lament eventually leads to righteous action.
 - Following today’s passage,

- Esther, encouraged by Mordecai,
 - decides to take action despite the risk to her own life.
- She requests that all the Jews in Susa fast and pray for her for three days and nights.
 - After this period of fasting and prayer, Esther approaches King Xerxes without being summoned,
 - risking her life according to palace protocol.
 - The king extends his golden scepter to her, signifying his acceptance,
 - and she invites him and Haman to a banquet she has prepared.
 - At the banquet, she invites them to another banquet the following day.
 - Meanwhile, Haman plans to hang Mordecai on the gallows he has prepared.
 - In the end, Esther reveals her Jewish identity to King Xerxes,
 - leading to Haman's execution and the Jews being allowed to defend themselves.
 - They emerge victorious,
 - and the holiday of Purim is established to commemorate their deliverance.

What This Means for You

- Let me invite you to be intentional about paying attention to injustice and responding to it,
 - especially as United Methodists, whether the injustice in question affects you personally or not.
 - It is okay to outwardly grieve these events.
 - Some of you already do during our Community Prayer...

- but can also be done through engaging in mission around what one is lamenting...
 - Or even starting up a ministry that addresses it.
- Also, I want to encourage the you to also allow others to grieve
 - without attempting to manage *their* responses to injustice or events.
- Keep new disciples in mind! Permission to grieve for social injustice may be a new concept for us as disciples,
 - as it's often not emphasized in our culture or in popular expressions of Christianity.
- But let me point out the importance of grief and prayer for informed action.
 - When we bring the problem to God, in community, God may inspire the community to effective action.

What This Means for Us

- What do we as a community, as a church need to grieve?
 - The lament of Mordecai and the Jewish community *was* the protest.
 - Often, we jump to action in an attempt to “fix”.
 - While action is necessary, how do we also leave time and space to grieve and lament?
 - Remember, lament is action. It is an outpouring of distress in order to draw attention and affect just change.
 - As Christians, let us grow more open to expressing lament as an honest and open expression of our call to stand against sin and evil in whatever forms they present themselves.
 - Amen? Amen.