A Life of Prayer: The Lamenter Memory Verse: Psalm 63:1

Nov. 24th, 2024 Scripture Reading: Genesis 15: 1-6

**SLIDE 1**

 In our discussion on prayer so far we have delved into the idea that, ultimately, we come before the Lord as children. And children, generally speaking, need help. So we are helpless children who come before our heavenly Father in prayer. But as we grow and we get some more experience in this life, we start to think we know a thing or two. We start believing that we know how things work and before too long our child-like faith is exchanged for a cynical viewpoint. As cynics, we question God and his goodness, we question his ability. And last week we sort of teased a very important question:

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What do we do when we come to God in prayer, and we do not receive an answer? What do we do when our high hopes crash? That’s what we are going to talk about today.

 Throughout this series, I have been using Paul E. Miller’s book “A Praying Life” as a guide and throughout his book he talks about his daughter Kim. When his wife Jill was pregnant with Kim, they would pray over their baby the words of

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Psalm 121, “I raise my eyes, where does my help come from?...God won’t let your foot slip…The LORD is your protector, he will keep you from harm.” When the time came for delivery, Jill had a horrible experience in the hospital, including medical malpractice on the part of their doctor. After an agonizing labor, their daughter Kim was born blue. She had low Apgar scores, and no one seemed to know what exactly was wrong. As Kim grew, her muscles never developed properly, her eyes did not focus, she constantly struggled with pneumonia and had trouble even breathing especially during the winter months. To this day, as an adult, Kim is not able to speak without the help of a specialized computer.

 Going through such an experience and raising a child with multiple disabilities was not only a test for these parents, but it was a crisis of faith as well.

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 They had prayed, specifically prayed for God’s protection, that Kim would not be harmed…and…she was. Paul writes, “It would have been easier for us if Jill had not prayed that Kim would be kept from harm. The promise of God actually made it worse. It hurt to hope.” The high hopes of these parents had crashed into immovable reality. High hopes…lofty dreams…great expectations crashing into reality.

 With the complicated birth of Kim, this family had entered into the wilderness.

 We have all experienced the wilderness.

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Maybe it was the birth of your own children that did not go as expected. Maybe your career took a turn you did not see coming. Maybe your marriage is not as stellar as it was supposed to be. Maybe your health has failed you. Maybe your grown children have disappointed you. We experience the wilderness whenever our reality does not live up to our expectations. And as mentioned, through Jill’s hope filled prayers, the expectations for Kim’s health and development were sky high. They were claiming the promises of God for their daughter.

In his book, Paul presents a very simple chart to help illustrate the experience of the wilderness.

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 I have altered it slightly for our use, but basically we can see time running it’s course along the bottom. That simply illustrated the unrelenting march of time. But along the opposite axis we have hope. And we can go through our days with a high level of hope or with no hope. So let’s just assume that we are faith filled Christians, we have been praying with a PAX team, and we are filled with hope, this creates within us high expectations. And we hope for what we cannot see right? We cannot expect something if it is already here. So living in hope creates a gap between what is hoped for and reality. We can call this gap the wilderness. It’s where we live when God does not seem to answer, it’s where our expectations remain unmet.

So there are generally two ways to solve the tension of the wilderness. One is denial.

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We just don’t take into account the reality of the situation and we sort of fool ourselves into thinking that our reality is what we expected. It is surprising easy to deny unwanted circumstances. The other option is to move toward despair.

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This happens when we lower our expectations to the point where they line up with reality. If there is no hope, then there is no tension and the wilderness problem is solved.

But denial and despair are not the Christian response to this wilderness problem.

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Hope is part of our mandate. Hope is what sets us apart from the outlook of the world. People of faith live in the wilderness. That means that we are well aware of the unfavorable reality of our circumstances and yet we remain fixed on hope.

In Romans chapter four the apostle Paul ruminates on the Old Testmanet patriarch Abraham.

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God promised Abraham a great multitude of descendants, more than the stars in the sky. Though his wife was barren, and they were both much too old to have kids, despite this reality, God filled Abraham with incredible expectations; absolutely impossible expectations. That sort of gap made for an instant wilderness for Abraham. “God promised me children and I have no way of having any children!” His hopes had crashed into immovable reality. So Abraham had some choices to make. He could reject God’s words and pretend it never happened. This would keep him from having to hope for any offspring. Or he could try to make his reality match up with his expectation and try to take matters into his own hands. Which did happen. Abraham and Sarah did go through a period in which they denied the reality of their barrenness and tried to force God’s promises to happen through Sarah’s servant girl. But listen to what Paul writes about Abraham:

**SLIDE 11** READ Romans 4:18-21.

Ultimately, Abraham was fully convinced that God would do what he had promised. Paul says he grew strong in faith, despite a reality that did not allow for children, Abraham fixed his eyes on the expectation of children. He fully embraced both the hard truth of reality as well as the soaring hope of his expectation. He lived in the wilderness.

I will acknowledge that Abraham stands as an incredible example for us modern day Christians, but I do have to note one crucial difference between Abraham and myself. Abraham received a special, personal, specific revelation from God.

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 A promise spoken directly to him. I do not have that same experience. I might find it easier to hope like Abraham did if I could point to something God said to me directly in a loud voice from the heavens. But yet, God’s word is directly before me. It’s filled with promises that God has made to his people and those who seek after him. Do I believe that those words apply to me? And the only way I am going to know the promises of God is if I am actively engaged in reading the word of God. So as we read the bible, the Holy Spirit begins to apply God’s promises…we begin to see that it is personal; that God is speaking to us.

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But as our hope rises, we are more aware of the disparity between what God says and the reality that surrounds us. God’s word then leads us into this wilderness. The Holy Spirit did the same to Jesus. After he was baptized, he was literally led into the wilderness. And why does God do this? What good could come from spending time in the wilderness? Paul Miller points out some possible boons:

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In the wilderness, God can get our attention and bring a cure to our wandering hearts. When there is nothing around but the glare of unfulfilled expectations, God can finally take his proper place. In the wilderness, we come to the end of ourselves and we find our own wills are broken. In the wilderness we come face to face with God. Jesus suffered in the wilderness. He went 40 days without food. He withstood temptation. He was made stronger by the wilderness.

Our very own Ann Klinner was telling me about the way her tomato plants disappointed her this year. And Ann knows a lot of things about a lot of stuff that I know nothing about. And she knew exactly why her crop was poor. She told me it was because we had too much rain. With all the water, the plants never developed strong roots. They never had the need to grow deeper and search out water. Water was too abundant. So when dry weather did eventually come, the roots were in no shape to handle it. And the end result was a sad amount of fruit. In the wilderness we develop our roots…we are forced to go deeper.

 When we find ourselves in that place, we know we shouldn’t deny reality but we also know we shouldn’t despair without hope, but what should we do? We follow the example laid out for us in God’s word…we lament.

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We find laments all throughout scripture; from the prophets to Jesus on the cross. There is even an entire book called “Lamentations”. Some of the psalms make for the most potent examples of lament.

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Psalm 6:6 David laments, “I’m worn out from groaning. Every night I drench my bed with tears; I soak my couch all the way through.” I have read that verse before and came away thinking “Goodness David, aren’t you being a little dramatic? A little over the top?” And yet, there have been times when I mourn and weep, times when I am worn out from being in the wilderness. What about Psalm 10 which begins like this,

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 “Why do you stand so far away, LORD, hiding yourself in troubling times?” I’m sure we have all had times when God felt distant.

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Psalm 13, “Look at me! Answer me, LORD my God! Restore sight to my eyes! Otherwise, I’ll sleep the sleep of death.” We can hear the desperation. David would rather die than be distant from God. Lamenting is messy…it’s not always nice. It is raw and uncensored. It is uncomfortable because it is naming the disparity between what God has promised and what we are experiencing. Lament fights the wilderness. It refuses to give up. To lament is to wrestle with God. But I want to point out that lamenting is not just complaining. Complaining is focused on our own will. We get mad because we do not get what we want. Lament is borne out of faith and a desire for God to have his way. It is based on the promises that God has already made.

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Paul Miller writes, “We live in a deeply broken world. If the pieces of our world aren’t breaking your heart and you aren’t in God’s face about them, then you’re becoming quietly cynical. You’ve thrown in the towel.”

 In the wilderness we develop our roots. In the wilderness we dig deep, we search, we hunger and thirst, we strive, we become desperate. This is what lamenting does for us. We engage with God on his terms, not our own and what happens is, in our desperation, a channel opens up between our hearts and the heart of God. Just like a well-worn path that get tramped down by constant use, our prayer life becomes hedged in, stuck in a rut if you will. But the well-worn rut allows us to remain anchored to reality and yet laser focused on the hope God has laid before us. In fact, the deeper the rut, the more you must look up. Imagine coming to God in prayer so often that my pathway is worn so deep that I can’t see over the sides of the trench that has formed. Then, with dirt walls on either side of me, my only choice is to look up to God my Heavenly Father.

Before I close I want to bring us back to where we started.

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We are God’s children, we come to him in prayer as his children. Children don’t know as much information as adults, they are more naïve about the world around them. But this allows children to hold on to something that adults let go of as they age and that is a sense of wonder. I can bring my little ones to the kids section at Barnes and Noble

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and they are enraptured by the fun books, the stuffed animals, the toy trains. They love exploring and discovering this little corner of the store. They do not realize that Disneyworld is more amazing or that they could be having ice cream right now. They are open to the wonder that surrounds them. My older kids are not so impressed. “Can we go yet?” They are aware of the fact that we are in a boring old bookstore. They are losing their sense of wonder. And let me tell you, I am aware of the fact that even Disney world could not make a cynical kid happy. The lines are too long and it’s too hot out after all.

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So I want to add another layer to our chart. As we head into the wilderness, as we live in the tension between reality and expectation, as we walk that well-worn rut and trust in our Father as a child, we will find wonder in the presence of God. We won’t have to be in the fun capital of the world to enjoy life, we realize that all we need is God and God alone. His presence with us is the greatest of all gifts and we see it with the most clarity in the wilderness.

Paul Miller brings some closure to his family’s story of having a disabled daughter. He writes, “Years later when Kim was about twenty, I was sitting at the dining-room table writing a Bible study on Psalm 121…I had forgotten about Jill’s Psalm 121 prayer. I looked up from the table and said, ‘Jill, God did it. He kept us from all harm. He did Psalm 121.’ We had thought the harm was a daughter with disabilities, but this was nothing compared to the danger of two proud and willful parents. Because Kim was mute, Jill and I learned to listen. Her helplessness taught us to become helpless too. Kim brought Jesus into our home.”

 In prayer, we come to God as helpless children. And in God’s mercy, he leads us with high hopes into the wilderness. It’s an environment where we can stave off cynicism, grow desperate and learn to lament. One more Psalm…

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63:1, “God! My God! It’s you – I search for you! My whole being thirsts for you! My body desires you in a dry and tired land, no water anywhere.” David expresses hope in God’s presence and yet acknowledges the dismal state of his reality. The wilderness is a place where we can continue on in helplessness and learn to marvel at the wonder of the unbridled glory of a good God who meets us in that dry and weary land. Cling to God. Read his word. Lament in prayer. Keep your feet in reality and your eyes fixed on hope. Amen.