

A Time to Lament

Luke 18:15-17

Habakkuk 1:1-5

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¹⁵ People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them, and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. ¹⁶ But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁷ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

Habakkuk 1:1-5

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

*² O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?*

*Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save?*

*³ Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?*

*Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.*

*⁴ So the law becomes slack,
and justice never prevails.*

*The wicked surround the righteous;
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.*

⁵ Look at the nations and see!

Be astonished! Be astounded!

*For a work is being done in your days
that you would not believe if you were told.*

Nine and a half years ago, I was coming home after an overnight shift as a chaplain at the hospital. I remember turning on the news and seeing the shooting massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Twenty-six people died that day. Twenty of them were elementary school children. I remember watching that and tears flooding down. I'd seen a lot in my time at the hospital, but nothing like that. Twenty young children who should be laughing and playing, running and singing, killed in an instant. Their lives gone. Their families devastated. I couldn't do anything but sit there in our living room and weep.

I wish that was my first reaction this week to the mass shooting in Uvalde, Texas. Another nineteen elementary school children murdered by another gunman. Two heroic teachers dead. But this time, when I first heard the news, I didn't cry. I didn't weep. I felt numb. I felt like this is just part of our country now, part of our culture, part of what happens. And that we are supposed to just get used to it.

After Sandy Hook, I had hope that things would change, that we would change, that we would take concrete steps to protect and save our children. That feels so much harder now. Uvalde was the 27th school shooting just since January 1. And it happened on the heels of mass shootings in Buffalo, in Milwaukee, and in California at a Presbyterian church.

My first reaction Tuesday night: I felt tired. I felt resigned. I felt numb. It took me until the next day, seeing a story of a parent who went and hopped the fence and ran into the school to rescue their child, that I was shaken out of it. Their action reminded me that we can do more. This is not who we are meant to be. We should not be resigned to this.

We should not allow this to be normal or comfortable or what we expect to see on the news.

A lot of the time, my hope is that we will leave here from worship feeling better than when we first came in. This week, I'm okay if we don't. I'm very okay if we leave here today with some rage. With some anger. With some tears. With grief. With a feeling that this is not okay. We are not meant to blanket over that feeling this week, or hide away it, or numb it. But to face it, because it is telling us something important. That this is not what God wants for any of God's children.

The ancient Hebrew people had a spiritual practice called Lament. The prophets practiced it. The psalm writers practiced it. Kings and rulers practiced it. Jesus practiced it. It is the practice of being totally honest with God. Even when it's uncomfortable words we say to God. Even when it's tears and sadness before God. Even when it's anger and rage before God.

We don't practice lament that much in modern Christianity. Because it's not cheery or comfortable. But this week, we shouldn't be cheery or comfortable.

This week is a week to lament. Because our tears, our rage, our shouts, our pleas are ways that we show that these lives matter. These 21 victims are children made in God's image and their loss is worth our tears and our pain. Lament is how we witness that we will not just allow this to happen and be okay with it. Lament is how we invite God in when we don't know the right words or answers.

Lament is an act of faith. It reminds us that God will meet us not just in the sunny, cheery days. But that even in the darkest of valleys God will be there with us too, walking with us, hearing our voices, crying alongside of us.

Lament is also our reminder that God is not just with us here at Bon Air Presbyterian Church this morning. God is with all those this Sunday morning who are mourning and crying and hurting and in pain. The parents. The friends. The other children who remain at Robb Elementary School. The community of Uvalde. God is there, and that God's grace and love is strong enough to take whatever rage, whatever questions, whatever doubts, whatever tears pour forth. God isn't turning away or blanketing over. But God is stepping into all of it, and inviting us to do the same.

So today, after our offertory, I invite you to come forward and write out your prayers of lament. Your pleas to God. Whatever is on your heart and mind, honest, open. What questions and desires you have for God this day.

My hope is that after the lament, you may hear God speaking back, stirring something inside of you. Deborah Houghton shared that after a day of feeling numb too, that something stirred in her to call her elected officials and demand better. I know at our neighbor church Huguenot Baptist, they heard God stirring them to gather together and offer a vigil Wednesday night. For others it may be ways to give and support the families and community of Uvalde. I don't know what that answer is for you, but I invite you as you speak out your laments this day and the days to follow to listen back, and to allow yourself to be stirred again by God.