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Proper 8B
Peace, Seattle
July 1, 2012
1 Samuel 1:1, 17-27
Mark 5:21-43

LAMENT AND HEALING

Two themes encompass our readings this morning: LAMENT and HEALING.

- David laments over the deaths of King Saul and Saul's son Jonathan.
- Jairus laments for his dying daughter.
- A woman laments over a chronic illness that has left her life in shambles.

But though the song, though the story, begins with lament, lament is not the end of the story. The end of the story is healing. But let's not go there too swiftly. Let's begin with the lament.

YOUR GLORY, O ISRAEL, LIES SLAIN UPON YOUR HIGH PLACES!
HOW THE MIGHTY HAVE FALLEN! So David begins his public lament.

Now, it's important to know, as we follow David's career in this series of readings from 1st and 2nd Samuel, that a lot of water has gone under the bridge since last week's tale about young David vanquishing the Philistine warrior Goliath.

- After that incident you may recall, David's popularity with the people made him a rock star—and made Saul murderously jealous in the bargain. Being upstaged by the young upstart hardly ever ends well.
- Even though David's music brought relief to Saul's bouts of depression, more than once he narrowly escaped Saul's rage.
- David and his band of followers became *persona non grata*, and headed for the hills to escape Saul's wrath.
- None of this conflicted behavior, however, seems to get in the way of David's soul-deep relationship with Saul's son, Jonathan. They are bosom friends.
- And now, upon learning of Saul and Jonathan's fate, David steps into the role of *heir apparent,* and commands that all of Israel's twelve tribes honor them in death by joining him in lament.

One thing that can be said about the David we encounter in these texts is that he rises to greatness on great occasions.[1] Truly believing that he is being used by God, David gives the outcome over to the one he serves, and so he is fearless.

Last week he showed that fearlessness as he faced Goliath with nothing but a sling and five smooth stones. And this week, he shows his capacity for greatness once again by composing a song of lament which incorporates the national as well as the personal.

David seems to recognize instinctively that one of the duties of a true leader is to act out publicly the emotional work of the people—whether it be joy or grief—as if on a stage. Ordering this song to be sung in Judah—the southern territory that was always skeptical of Saul's leadership—is a gutsy move that ultimately helps pave the way for a united kingdom under one flag and one king.[2]

Let's notice one more thing: the song itself, as recorded here, isn't about revenge and it isn't about hope.

[1] Feasting, Turner
[2] Feasting, Turner

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It invites the nation's attention to be focused solely on that place where it belongs at that moment— on grief.

You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor bounteous fields!
For there the shield of the mighty was defiled...
Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! Swifter than eagles; stronger than lions!
Oh how the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!

Nations and communities need such laments to help them appropriate and process the disasters that befall them. Perhaps our leaders, and by extension, all of us, could benefit from taking a page from David's operations manual.

The fifth chapter of Mark's gospel starts off with this same heavy, deep lament, only now the cry from the depths is highly personal.

A father and leader in the local congregation breaks through the crowd around Jesus, falls down on his knees, and, digging his nails into the dirt, pleads with Jesus for the life of his daughter.

Anyone who has carried his child into an emergency room, or who has come face to face with the prospect of watching her loved one approach life's end knows the dynamics of this story. It is everyone's nightmare.

MY LITTLE GIRL IS AT THE POINT OF DEATH! He pleads.
COME LAY YOUR HANDS ON HER, SO THAT SHE MAY LIVE.

Jesus goes with Jairus, but another woman with another story of lament intervenes. And by the time Jesus is ready to resume his initial course, word comes from the house that it's too late. Jairus's daughter is gone.

Most all of us know these moments. Moments of waiting when it is our loved one who is in danger of slipping away; moments when we long for the power and presence of Christ to surround us, his compassion to enfold us, to give us hope when the prognosis is poor and the life of one we love lies in the balance.

And we know the grief as well, when a life precious to us is gone and our joy vanishes with them. We know what it's like to ask, WHERE WERE YOU GOD?

God's undivided attention—God's compassion, that's what we want and that's what we need.

The Hebrew Bible's word for compassion comes from the word for womb.[3]
To have compassion is to have a womb for someone, that is, to treat a person just like the one who once carried her inside her own body; to remember how loved that child was even before eyes were ever laid upon her.

When we read in the Scriptures: **"God will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love,"**[4] the writer is suggesting that when we suffer, God looks upon each one of us as though God were our mother. We are invited to wait patiently, knowing that the God who remembers

[3] Portions of what follows are excerpted from an unpublished resource authored by Frederick Niedner as a resource for the season after Pentecost, Series B.
[4] Lamentations 3:32

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us that way will never forget us or leave us broken and hurt forever. God will eventually do what must be done to have us back again.

That's what happened that day in Jairus' house. God's own womb was stirred up with compassion, and the power of this compassion gave force to Jesus' words as he said,

TALITHA, CUMI! Little girl, arise!

Our own hope is grounded in the confidence that the same womb of our loving Creator holds each one of us, and we are never forgotten, no matter what we have seen or lost or suffered. Nor are those whom we love.

Though we are frightened, or grieving, or waiting for a long time now to be whole again, that compassion remains our hope. We will not always be in a state of lament. We will know joy again.

Sisters and brothers, what would it be like to imagine ourselves as being God's womb in the world?

To imagine ourselves as the womb of God through whom compassion does its powerful work today, even as it did through Jesus' hands, as he brought healing to the bleeding woman and new life to Jairus' daughter…

- where we hold close to our hearts and to God's, all those children, all those people whom God remembers. The abandoned and abused, the sick, the afraid, the fearful, the hungry…
- where no one is forgotten, and there is great power in the compassion stirred up in the <u>womb of this community</u>?

Despite all the death which surrounds us, and the pain, the loss, the laments, the empty places at our tables, the holes in our lives, God's compassionate womb holds every one of us, on which ever side of death we find ourselves.

And we, as Christ's womb in the world, hold each other. The power of God's love surrounds us always and forever.

This wombing and remembering will go on so long as there is pain and loss in this world, and until the day when God full of compassion, says to all the little girls and the boys and the babies and the grownups and the old people and everyone else who has been lost over the centuries, TALITHA CUMI! I say to you, arise!

Amen.