May 17th , 2020

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Fifth sunday of Easter

**The Only Way is Through**

1. From Lament to Hope

 Last year, as I was navigating the waters of divorce and the journey of finding a diagnosis, I was, to say the least, overwhelmed. In those times there were moments where I would have done anything to get away from the pain and challenges of those days – I looked at flights to warmer places, I wanted to get away from the pain. Who doesn’t? Who wouldn’t? The feelings of struggle are hard and we all, in our own ways, try to turn from the pain to find some relief. Some find their solace in coping mechanisms, both healthy and unhealthy.

 As I was going through this tumultuous time in life, I reached out to my sister, who frequently said this phrase, “Bec, the only way is through. You can’t go under it, you can’t go over it, you can’t go around it, you just have to go through it.” It was the sisterly advisement that I didn’t necessarily want to hear, but in my heart of hearts, I knew she was right. You can’t avoid it, the tough stuff of life, whatever that may be, you have to go through it, and maybe when you go through it, just like fire hardens the iron, you’ll be better for it.

II. The Psalmist Direction

 I don’t think my sister would openly admit that her advisement was right in line with the psalmists of old. Yet, the Scripture we hear today conveys that same truth – God does not stop the storm, but it is God who gets you through it. The psalmist is truthful – he writes that God has tested them, as silver is tried, God has put them in nets, has entangled them in troubles, and God has laid the burden on their back as they ached with pain. He even writes – we went through fire and through water, through these elements that could have very well killed us, and yet, you, O God, you have brought us out to a spacious place.

 Though the Psalmist saw some of the greatest troubles, he declares that God was with him, that God journeyed through the fire with him and now he wishes to proclaim God’s glory to all who will listen. In verse 16, he says, “Come and hear, I will tell you what he has done for me.”

III. The ebbs and flows of life

 While I told you of my struggles in the last year, I have no doubt I’m alone in seeing troubles in life, especially in these days of the virus. Yet, I know that many of you will have stories from your past, stories that testify to struggles that seemed insurmountable, and yet, you persevered through Jesus Christ. The Psalmist encourages this vulnerability – this need to tell the story, the story of what God has done and God is doing. The Psalmist does not only want the world to hear the bright and beautiful parts of the life of faith, but he knows we need to hear that move from deep lament and sadness to the brightness of hope for the future.

 I don’t know many people who are jumping up and down to tell their story of challenge – it requires a level of vulnerability that we easily shy away from, it pulls at our insecurities, and it makes us question our choices. We our own worst critic, yet, what we often find when the truth is told, when the words of lament are spoken, when the story of walking through hell and back is told – there is strength in that story. Again, the fire hardens the iron, the story has strengthened us, and in telling the story, we are not only setting ourselves free, but we are testifying to the God who pulled us through the mire.

Life has both lament and hope and it is critical to share both.

III. A New Theme

 Many of you have heard that Baltimore Presbytery was hosting our General Assembly next month. I worked on the worship and arts team and I was so excited, I was ready to see some big art projects come to fruition. Our theme was a powerful one, inspired by a line in Romans, where we acknowledged that the church was called from institution to movement – to something new and fresh and viable for the 21st century. We were ready to challenge what it meant to be the church today, to move from some of the negative impacts of the infrastructure of the institution to something much more alive, a movement that spoke to communities in new creative, imaginative ways.

 And then the Coronavirus happened. And then the Governor turned the Baltimore Convention Center into one of the field hospitals. And then...everything changed. All this work seemed for naught. The larger church had to say that we could not meet in person, but Baltimore would be hosting the first ever virtual assembly. The theme was changed, it was now very much in line with these kinds of Psalms – the theme is “from lament to hope.” And strangely, perhaps a hidden blessing is that through our new ways of worship, we are finding the church moving outside the walls of the sanctuary, maybe the institution is starting to take on the look of a movement, even in these challenging circumstances.

 And perhaps you would say this is a very first-world problem, and indeed, in some regards it is, yet lament is lament. We know there are deeper laments, the lament of losing your job, of losing your sense of what life is right now, the lament of watching loved ones suffer from this awful, terrible, horrendous virus. You could fill pages with lament, in fact, the psalmist do – you’ll find that a great deal of the Psalms transition us from lament to hope. This transition is no stranger to the human experience.

VI. Hope

 So, you may be wondering about that hope part. Well, the psalmist tells us and my sister’s modern take on life that – you’ve got to go through it, you’ve got to through the water and the fire – to make it to the other side and at the other side of the struggle, hope will always lie there.

 And while we can lament many things, it is important to turn our hearts towards the possibility of hope. Even if it seems far off, even if it seems unlikely, even if it seems out of the realm of all possibilities – we still hold hope. There will always, always, always be hope. The tide will always shift, the hurdle will be surpassed, time moves on and life will change. Wherever you find yourself today, whether you are sitting in lament or starting to see the hope lifted, I encourage you to share your story, with those you love and those who need to hear it. For if anything comes from our laments, may it be the story of great hope and survival through Jesus Christ. Our stories have power that can help others endure trials for years to come, just as the Psalmist words evoke. Thanks be to our God who journeys with us through lament and celebrates with us in hope and triumph. Alleluia, amen.