

11/3/24 Teaching: Binding the Sticks

Hello, My name is Melissa Logsdon and I serve as Associate Pastor here at New Covenant Fellowship. I have the privilege of wrapping up our teaching series on Lament. We've covered a lot of ground in this series from what is lament, to what we have to Lament, and how to Lament in a way that brings us closer to God and hopefully one another.

Let us pray: God, thank you for calling us into this season where we've been able to hear your invitation to open our hearts before you and to consider what steps we may need to take next. Speak to us today, continue to draw us into your loving presence in the midst of it all. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

INTRO

Do you ever find yourself avoiding certain books of the Bible or just skim reading them and not letting the words sink in? Maybe you feel like that about the whole Bible?

I recently read Ezekiel and realized I guess I've always just skim read the book before. Or felt like the message was ONLY for the people of that time, not for me today.

Earlier this year, I had bookmarked Ezekiel, feeling drawn to read it. And then, I didn't.

Then this fall, I was reminded of the valley of dry bones story in Ezekiel. And I read it. And the rest of ch 37 (which our passage will come from today). I then went back and started at the beginning of the book and worked my way through it. When it got drudgy, I thought I'd listen to it in the Message Translation. It was even harder to listen to..

It was hard to read. Not fun. Really stomach turning. A hard message to swallow.

And yet...

That's what Ezekiel was called to do—to receive a very difficult message. And God sustained him to hear the message. In Ezekiel 2:2 and again in 3:24, Ezekiel tells of how the “the Spirit of God came into [him] and raised [him] to [his] feet”, upholding him to hear, to receive, the message.

We've heard a lot of thought provoking, encouraging, and convicting words in this Lament series already.

I'm starting to feel like I'm afloat; so full from this series already.

I had to go back and listen to each teaching a few more times (thank goodness they're available online, as my memory is faulty at times!). Here's a few takeaways I'm working to digest:

Sharon Chubbuck's words on living in the "mystery of suffering", as quoted from the Jesuits, has continued to roll around within me. She shared how "Lament is an important weigh station on our journey to wholeness; where the Holy Spirit, as a down payment, can comfort. Where we can experience forgiveness. Where we can grow in our compassion for others."

Renée Antrosio shared "the invitation of "Prayer [as] our response" to the pain. That we "Come to Lament and find hope".

Ron Simkins spoke how "Truth telling, along with confessing our sin, is part of Lament. And God comforts those who weep."

Renée quoted Richard Rohr as saying there is a "Mysterious connection between joy and suffering." And "Tears are an appropriate response to reality." And the important reminder that "God is present in the reality of what is, not just what it should be".

Jeff Trask shared the necessary and often neglected aspect in Lament of apology and restitution. Apologies are necessary, often long overdue, and restitutions need to be made to bring healing to the broken relationships (actions need to match words).

And finally throughout the series, there is a constant calling back into God's presence in our lamenting.

In the space of Lament we are wooed to the face of God. And in God's presence we hear the call to unity with others, within God's presence.

PART 1: Binding the Sticks in Ezekiel (Props: 2 sticks, binding twine)

The book of Ezekiel starts off with Ezekiel recounting how he came into God's presence. He experienced God's holiness.....God's glory.

And in God's presence Ezekiel was given the difficult message to bring to God's people. And Ezekiel calls for lament.

From chapter 4 to 34, Ezekiel recounts the warnings of the consequences for the people's selfish, unjust, sinful actions. These words are hard to hear. They are rightly harsh word against God's people that have not been living as they should: they have gone to trust in other countries, in war, in idols, false hopes. Instead of trusting in God's care. There is no justice in the land, but selfishness, rampant sin.

God has Ezekiel warn the people of the consequences for turning from God and God's ways: they will be carried off into exile; they will be scattered. What they thought they wanted, they will realize they don't want any more.

Finally, in chapter 34 God speaks out words of hope and restoration for God's people: God will gather the people of God back together and God will personally care for them as a good shepherd.

There's a very strong reflection in this passage to the word picture of Psalm 23.

Ezekiel 34:11-16 NIV

"For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.

I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land.

There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord.

I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice."

God continues this message of hope, speaking life to them of a gathering back of the scattered, a bringing to new life what seems dead and hopeless, and a promise of unity together in God's presence.

And that is where we find our passage today in *Ezekiel 37:15-23, 28 CEB*

“The LORD’s word came to me: You, human one, take a stick, and write on it, “Belonging to Judah and to the Israelites associated with him.” Take another stick and write on it, “Stick of Ephraim belonging to Joseph and everyone of the house of Israel associated with him.” Join them to each other to make a single stick so that they become one stick in your hand.

*When your people ask you, “Why won’t you tell us what these sticks mean to you?” say to them, The LORD God proclaims: I’m taking Joseph’s stick, which has been in Ephraim’s hand, and the tribes of Israel associated with him, and I’m putting it with Judah’s stick, and **I’m making them into a single stick so that they will be one stick in my hand.***

*When the two sticks that you’ve written on are in your hand in their sight, speak to them, This is what the LORD God says: I will take the Israelites from among the nations where they’ve gone, I will gather them from all around, and I will bring them to their fertile land. I will make them into a single nation in the land on Israel’s highlands. There will be just one king for all of them. They will no longer be two nations, and **they will no longer be divided** into two kingdoms.*

*They will no longer defile themselves with their idols or their worthless things or with any of their rebellions. I will deliver them from all the places where they sinned, and I will cleanse them. **They will be my people, and I will be their God.***

The nations will know that I, the LORD, make Israel holy, when my sanctuary [where God’s presence dwells] is among them forever.”

PART 2: My sticks (Props: 3 sets of 2, of drinking straws taped together)

When I read this passage, what stood out to me was how God’s heart was for the divided nation to be one.

And then I thought about all the polarizing within our own nation right now. The angst and heartache I have around polarizing perspectives within the capital “C” Church in America, political alliances within our country, and perspectives on the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. It’s easy to want to side with one side and then see the other side as wrong or an outright “enemy”. But for me, when I read this passage, I was prompted to

work out my own prophetic act with sticks (or in my case, what I had on hand which was drinking straws and scotch tape).

Here's what My 3 sets of sticks say:

Set 1: Post Evangelical/Liberal Social Justice Gospel & Evangelical/Conservative Personal Salvation Gospel

Set 2: Democrat/Liberal & Republican/Conservative

Set 3: Palestine/Gaza/Lebanon & Israel

It was emotionally challenging to bind each of these sets together.

To consider how God longs for unity amidst all that strives to divide us.

And I wonder, "What would change in the capital "C" church body, our nation, our world if we lived this out?" Would more get accomplished? Would there be more peace? More love? More justice? More hope for us, and for the future of our country and our world?

Jesus says, "...everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."
(John 13:35 NIV)

PART 3: "Building Bridges for Radical Belonging"

In a recent email publication from Richard Rohr's Center for Action and Contemplation, I read this article entitled "Building Bridges for Radical Belonging" by Rev. Ben McBride. Rev McBride encourages us that:

"You don't have to have anything to get started, really: just a will, which I believe is already within you, and a way. Do the work your way, with the intention of expanding the circle of human concern and creating radical belonging for others...."

Get to work. Build. Bridge. Belong. This call for belonging is not about saving ourselves as individuals in terms of the resources that we have or the access we have been granted. Belonging is about saving our very humanity.

If you are not thriving, then I am not thriving; if you do not have peace, then I do not have peace; if you do not belong, then I myself do not belong."

He goes on to reference the term “Ubuntu” which means “I am because we are.”

And goes on to explain the implications of living this out by saying, “The challenges to belong cannot be resolved in isolation but can only be resolved when we are existing together across differences.

We have to be willing to meet each other on the porch in peace, to make room for each other, to listen to each other. Even if, at first, we might be inclined to presume the other person or group doesn’t belong.... Have a conversation.

Listen not with a need to agree or disagree but with an open heart and a desire to try to understand their perspective.... You never know what you might learn about this other human being. Or what you might learn about yourself. Our ability to sit with each other in that space, through our differences, is the gateway to radical belonging. It is how we learn. It is how we grow. It is how we become.”

CONCLUSION:

While this teaching series on Lament is coming to a close, I want to encourage you, me, us, to continue to practice lament in our lives. There are times when it is the right heart posture, the right action, to take.

As we approach the 2024 elections, Vern Fein has encouraged us toward fasting something to make space for focused prayer for our country. Reminding us again, of the importance of bringing our anger and fears, our sadness and tears, into God’s presence. Face to Face with God. God is big enough to handle all of our anger. God’s love is big enough to wrap around all our fears. And God’s promise is to comfort all those who mourn.

And to remember that in the midst of our suffering, in our Lament, there is hope. And there is an invitation to coming into unity with others.

(ONLINE: In our in person services, we take communion after the teaching. I encourage you to take a moment to take communion right where you are at (it doesn’t have to be bread and wine or in our case: grape juice and a cracker—it can be just a sip of water. As we come to meet with God, God meets with us, irregardless of what we happen to have on hand.))

COMMUNION

As we come to the table for communion, we come face to face with God. As we take the elements we are reminded that Jesus is here with us, sustaining us, empowering us, to be conduits of reconciliation, peace, and unity in our world.

Let us pray:

Jesus, thank you that you model: speaking out truth, calling for acts of justice, and drawing people to God's love. Thank you that you modeled weeping with empathy for others, and crying out in God's presence. Thank you for your presence with us today. Please continue to make us, your followers, into one body—that we may live in unity and be known by our love. Amen