

Living Between the Times

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[0 : 00] Good morning, my name's Kevin. I'm one of the pastors here at Church of the Advents, and I hope everyone had a wonderful Thanksgiving. Because of the pandemic, our Thanksgiving celebration was quieter. We stayed home, just the five of us.

But it was still really good to spend a day focusing on gratitude. And as you've heard, today's the first Sunday of Advent, and I'm especially glad that Advent is finally here.

This is by far my favorite season of the church calendar, and I think this is exactly what we need right now. As many of you know, Advent, the season, gets its name from the Latin word *Adventus*, which simply means an arrival or a coming.

And in this season, we fix our eyes on the once and future coming of Jesus Christ, to borrow the great subtitle of Fleming Rutledge's excellent book on Advent.

In this season, we remember the incarnation and all that that means. And we long for the day when Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead and finish the project of new creation and set the world to rights.

[1 : 11] Advent is a season of preparation and anticipation. It's a season of watching and waiting. And when I think about 2020, I wonder if there's ever been a year when it was more clear that things are not okay, that we are not okay.

I wonder if there's ever been a year when we've needed Advent more. And I don't need to tell you that it's been a hard year. The social fabric of our nation has been stretched to its very limits. There have been a tremendous amount of natural disasters on the East Coast. The Atlantic hurricane season has been the worst on record. And the West Coast of America has been ravaged by wildfires.

Much of the year, it's felt like the world's been on fire. And that's because it actually has been for lots, for many days. And of course, this isn't to mention the pandemic, where we've been hunkered down for almost 10 months.

According to the most recent numbers, 1.4 million people have died because of COVID-19. And that includes 262,000 Americans. We've just had the worst two weeks of the pandemic.

[2 : 20] And from everything that they're telling us now, the worst is yet to come. And so for almost a year now, we've been watching and we've been waiting. And I don't know about you, but I've prayed a lot of prayers like this.

Lord, when is this going to end? Lord, where are you? Why don't you do something? Why do you tarry? Why does it feel like you're silent when we need you to speak? Why does it feel like you're hiding yourself when we need you to act and to show up?

These are questions I've been praying. They're not questions that I have answers to. They're classic Advent questions. They're good questions to pray this season. And I think by God's grace, this season of Advent gives us the resources to pray like this, to watch and to wait without losing faith and without losing hope.

Our passage this morning is John 11. And this isn't a typical Advent passage. But I think Mary and Martha have much to teach us about what it looks like to watch and to wait without losing faith. In fact, I think Mary and Martha's experience of waiting for Jesus in this scene is a paradigm for us, is a paradigm for the life of the church. The four days, the four painful days they've spent waiting for Jesus to come, fix their situation, is akin to the history of the whole church, waiting for Jesus to come and fix our broken world.

[3 : 42] Fleming Rutledge describes this dynamic so well in her book on Advent. She writes this, The Christian community lives in Advent all the time.

It can well be called the time between. Advent contains within itself the crucial balance of the now and the not yet that our faith requires. She goes on to say that the contrast couldn't be more stark between this theme, this Advent theme, and what she calls the frenzy of holiday time in which the commercial Christmas music insists that it's the most wonderful time of the year.

And Starbucks invites everyone to feel the Mary. The disappointment, brokenness, suffering, and pain that characterizes life in this present world is held in dynamic tension with the promise of future glory that is yet to come.

In that Advent tension, the church lives its life. And I think tension is just the right word for this. It's about remembering that Jesus came and about pleading for him to come again.

It's about the consolation of Christmas and wrestling with and through the desolation that we experience between the times as we wait for him to come again.

[4 : 57] And this is a hard tension to endure. It always has been. That's especially true, I think, this year. There's a lot of ways of dealing with this tension. I think there's always the temptation to dull the painful reality with the burn of booze, with the warm fuzzies of holiday nostalgia.

But what I think we need, especially this year, is the fire of lament. I think we need to learn to lament, not just to endure this difficult season, but to hasten Christ's coming.

And so what I want to do with the rest of our time this morning is to draw out a few insights about this key spiritual practice of lament for us who live between the times. And so we're going to focus on two things.

First, what lament looks like. And secondly, what lament does. So what is it and what does it do? So first, what lament looks like. Well, what is lament?

Let's ask that question. A lament is a kind of prayer. In fact, it's the most popular prayer in the Bible. Forty percent of the Psalms, which are the prayer book of God's people, Forty percent of the Psalms are laments.

[6 : 07] I think that tells us that God clearly wants us. He thinks we need to learn the language of lament. And I think we can learn just about everything there is to know about lament from Mary and Martha, from their story here.

Of course, their situation is a bit different. They're sending messages. They're talking with Jesus face to face because he was among them, not praying like we need to when we are speaking to Jesus, when we're lamenting.

But all the same, what we see in John chapter 11 is the stuff of lament. So here's a definition of what a lament is. A lament is a God word complaint that cries out for deliverance, that implores God to come and to rescue us.

That's a bit textbookish. Here's maybe a better, more pithy way of describing lament. Lament is simply a prayer out of pain. It can be one word, why?

Help. Help. Lord, I need you. Where are you? How long, oh Lord? It's important as we're talking about laments, it's important to say that lament does not necessarily dull our pain.

[7 : 16] What lament does is direct that pain Godward. And I hope that you'll begin using the prayer guide that we've developed for this next season of our life together at Church of the Advent.

If you do, if you're going to pray along with us and read the Bible along with us, you'll see that there are 11 psalms of lament in the lectionary this week. So you'll have some time to practice praying these kinds of prayers.

So that's what a lament is. It's a prayer out of pain. So what does lament look like? Well, there are four contours to lament. I'll go over them quickly so you'll know how to recognize them.

First, we see that a lament has an address. We turn to God. A lament is not just a complaint uttered into the void. It's a prayer addressed to God.

It's a prayer of faith, trusting that our God is a God who listens. Our God is a God who cares and is capable of responding to our prayers. Next, there's the complaint where we cry out to God, where we lay our problems or our plight before the Lord.

[8 : 24] And the complaint is the right word for this. This could be problems caused by ourselves or by others or even by God. It's all fair game in prayers of lament. We cry out to him.

We complain to him. The third move is the request. We make our appeal to God. We call on God to come and to help, to come to our rescue.

And we lay out our specific requests and the reasons why God ought to help. We appeal to why he should be motivated to do something. We appeal to his character, to his reputation, to his love for

us.

And then finally, to round it out, the fourth contour is confidence, where we trust in God. This is an expression of trust and praise that God is good and will be faithful.

Now, these are the four contours, basically four bullet points for what make up a lament. But I don't want us to get the wrong idea, the wrong impression about what laments are.

[9 : 22] Laments are not neat prayers. They're laments after all. They're messy. They're rough. They're angry. They're often desperate. And Mary and Martha in this scene show us how to lament.

They show us what it looks like to live it out in the midst of a devastating loss. The movements of lament are embodied in their story. And so it might be more true to life than a buttoned up prayer.

So let's take a look at what they show us, what it looks like to lament in life. So first we see that Mary and Martha turn to Jesus. We see this at the very beginning of chapter 11. Now, a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

These women were sisters to Lazarus, and they were close followers of Jesus. And the sisters sent to him. They send to Jesus. And we see that Mary and Martha have a very close relationship with Jesus.

These siblings love Jesus. They trust him. They've seen firsthand his care for the broken. They've seen his power. They've seen his miracles. They've seen his ability to heal.

[10 : 28] Verse 27. They have great theology about who Jesus is. It says in verse 27, they know that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God who is coming into the world. He's coming to fix everything just as God had promised.

And so they know that if anyone can heal Lazarus, it's Jesus. And so Mary and Martha turn to him. They send for him. And second, we see that they appeal to Jesus.

And their appeal is very simple. Laments don't have to be long, drawn out, profound prayers. Their appeal is this, Lord, he whom you love is ill.

And in this, there's an implied request. The appeal is clear. Lazarus is sick. You love him. And you can heal him. You could even heal him with a word from a distance.

So please, come. Fix things. And then what Jesus does next is, I think, one of the most surprising things that Jesus does in all of the Gospels.

[11 : 27] In verse 6, it says, When he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. It's shocking.

At the request to heal his beloved friend, Jesus intentionally delays. Third, we see Mary and Martha cry out to Jesus. Because Jesus delays, Lazarus dies.

Now, initially, their complaint was all about the sickness that plagued Lazarus. But because Jesus delayed, because he tarried, their complaint now becomes focused squarely on Jesus.

The target moves. And now we're getting close to the heart of lament. It's raw. It's unpolished. It's emotional. It's angry. Their gentle request turns into a kind of stinging rebuke.

The complaint is directed at Jesus. And Mary and Martha lead off with the same thing. We see the same words in verse 22 and 32. This is their complaint. Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

[12 : 35] Now, one of the interesting things about this is that we see these same words expressed coming across differently. Mary and Martha are feeling different things.

Martha hears that Jesus is finally on the way. And I imagine her running on the road to meet Jesus. And I pick up some real anger in how she approaches and speaks to Jesus.

She's basically grabbing God by the collar. Mary, on the other hand, says the same words, but falls down in the heap of tears at Jesus's feet. What I think this shows us is that we all lament differently.

We can be praying the same psalm of lament, but it might come out differently. We might express ourselves very differently. I might pray in anger. You might pray through tears. The same words with Mary and Martha, but different expressions.

But what unites them, I think, is their brutal and even their beautiful honesty. I think it's important for us to know that it's okay to be angry with God.

[13 : 40] It's okay to be disappointed with God. It's okay to be a weeping mess before God. God wants us to bring these things to him, to talk to him about it. God wants us to be honest with him, however we're feeling.

The best prayers are honest prayers. God wants us to be honest with you.

Maybe you're feeling a crushing sense of loneliness, being so isolated for so long. Maybe you're feeling trapped in a marriage that's grown cold and lifeless. Maybe you're grieving death. Maybe you're just feeling overwhelmed with the demands of work and family right now. Maybe you feel like God has forgotten you. Maybe you feel invisible to God.

Well, I think this Advent season is an invitation for us to take stock of how we're doing. So I want you this week to ask yourself, where is my anger?

[15:05] Where is my disappointment? Where is my hurt? Where are my tears? Your tears might be the best place to start your prayer. I think your tears are God's invitation to lament.

I encourage you to bring all of this before the Lord this week, and maybe even write out your own prayer of lament. And if you would be so bold as to share that with a pastor or with a trusted friend. Now this all leads us to the fourth move, that of trust. Laments don't end with their complaints. Well, that's not exactly true. There is one Psalm of lament, Psalm 88, that ends with a complaint.

But most round themselves out, fill themselves out with an expression of trust. Even though Mary and Martha are grieving deeply, they still turn to Jesus and express their trust in him.

We see that in verses 21 and 22. Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.

[16:15] It's important to emphasize that this trust doesn't cover up their sorrow. It doesn't solve their problems. It doesn't make them feel better.

A lament is trust in the midst of tears. It's prayer out of pain. Mary and Martha show us what it looks like to lament. Now I want to talk about, as we wrap up, what lament does.

I want to look at what, or rather how Jesus responds to the lament of Mary and Martha. And as we do that, I want to make a point about prayer. I want to correct a misconception about prayer.

Sometimes I think that we believe prayer in general, lament in particular, is mostly about how we can become okay with how things are. But that's not what prayer is.

Lament is not about, lament is not a coping mechanism. It's not a way of making the bitter taste sweet. Of course, we pray for peace that surpasses understanding, but lament is not about reaching some sort of Zen state as the world is burning.

[17:20] The ultimate goal is to stir God to action. Listen to how John Goldengay, an Old Testament scholar, describes the purpose of prayer. He writes this, A commonly articulated Christian conviction sees prayer as designed not to change God, but to change me.

Christian faith has thus abandoned a scriptural conviction that prayer, about prayer. Prayer is designed to change the way God is acting, to change circumstances and to change other people. Whereas a more implicit Christian conviction sees prayer as designed to make me feel better, but this is wrong. The purpose of prayer is not therapeutic. Prayer is designed to get God to listen and to get God to act.

Now, lament is the best way I know how to refuse despair and to cling to hope, but it's not therapy. We lament because the world is not okay.

We lament because we are not okay and only God can come and make it okay. And time and again, the scriptures teach us that lament moves God to act.

[18:27] We see that in this passage in verses 32 to 35. Now, when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, where have you laid him? And they said to him, Lord, come and see.

Jesus wept. John 11, 35 is the shortest verse in the Bible and perhaps the most profound. Jesus wept.

The tears of Jesus are incredibly important. We see the creator and redeemer of the world enters into our broken situation and we see him moved by its brokenness.

We see him weep with those who weep. We see Jesus's compassion. And that word compassion just means to suffer with. The word became flesh.

[19:27] Jesus Christ, the son of God entered into our suffering. It was so profoundly moved by our lamentation that he not only weeps, but he is moved to raise Lazarus from the dead.

In verse 32, Jesus says, Lazarus, come out. He shouts into the tomb and at his word, a dead man comes back to life. Now this is Jesus's greatest miracle, hands down.

But as amazing as it is, it's simply not good enough. This scene reveals Jesus as a compassionate and powerful man. He's a great friend to have on your side.

And it's comforting that he can raise the dead like he raises Lazarus. But this doesn't ultimately solve our problem. Let's not forget Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, but he's going to die again in the very next chapter of the gospel of John.

The Jews are plotting Jesus's, I'm sorry, they're plotting Lazarus's second death. We don't just need a compassionate and powerful friend or a teacher or a miracle worker.

[20 : 29] We need a savior. And if you keep reading the gospel of John, we see that Jesus is just that. We see the good news of Jesus Christ that he didn't just suffer with us.

He suffered for us. He was crucified and died and was raised so that our hope is greater than that of Lazarus. Lazarus was raised only to die again, but we have a greater hope and a better promise.

Though God may tarry, though we may yet die, we will be raised with Christ on the last day. So what does that mean for us? Well, as we consider all of the problems and the potential solutions of 2020, I think it means that what we really need is not a better functioning democracy or more radical and effective climate change policy or even an effective vaccine.

Now, don't get me wrong. All of these things would be great things. They'd be good things. But they're penultimate. If the virus doesn't get us, something else will.

What we need is not that God would prolong our days on the earth, but that he would renew it. Our ultimate hope is not that God would delay our death. Our ultimate hope is that he will swallow up death forever.

[21 : 49] This is the great promise prophesied by the prophet Isaiah. He will swallow up death forever and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth.

For the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, behold, this is our God. We have waited for him that he might save us. This is the Lord.

We have waited for him. Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. This is our ultimate Advent hope. And as we watch and as we wait, we add our voices to the prayers of the church.

The prayer that the church has been praying for its whole life, its whole history. How long, O Lord? Come quickly. How long, O Lord?

How long?