

Lament as Conversation with God

Exodus 3:1-15, Psalm 105:1-11

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This week I've heard a lot about the South Side of Chicago. I've now even heard of Wasilla, Alaska. And frankly it's got me worried.

Not because of particular parties or people, but I'm worried I'm not political enough.

I mean I enjoy keeping up on current events and going to caucuses, and I have been known to canvas or phone bank for a candidate or two. But when I think about the activity of other people I know, or the activity of this congregation, I wonder if I could be doing a lot more.

I don't know about you, but it has been fun to turn on the TV this week or read the newspaper, and see two of very our church members plastered across their pages and screen.

To listen to Amy Klobuchar cry out for ethics reform.

To see David Gilbert-Pederson paving the way for young activists. Honestly, it inspires me. They are not afraid to get in the ring, as neither are countless others of you who work hard any number of political agendas, on either side of the party line.

It makes me question my own political involvement.

Not just with the election, but with many of the issues I find important.

You see, I have a few streaks running in me, that sometimes impede my involvement.

Things like not really enjoying confrontation.

Wanting to be sensitive to everyone's needs.

Being a bit afraid to alienate people I know and love.

So every election year, every new policy issue,

I debate about just how much to say,
Or what signs to put up in my house or yard,
What stand I should be taking, particularly as a person of faith.

So it was with this political frame of mind,
Maybe even some political guilt,
That I read our story of Moses and the burning bush.
A story that, at least this week, seems all about faith and politics
Or at least how the prayers of the faithful
Can bring about some massive political change.

It is an unlikely scene,
A man tending his sheep who comes across it's a blazing shrub.
A man undoing his sandals.
A man talking back to a voice that calls his name.
And yet, this conversation only takes place
because of a much larger conversation that preceded it,
A conversation that had been going on for weeks, months, and years
before Moses.

When God speaks to Moses from the burning bush, the voice says this:

"I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt;
I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters.
Indeed I know their sufferings,
and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians...
The cry of the Israelites has now come to me;
I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.
So come, I will send you [Moses] to Pharaoh to bring my people, the
Israelites, out of Egypt."

God raises up Moses in response to the cries of the Israelites.
It is their cry that starts the so-called Exodus.
It is their laments,
Born out of their slavery,
Born out of their oppression by Egypt

That sets into motion this wonderful plot of raising up a leader to deliver the enslaved.

Lament is what starts the change.
God does not let their prayers go unheard.

It's a story we've heard time and again.
Not just in Moses, but in some of our lifetimes.
In this historic week of marking the 45th anniversary of the March on Washington,
We remember those laments,
 Laments of faithful people everywhere
 Crying out for racial justice
 And we remember a leader being raised up,
 Raised up with not just with a dream,
 But with power to bring about radical political change.

And so lament is an age-old practice of faith,
 The practice of expressing through words or poetry or song,
 or in this case prayer,
 the aches of one's soul and the injustices of the world.

To lament is to care deeply about others,
 To care deeply for justice
 And to bring before God,
 the cares and concerns of this world,
 particularly those of the poor and the oppressed.

And we do it because God promises us throughout the scriptures,
that God hears the cries of the poor and the needy and the infirm. And God acts.

And in this way, lament is not only faithful, but it is profoundly political.

Just think about the images of lament we see on a regular basis.
At places like the Western Wall in Jerusalem, formally the Wailing Wall,
 Where people cry out and then write out their prayers to God.

Or in Prayer vigils around the world,
And even places here in the US.
Like those for Matthew Shepard, at the School of the Americas,
or at the March on Washington.

Lament is captured almost daily in our newspapers:
The grimace of fathers weeping over dead children in Iraq.
Or the inconsolable look on a woman's face as a water overtakes her
home.
Or the tears in the faces of starving children from around the world.

Lament is a cry from the soul,
It moves other people,
And most of all, it moves God.

Now there are a few things lament is not.
Lament is not complaining.
It's not simply I'm tired, or I'm hungry, or I'm having a bad day.
Lament is rooted in deep injustices of the world.
In poverty. In racism. In classism.
And it wells up from something much deeper than just our own
experience.
It takes on the experiences of others, too.

And lament is not statistics, and we've heard a lot of those this week.
47 million Americans without health care.
25% of the world's oil is consumed by the United States.
Lament goes beyond facts, to feeling,
To the grief that comes when we think about the huge disparities
between rich and poor.
When we think about people
In our own communities
Who this winter
will have to choose between heat and food.

And although it may be political, lament is not partisan.
When it comes to certain justice issues,

It doesn't really matter what side of the political fence we're on,
Because as people of faith, and particularly Christian faith,
There are some fundamental beliefs we share.

That all people are created in the image of God,
No matter one's gender or race or ethnicity.
That being created in God means we are created equal,
So that racism and classism don't belong in our world.
That God desires human flourishing,
Which means poverty and hunger are unacceptable.

As people of faith, these are issues that demand our attention and our
lament. And we must cry out, not simply to other people, but to God too.

Audre Lord, an African American lesbian activist, wrote that to keep silent
is to be complicit in one's own oppression.

To keep silent as a person of faith, is to be complicit with whatever
oppression happens, to us or to those around us.

And so our lament is a faithful response in a world full of injustice and
grief. For our lament has power.

When we cry out,
When we lament, in our individual and communal prayer,
The killing of civilians
The torture of human beings
The degradation of the environment
We unleash the most powerful force we can,
The very creator and sustainer of life.

For God hears the cries of the poor and God acts.
And our God raises up leaders who will carry deliver God's people.
It happened with Moses, it happened with Martin Luther King, and it can
happen again.

Now I'm not saying that McCain or Obama is going to be the next Moses,
but with Moses as our example,
we know that our cries matter,
And so in this generation, our cries should ring out, too.

Now I know in this church, we are doing many political acts.
We are going to the polls,
Or wearing our buttons,
Or knowing our statistics,
Or attending our rallies
Or financially supporting any number of candidates or issues.

But all these actions, in and of themselves, won't bring about the righting
of the world's problems.
For justice to really happen, we need the big dogs,
And really we need the biggest dog of all.

Lament is faithful, but it is political too.
And frankly we'd be crazy not to enlist the help of God.

In thinking of these two weeks of conventions,
 In thinking of this story of Moses,
 In thinking of my own desires to be more political,

I realize that I don't necessarily have to be one of the delegates in Denver
or St. Paul.

To be political, I don't necessarily need a yard sign,
 Or a clipboard,
 Or a checkbook.

I can be a person of prayer. A person of lament.
And knowing the God we serve, that is a political move itself.
For God raised up Moses, and God raised up Martin Luther King,
and God will raise up prophets and leaders again.

If we want change, if we want progress, if we want renewal of life,
Then let our cries be heard.
For God hears the cries of the poor, and God will answer. Amen.

Throughout Scripture, God's care for the poor and the oppressed, for widows and orphans, is spoken about again and again.
When our cries for justice ring out, they do not fall on deaf ears.
God hears, and God acts.

So no matter how much political activity we already do,
No matter how political we wish we could be,
Saying these things, out loud, to God, in our lament, in our prayer, is
something we all can do.
For it will not fall on deaf ears.

Faith and politics is always a hot topic,
Certainly in this election it has been,
And even in our Exodus story this morning,
The two seem inextricably linked.
So today is an exploration of one way we can be political and faithful, at least according to this passage.

This passage is one of the richest stories in the Bible,
The call of Moses on Mt. Horeb,
God in the form of flaming shrub,
God announcing God's name as "I am who I am"

God hears the cries of the poor and oppressed,
and God cares.

And so as I read this text in this political time,
I couldn't help but think of

It is the lament of Israel that starts the process of change.
and although Moses will a key instrument, it is the chorus of the Israelites that first gets God's attention.

And although we hear Moses stammer and stumble and wonder how he's going to do it,
And although we hear God's promise to Moses that God will be with him,
God is first and foremost with those Israelites.

Last week, Eric talked about the birth of Moses,
And the important roles that the women in the story had in securing Moses's life.
Moses would not have been who he was without the care of these women,
And Moses would not have been who he was without the cry of the Israelites.

And so it was with this political frame of mind

That I read our scripture from Exodus this morning,
A scripture that undoubtedly has parallels to our modern predicament,
As we wait for the next great leader to be raised up.

Now I suppose it's a bit ironic, or maybe serendipitous,
That we're starting the stories of the Moses,
Whom God raised up as a great prophet,
At the same time our country is determining its new leaders.

And if you were here last week, you may remember that Eric preached
about the birth of Moses,
And the important roles that the women in the story had in securing
Moses's life.

Moses would not have been who he was without the care of these women,
Who wrapped him in cloth,
hid him in a basket,
carried him to and then from the river,
and raised him in Pharaoh's house.

It's was a reminder to us, even in this day and age,
That great leaders come with a fine supporting cast,
That most of them don't make it without the care and concern of
others.

I am reminded of that lesson again today, as we hear of Moses and the
burning bush.

Lament invites to consider not only ourselves but the deep needs of others,
particularly those of the poor and the oppressed.
Immigrants.
The un- and underinsured.
Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, and especially transgendered people.
People of color.
The elderly.
The list goes on, of course, and many of us here fit those categories.