

I speak to you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.

OPENING:

I have a friend who was recently getting ready for dinner, inviting all in his family to hold hands and pray, when his five year old daughter announced:

“I don’t want to pray.”

They asked her why and, after some prodding, she said:

“Well I have been praying and praying to God....

but God doesn’t listen. God doesn’t answer back.”

One could dismiss this as a childish misunderstanding of God and prayer, but look no further than our Gospel reading where we also see a female character imploring to God, here in the person of Jesus Christ in the flesh, for connection.

And we see the same result: “But Jesus did not answer her at all,” Matthew reports.¹

A deafening silence and, even more, an ignoring of a worthwhile plea.

My friend’s five-year-old daughter and the Canaanite mother from our story are in the same boat:

what do you do when God doesn’t listen?

(Or, does not *seem* to be listening.)

PRAYER

With his daughter, my friend said that he and his wife were able to stammer out something to the effect of “Well maybe God is speaking to you in ways that are not like a sound. So you don’t have to actually *hear* God for it to mean that God is listening.”

They tried to give examples of this, how they have heard God in their own lives:

“When Mommy and Daddy met... that was an example of God speaking”

OR how you can feel God’s presence in nature, when you see a beautiful sunset or the way the stars shine at night.

Those were not entirely satisfactory for her, nor would that sort of explanation have been satisfying for the Canaanite woman, desperate for her daughter’s healing.

¹ Matthew 15.23.

For us, as some of us are here back in the Sanctuary finally, maybe it's also a good time for that sort of reckoning with God. We feel joy and elation to be back here, but still realizing that we have a long way to go. So we share in that question: "Can you hear me God? Are you listening?"

GOSPEL:

Now, this is the part of the sermon where I remind you that our Gospel story is the only argument that Jesus ever loses in the New Testament.

There is where I also say that this is the first time, in the Gospel of Matthew, that a woman speaks out loud. It only took 15 and a half chapters!² (Maybe the two are related!)

This is also the part where I say that "Canaanites" were the ancient and despised enemy of the Israelites, outside of the ritual rules of cleanliness of the Torah. And, that, since the woman is "unattached", she would have been further marginalized, her occupation might be that of a prostitute.

That's the context of the *jarring* nature of the Canaanite woman's plea. It's a mind-blowing interaction, a combustible confrontation on uncharted ground. And the results are fireworks that we rarely see in the New Testament: Jesus losing his cool and Jesus changing his mind. In it: "The Canaanite mother (thus) becomes a doorway for God's power. The (interaction) opens a door and lets God in."³

LAMENT

In fact, the woman's language, her shouting, her annoyingness (to the disciples), her argumentation, her insistence, is a pattern of speech, known as a lament, that is found all over Scripture.

Think the famous Psalm 22 "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Laments are designed as direct addresses to God, where the speaker confronts God frankly, asking boldly for help. As one scholar writes:

Israel was not afraid to make its needs known to God and to assert that those needs and injustices, those complaints and fears, were God's business... Israel knew that its

² Stephenson Humphries-Brooks, "The Canaanite Woman in Matthew" in Levine, Amy-Jill, and Marianne Blickenstaff, eds. 2001. *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 144.

³ Ibid. 145.

worship, as with all its life, had to allow for the honest articulation of pain, fear, and need; these human experiences had to be handed over to God in **disciplined, liberated speech** in order for transformation to become a reality.”⁴

So, look at the words that the Canaanite woman uses.

She *addresses* Jesus: “(my) Lord, Son of David”

she *offers* a petition: “Have mercy on me.”

Adds a *complaint*: My daughter is tormented by a demon”

and, finally, puts in what’s called a *Motivation*: “even the dogs eat from the table.”⁵⁶

Notice what the woman does NOT say:

The woman doesn’t say “I am pretty good..... I have failed here and there but I am actually pretty upstanding. C’mon Jesus... I deserve this.”

That’s OUR type of lament. That sounds like MY prayers:

A rational/ meeting of God in the middle, arguing around the edges. Bargaining.

Instead, she says “Have mercy.”

Instead she uses: “Disciplined, (yet) liberated speech” and the world breaks open on the basis of her lament.

COVID:

The irony, of course, is that the Canaanite woman is not a *Jew*, but she is offering an entirely *Jewish* prayer of lament. So she is out of place in doing so but Jesus also, is out of place, out of his area, a stranger in a strange land, “in a place of ambiguity, of border-crossing, and of marginalization.”⁷

There’s something about that combination—the fact that they are out of place and the language of lament—which combine to create something life-giving and revelatory.

We are also out of place. We have been in exile, some sort of 1st world exile, of varying degrees of misery. We are going to be in this for some time longer.

We have been changed, we are not the same. We have cause for joy, but also know that there many miles until we have all returned to the Holy Hill.

We need to hear this story, because we need too to learn how to lament.

We are going to need to get better at it.

⁴ Gail O’Day, “Surprised by Faith: Jesus and the Canaanite Woman” in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, 119.

⁵ O’Day, 122.

⁶ O’Day, 122.

⁷ Elaine Wainwright “Not without my Daughter” in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, 150.

So, here's my Pandemic lament in what I hope is "disciplined, liberated speech." I offer it up in this weird, in-between place (back in the pulpit, but with an empty church) in the hope that it might open up a new avenue of conversation with God. *Gracious God, God of Social Distancing, God of scratchy Masks, and God of ZOOM and Livestream.*

How long, oh how long, will we be in this mess? Will things ever get back to 'normal'? Will it ever feel the same? Should it?

God, we are tired of this. Tired of being away from one another, tired of being afraid, frustrated by loss of connections, loss of jobs, loss of life.

God, we need help, we are struggling to stay afloat, we cannot do the work of the Church, the work of God's kingdom.....

NOW here is the kicker, in the pattern of the lament, there is always a turn, always a moment where, after all those lamentations, the speaker turns and his/her tone changes. There are then words of praise, where "in the midst of the pain, fear and the need of the petitioner, a word of God enters to transform brokenness and to open the petitioner to new courageous possibilities for life."⁸

So my lament continues in that vein:

God, You have brought us out of the wilderness.

You have provided us with gifts of technology to communicate and maintain relationship.

You have blessed us with a congregation that is generous with its time, talent and treasure throughout it all.

You have called us to reach to those who are in need, and to continue our mission as the Church of the Good Shepherd as the program year gets ready to restart.

We feel your love and your guidance in this, and we give thanks for being back "in this house of prayer, able to keep the sabbath, and holding fast to our covenant."

We feel near you as we bring this "humble offering to your altar", we know that you are the Lord who "gathers the outcasts of Israel"⁹

*and who hears and listens to our prayers, always. **AMEN***

⁸ O'Day, 120.

⁹ Isaiah 56.6-8 (Paraphrase)