

***Anger, Pain, and God***

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

It's neat how the Lectionary texts often speak to the time that we are in, even though the text itself was written hundreds of hundreds of years ago and the decision to arrange the texts in that Lectionary was made a long time ago. The Gospel reading today, if I'm not mistaken, is the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well, and there being a little bit of a dispute mentioned about whether it's right to worship in this place or that place. And Jesus says God is seeking worshippers that will worship in spirit and in truth. And here we are worshipping in spirit and truth, if not in the physical place that we would prefer to be, perhaps. So you know, I think for me the most frustrating aspect of this as it concerns church is that things were really just starting to get going. And as I think ahead to what looks likely to be a pretty long period of social distance, I'm really disappointed that we might lose some momentum around our Lenten theme of the deconstruction project.

Now obviously, any of my frustrations around that or anything like that pale in comparison to the people who are actually very sick or have lost loved ones. Obviously that's a whole different category of suffering. But for us as a church, I'm feeling that frustration right now and I know that maybe you are too because you have been, perhaps as I have, been looking forward to this for a long time. It's been months in my case that I've been thinking about this and the response so far has been really overwhelming and positive, both to the worship experiences on Sundays in the messages and also to the midweek workshops that we've been doing. So to think about possibly losing some momentum there is just really disappointing. And it's not just, you know, the institutional momentum — it's really been a lot of work. Preparation, discussion, dreaming, prayer, a lot of hope for what this could mean for our church. But it happens, and speaking about things that were decided a long time ago that now seem quite timely, the sermon topic that was scheduled for today might actually fit really well with the idea of feeling disappointment.

It might be just the thing that we need for what we're experiencing as a society right now. The title of the sermon was (and I guess is) "Anger, Pain, and God." I've touched on this a number of

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times already in this series in Sunday service and on Tuesday evenings. And on the idea that for the people who are deconstructing their faith or their religious traditions, people who are processing the emotional aspects of that, are finding that that's every bit as difficult as figuring out the spirituality of it all. Of course, that's actually because there really isn't a bright line between these two aspects of our nature. Okay, like we don't have an emotional life and a spiritual life and a physical life — those are not all separate things. We're not compartmentalized in that way. We are all one being. But that sense of pain or anger, even, at God can be very real in a season of deconstruction. It might be that the events of the world are making that worse for some of us. So you remember that one of the things I recommended last week in my sermon if you heard it, was to find solidarity in the midst of a deconstruction experience. And not just to find solidarity with each other, although that probably is the best thing for you if you're disoriented in your faith, but also solidarity in the pages of Scripture.

Last week's example was John the Baptist whose lifelong identity as the precursor to the Messiah was upended when he found himself near death in a prison cell and then found himself asking the question, is this true? Is the thing that I've been pointed toward my entire life actually just wrong? And this week I want to encourage you, and us, to try to find some solidarity from the Book of Psalms, specifically for the category of songs known as the Psalms of Lament. So these particular songs are such a gift to God's people because they legitimize the pain of religious experience. They give voice to our doubts, to our fears, and to our frustration, and even to our anger. And I love that they are actually in the Bible. I often say that if modern religious believers, if modern Christians were deciding what went into the Bible, we would make some different decisions. But we have the Bible that we've been given and the people who came before us were much wiser than us in a lot of ways. And so the fact that these songs are here, I think, is an incredible gift to us. And I hope that you will come to see that they also even offer us a model for prayer when we're experiencing deconstruction.

So let me read you one example. I'm going to give you a short reading from the book of Psalms. I'm going to read you Psalm 30. Anybody who's ever taken a red Bible home, I'm going to give you the page number but you can look it up in your own Bibles if you'd like to follow along. Or you could just open a new tab in your browser window if you're on a computer and (it's 429 in the red Bible) and you can open the Bible up on your phone or your device if you want to do it that way. But this is Psalm 13:

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I bear pain in my soul,  
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

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How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?  
Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!  
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,  
and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";  
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.  
But I trusted in your steadfast love;  
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.  
I will sing to the Lord,  
because he has dealt bountifully with me."

Now that comes from the NRSV translation of the Bible (New Revised Standard Version). That's the one that we use in services on Sundays. That's the red Bibles that we talk about. But I want to read a little part of that psalm to you in a different version of the Bible called *The Message*, and *The Message* is a version of the Bible that tries to emphasize the poetry of the original language rather than making a linear word for word translation of the text. Those are two very different approaches to translation and they're both valid, but with something like the psalms which are poetry, it can be really helpful to read a different translation. It's actually one of the great benefits of using online Bibles or a Bible app on your phone. It's very easy to switch between translations and compare them. So here's just a few of the opening lines from Psalm 13 as Eugene Peterson translated it in *The Message*:

"Long enough, God—  
you've ignored me long enough.  
I've looked at the back of your head  
long enough. Long enough  
've carried this ton of trouble,  
lived with a stomach full of pain.  
Long enough my arrogant enemies  
have looked down their noses at me."

It's a little bit more visceral, isn't it? So I want to try to help you learn how to use this type of text as a form of prayer. I think this is a really, really beneficial tool for us at times like this. And at its more simple, the idea of praying with the Psalms is nothing more than just opening the book or looking at it on a page and using those words to form your prayer instead of your own words, the words you might come up with on your own. Now if you've never tried that before, I want to tell you that can be a huge relief, especially for people who are in deconstruction. This is one of the things that actually saved the idea of prayer for me during my own season of deconstruction. There was a time when I couldn't really find my own words for prayer. It felt

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just incredibly hollow and actually pointless at times. And to be able to use the Psalms, which are in a sense prayers, was really, really a gift to me. And especially for people who might be having trouble giving words to the emotion of it all, this can be a real gift.

Let me pause for just a moment. The battery on my laptop is a little bit low. We're going to get through it I think, but I sent out a text to my family who lives close and has a charge cable [laughs] so if the screen jostles a little bit that's probably what it is. We're plugging in the computer because I was not wise enough to bring a laptop charge cable. My pocket and my wrist have been bumping me constantly during this as somebody probably responded to my text messages. We're still figuring this out. Another thing; I'm at the microphone right now realizing that it's pointed away from me, which is probably why the volume was low at the beginning [laughs] and probably why you could hear me whispering as I was leaving this spot that I'm going to go get some water. Anyway, we'll leave that as it is for now and things will be more put together next time. Okay, all of that came right in the middle of something that was perhaps quite emotional, so I apologize for that.

If you are in a deconstruction experience and can't find the words for prayer, using the Psalms is a huge gift. And I want to encourage you to try to do that. And it doesn't have to be complicated, you can just read the words and pray that. If you were taught to say "Dear God" before you pray, just say "Dear God" and then read the words. If you were told to say "Amen" at the end of every prayer, just say "Amen" at the end. Those little cues actually can kind of get your mind oriented in a way if you've got a longstanding tradition of that being one of prayer. I want to say that it's also a gift to you if you are not currently in a season of lament yourself, and here's why. Because praying the Psalms of Lament when you are not in a season of lament yourself can help you build that solidarity with other people that I've been talking about. That's so important to getting through these types of experiences. If you pray and make these words from the Psalms of Lament your own when you're feeling that, then you can be doing that on behalf of other people. Maybe someone else that you know or you love who is hurting right now, so I encourage you to do that. I'm going to mention a few of the Psalms of Lament, but if you are looking for other ones, honestly you can just Google the words "psalms of a lament" and you'll get a list. I think there's actually a Wikipedia entry for the Psalms of a Lament and that would be a place to start, too.

So that was Psalm 13 that I read a few minutes ago. Here's another famous Psalm of Lament, Psalm 22. It's quite a bit longer so I'm not going to read all of it, but I'm just going to give you the opening lines: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That might be familiar to you. Psalm 22 is a very important one in the liturgy of the Christian church even though it comes from the Jewish tradition. Psalm 22 is almost always read in the liturgy on Good Friday

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when we remember the crucifixion of Jesus, and the reason for that is that Jesus quoted the opening lines to this psalm while he was on the cross in the middle of his own crucifixion. Talk about solidarity. Even Jesus, God in the flesh, felt separation and abandonment from his heavenly father. And so in the midst of our suffering it's a gift not only to know that the people who wrote these songs felt some of the same things that we feel, but also that Jesus himself felt some of those same things. That's incredibly powerful. Now here's something else that I came across. This is a theory that I came across. I can't remember where, but I really like it.

Oh, here comes my laptop charge cable. We're good to go, we won't have to stop in the middle [shuffling sounds]. Let me just pause for a second so that I don't interrupt the point that I'm about to make. Thanks Abel, my son Abel who ran this up to me [more shuffling]. Alright, we're powered up. Thanks for bearing with me. Of all the things we had to figure out for livestreaming I didn't think bringing a charge cable would be one of the things I needed to write down on the list, but apparently it was.

So something that I think is an interesting and compelling theory about Jesus quoting Psalm 22 on the cross. So the theory is this, that it's not just that Jesus was experiencing the depths of human suffering and offering us this incredible validation of our own deepest doubts. I think he was also offering us hope, and let me tell you why. I think it's quite likely that Jesus knew the entire psalm by heart and actually that a lot of the people who were within earshot of Jesus on the cross knew the entire psalm by heart. So that means that they didn't just know and recognize the opening line he quoted, but that they and he would have known the whole psalm, including how it ends. Now again, I'm not going to read the entire psalms you but here's the closing stanza. How the closing stanzas begin of Psalm 22. Remember, it starts out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and it ends this way: "From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me." It's figurative language. "I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters. In the midst of the congregation I will praise you." So it's almost as if Jesus in the deepest depths of his despair, at the lowest point of his entire life, moments before he died in agony, was giving all of humankind a glimmer of hope. A sign pointing toward a lifeboat on a sinking ship, or maybe a piece of driftwood for someone who feels lost at sea.

The truth is that most of the Psalms of Lament have some kind of ending that brings a positive note. And I do think that can perhaps offer us some hope. I do think that ultimately we are supposed to be people of hope. For all the ways that I acknowledge that feeling pain and suffering is part of the human experience and even the religious experience, I do think that ultimately we are supposed to be people of hope. It's a crucial part of our experience as God's people. And so the codas, the ends of these Lament Psalms can give us some of that — sometimes. Other times, those closing stanzas can seem really hollow. If you're just not there, it

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can be hard to hear those parts of the Psalms and take them to be anything more than whistling past the graveyard. So for those times, there is one psalm that I can point you to that will not try to tie a pretty bow on the end of the lament, and that's Psalm 88. Once again, I'm not going to read the whole thing, but here is the very last line of Psalm 88 just to prove to you that it doesn't end on a hopeful note: "You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me. My companions are in darkness." Another way to translate that ending is: "Darkness is my companion. Darkness is my only friend." That's it, that's the psalm. And once again, I'm really grateful that somewhere along the line in the history of God's people we decided to include this in our sacred text. And not because I think it's God's desire that we remain in a place of hopelessness. In fact, I think Psalm 88 doesn't tell the whole story. I actually even think I would go so far as to say that I think the theology inherent in Psalm 88 is perhaps wrong. I actually think God is the one who caused the suffering for the psalmist, for what it's worth. That's not why it's in the text. I'm glad it's in the text because it reminds us that we are not alone.

Even during those times when we feel most alone, we are not alone. So let me say this to you. If you are feeling deep despair right now, deep fear right now, whether it's because of the coronavirus and how it's affecting us, how it will continue to affect us, or because of other factors that only you know about, weights that only you are carrying — if you feel that way, I want you to know that you are not alone. Even though we can't be together with each other in person on Sundays right now, we are together in our spirits. And we are together with all of God's people, not just those who exist in the present day but those who exist in the line of faithfulness that stretches back thousands of years into time. We are together with Abraham in his faith, who got up and went when God told him to go even though God didn't tell him where. We are there with the author of Psalms 13 and 22 with the feelings of sadness and longing and pain that eventually subsided and gave them a chance to write those last lines. We are together with the author of Psalm 88, who wrote the whole psalm in a season of despair. We don't know how that story even ended. We are together with John, who reminded us that the light of the world shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. And we are together with Jesus, who is the light of the world in His humanity and in his suffering. And yes, even in his divinity and in his conquest of sin and death.

So I'd like to conclude with a benediction, and I so wish that I could be in the room with you right now and see your faces looking back at me. So receive this. May you know that in these dark times, you are not alone. May you know that your sadness, your fear, your anxiety, and your despair do not disqualify you from being part of God's beloved family. That you know the peace of Christ which transcends all human understanding, which by the way might mean that you don't get it right. May you know the Light of Christ, which drives out all the darkness of the world. May you be the peace of Christ to others whenever and wherever you can. And may you

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be light in the darkness. Do not grow weary in doing what is right. And love one another. Go in peace from wherever you are to wherever you need to go. Or stay in peace if what you will be doing today is staying. Thanks for being here with us today and stay tuned for how things will unfold in the coming days and weeks. Love from all of us at Artisan. Be well.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).