

“Laid Bare”

August 19, 2018

Psalms for the Soul series

By now, you’ve heard that Aretha Franklin passed away this week after battling cancer. I’m not a super fan, but I appreciate her gifts immensely. There’s something very deep and real about her voice and her expression of music. When she sang R-E-S-P-E-C-T, I feel like she wanted respect and was willing to fight for it. When she sang “God Bless America,” it was really a prayer for our nation.

And when she sang hymns of the church, her faith in Jesus was clear, and her soulful way was a powerful witness. Aretha Franklin grew up in the church as a preacher’s kid, and she said many times that no matter what other genres of music she sang, Gospel was a constant. Her 1972 album “Amazing Grace” was her best-selling album among many over her 50+-year career. If you get a chance, look it up and listen. She means what she sings, and she was never shy about telling people so. Even last year when she performed in Detroit, she asked the audience to pray for her.

My sister, Jean, described Franklin’s voice as something from another realm. One news commentator said, “You could almost hear her heart when she sang.” I love that description! That made me think of Psalms because so many times, we read them and pray them, and they move us deeply because of how true and honest they are. Psalms cover the range of human emotion - from praise and thanksgiving to pleas for safety and even revenge.

Psalms 143 cuts to the heart. The tone is serious, and the speaker comes to God with deep spiritual pain. Perhaps that’s what makes this psalm and the others like it so powerful – they comfort us because they encourage us to go to God with an honest heart and lay it all out there for God to hear. But, at the same time, they make us uncomfortable because it means that we have to be honest with ourselves and with God about our struggles and our sin. Truth be told, we’d avoid pain at any cost, but the Psalms don’t allow us to cover it up. In the words of the band R.E.M., “everybody hurts...sometimes.”

We started with Psalm 1 – a torah psalm that focused on instruction for being “happy” – righteous, blessed, at peace with God - God-centered “like a tree planted by the water.” Last week, we heard Psalm 34 shared by our church family, a thanksgiving song that reminded us to be ready to praise because of God’s care for us. Today we turn to another distinct type of psalm – a lament – a prayer for help. There are more psalms of lament among the 150 in Scripture than any other kind of psalm. Psalm 143 is a special kind of lament – one of seven penitential psalms.

To lament means to mourn or express sorrow, usually as a result of grief. Grief usually brings thoughts of loss and death, but this psalm carries a sense of personal grief because of sin. We don’t like to hear or talk about sin – not even in church! We’re

happy to avoid it. But, sin sells, doesn't it? Look around a grocery store checkout lane - most of the magazines carry a main story about some sort of indiscretion or immoral behavior by someone famous. And I'll confess that sometimes I think, "Well, at least I haven't done that!"

What sells newspapers? What links get the most traffic online? Is it a focus on people who are making a positive difference in the world? Sometimes, but the more common story is about someone's sin! Sin sells, but why? Does it make us feel better to read about someone else's sin and the trouble they're in because of it?

We don't enjoy talking about sin - at least not our own. Go into a bookstore, and the shelves are full of material to help us feel better. We're not quick to admit our struggles and confess our sin. You might notice that we pray a prayer of confession every Sunday when we gather, but it's always followed by words of assurance - a reminder of God's forgiveness.

I've had people ask why we do that - and even say that it doesn't apply to them or that they don't like it because it's a downer. But it's important to remember our need for God's love and grace. Even as the church faces painful realities of the abuse of power by leaders, we need to speak the truth of sin - in our lives, in the church, and in other institutions.

And so this psalm hits a little close to home and challenges us to do what we don't like to do. We have to admit our sin to God and claim it enough to feel how it separates us from God. We have to see how serious it is and how much we need the forgiveness that only God can provide through the love of Jesus Christ.

I'm not advocating that we focus on guilt all the time, but we have to acknowledge our need for God. If we're not sinners, then why do we need a Savior? I need a Savior who will save me from my sin and save me for new life!

It sounds good, but it's not easy! We like Hallmark Channel happy endings where conflict is resolved and everyone is happy. We like to get to the part where we can praise God! But this psalm makes it clear that being faithful also means that we cry out to God, search for God in the darkest times of life, and admit that we're doubting God's presence and even that we're hurting.

We have permission to be honest - even about sin and struggle. The psalmist admits that no one is righteous before God. And we hear that echoed by Paul in Romans: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

That's where these laments come from. This psalm is credited to King David - perhaps at a time when he fears for his life or is dealing with personal sin or both! But the psalm was probably recited at a time when the Israelites had returned to their land from being in exile. It was a time when they were searching for God and wondering where God was, if God was with them, and what God wanted from them. Maybe we've felt the same way - searching, wondering - is God with us? What does God want?

It's possible that this psalm would've been prayed as a person spent the night in the Temple waiting for God to answer. We hear it clearly in the psalm: "I spread out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land." What an image – and a contrast to the tree planted by the water!

We can almost feel that image deep down - gut-wrenching and powerful. We can picture someone simply getting past what's expected of them and finally getting to what's real. I don't know about you, but when I actually just come to God and pour out my heart, it's powerful. And it's really an act of faith and trust.

Thinking about lament made me think of a photograph I saw earlier this year. Maybe you saw it, too. **SHOW PIC.** It was Ash Wednesday, February 14, when there was a school shooting in Parkland, Florida. Parents came to the school waiting to receive word about their children. Cathi Rush, pictured in white, and another woman became an image of lament for me that day. And it was surreal to think that Rush had received ashes that morning possibly hearing the words that I've said many times - "remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" contemplating her own mortality - and then facing the possibility of losing a child in such a tragedy.

This image hit me in my gut and stayed with me. We don't always claim the deep pain of our lives and our world. Our ancestors in faith weren't shy about crying out to God about their own sin and the brokenness around them, and we can come to God with all of it. God receives it and receives us. Even at the end of the psalm when there's a plea to destroy one's enemies, perhaps it's a plea to God to make the pain and fear stop.

There's recognition from the psalmist of sin, but there's also a deep knowledge of God's love. We need to understand their understanding of sin. For us, "sin" usually takes our minds to any variety of sexual immorality. We start there and move onto other things.

But literally, "sin" means missing the mark – being off target for what God intends for us. It means going against what God calls us to do and to be. So, starting there, we face the many ways that we miss the mark and rebel against God's good intentions for us. Yes, sin hurts us and others, but even more, it grieves God.

We've been unfaithful to God and to one another. We've hurt the people we love. We've betrayed a friend's confidence. We've left things undone and unsaid with people – and then regretted it later. We've been selfish. We've treated our bodies with little respect for the wonderful creations we are. And sin can get to us. Psalm 102, another penitential psalm says, "I lie awake; I have become like a bird alone on a roof."

Do you come here with any baggage? Guilt? Regret? We all have it, and sometimes we relate to Psalm 38: "My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear." Or from Psalm 6: "I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears." And are we willing to confess our sin and come to a place where we can admit it to God and ask God with an honest and

open heart for forgiveness? Psalm 51, probably the most well-known penitential psalm reminds us of what God wants: “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

There’s something implied in the lament here. The psalmist says that he remembers the old days – perhaps the wonderful things that God has done. Maybe it means the Exodus when God was with the Hebrew people and brought them out of slavery by the Egyptians. Or maybe it’s something personal – another time when God’s grace was real in his life.

But that’s the reason that the psalmist can speak at all – because God is faithful! God has been faithful in the past, and so he can trust God now, in the midst of this situation. We can trust in God’s grace and mercy. Psalm 130 says it well: “If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.”

God wants us to recognize who we are – that we are God’s creation – that we’re connected to one another. What we do or fail to do affects all of humanity. And ultimately, we are connected to our Creator. We need a relationship with our Creator. And God makes that relationship possible through Jesus Christ. We find the power of love that can overcome even our deepest, most painful sin in Jesus who goes to the cross for us – even for you and me!

This psalm moves us to confess our sin and to repent – to go a new way – to go God’s way. For as much as the pain of our sin is very real, God’s grace and love are even more real. Aretha Franklin had words for us to remember: “When God loves you, what can be better than that?”

The joy that God offers is to experience God’s forgiveness. The challenge is that we take on the spirit of the psalmist – “teach me to do your will, O God.” The challenge is to trust in God’s unfailing love.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE