

What the hell, God?

*A sermon on Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31
by Nathan Nettleton, 10 October 2021*

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Message

Faithful lament, even enraged and despairing lament, takes us close to the heart of God, though we usually can't perceive God when we are there.

Sermon

The Church is not generally comfortable
with angry despairing complaints,
even though our Bible is full of them.
The biblical writers, especially the prophets,
and even Jesus himself
give full voice to frustration and despair,
to disappointment,
to fierce protest against the way the world is,
and even – sometimes especially – against God.

Yet we don't want to go there.
It's not that this is an unfamiliar place,
or that these are unfamiliar feelings.
Perhaps that's why we don't want to go there.
Perhaps they are too familiar.
Perhaps they are precisely what we are always looking to escape from
and we want our religion to be a means of escape.
We want religious practices that sooth and relieve the angst
and give us a place of refuge
where we can have an hour or two of blissful relief
before we have to go back and face the harsh realities of life.

There might be more to it than that too.
I don't think it is usually just a refuge or escape that we are wanting.
It's clarity, certainty.
In the midst off chaos and confusion,
we want to know for sure what is right and what is wrong.
We want to know clearly which path we should take.
We want to know that things are fully understood
and under control
and that we are on the right side of the story.
So many of those complaints in the Bible
are angry protests against the lack of certainty, of clarity,
of clear guidance and reassurance.
Nothing is making sense,
and it leaves us in despair.

Like Job, we cry out,
"If only I knew where I could find God,

I'd pound on the door and demand a hearing.
Let's see what God would have to say to that!
But I can't find God anywhere.
My hope and courage are almost gone.
God has left me a frightened wreck."

In a world that feels totally out of control
we desperately want to regain some control.
"God has left us a frightened wreck."

We hate having our lives ruled by an invisible virus
and by governments and pharmaceutical companies
that have spent decades proving over and over again
that they should never be trusted, even for a minute.

We hate having our lives ruled
by seemingly inescapable market economics
that even blind Freddy can see are suffocating the planet,
tearing apart the social fabric,
escalating global hostilities,
turning us into cogs in a machine,
and fuelling a pandemic of anxiety, despair, abuse, and suicide.

So even when we can't bear to admit it to ourselves,
even we try to push it down and silence it,
the voice of complaint, of protest, of lament,
is never too far from the surface.

"I continue to complain bitterly.
God is still kicking me while I'm down.
If only I knew where I could find God,
I'd pound on the door and demand a hearing.
Let's see what God would have to say to that!"

"God, my God, why the hell have you turned your back on us?
How come in our most desperate hour,
you are nowhere to be found?"

"We look up, down, forwards, backwards – nothing.
We think we catch a glimpse to the left, but no;
We rush to the right, but God vanishes like a mirage.
Our hope and courage are almost gone."

It is a mark of how desperate many of us have become in these days,
that we talk wistfully about longing for life to return to normal.
Because the old normal wasn't good.
It's just that the present normal is even worse.
If we all rush back to the old normal,
we will, within a generation,

fry the planet,
drown our cities in rising sea water,
bury ourselves under the weight of our own waste,
and any of us who cling to some sort of existence
will be living sad and shattered lives.

And still we will be crying out to God
with Job, and the psalmist, and even Jesus:
“Where the hell are you, God?
Why have you abandoned us?”

No wonder we want to stick our heads in the sand.
Because who can find their way out?
Those peddling surefire answers almost always turn out
to be nutters with their heads in different sand,
believing in bizarrely simplistic answers
to absurdly oversimplified accounts of very complex problems.

But it is easy to see the attraction
because feeling confused and trapped and paralysed
is nobody's idea of fun.

I feel trapped.
I feel frightened by my own inability
to untangle myself from the webs of sin and destruction.

I stand here speaking to you through a recently new computer.
In the next room, my wife and daughter are looking at you
from another recently new computer.
That one replaced one that is now in a box behind me.
It still works as well as the day it was bought.

It's not even quite an example of the evils of planned obsolescence
because it hasn't worn out and broken down.
It's just that all the things that it can still do perfectly
are the things I needed it to do twelve years ago,
and as computers have become more and more part of my life and work
and the software that enables me to do all these new things
like preach to you in a Cyber Chapel
has continued to become more powerful and demanding
and that computer back there
is not powerful enough to keep up with those things.

And I can't even tell you with 100% certainty
whether it is really true that I need these shiny new tools for my work
or whether I am just addicted to needless progress,
but I can tell you that that computer back there
is now one of four obsolete but still perfectly operational computers
sitting around my house.

Four!
Plus the two current ones.
And a couple of iPads and smart phones as well.

And I can tell you with 100% certainty
that the over-production and waste of such electronic goods
is a huge problem for our planet.
But I have no idea how to extract myself
from being part of the problem.
I stretch out the lifespan of each device
far longer than the manufacturers and retailers and economic growth gurus
would want me to,
but that seems to only make a small reduction
to my contribution to the problem.
I am still hopelessly entangled in a sinful web.

“God, my God, where the hell are you?
How come in our most desperate hour,
you are nowhere to be found?”
“I look up, down, forwards, backwards – nothing.
I think I catch a glimpse to the left, but no;
I rush to the right, but God vanishes like a mirage.”
And with God goes any hope
of clear and certain answers.

I had my second jab last week.
I feel slightly safer,
but totally compromised and pissed off
at being drawn into a horrific global injustice
in which there is now talk about supplying wealthy people like me
with a third jab, a booster,
before most people in the developing world
have even got a first jab.
I have the privilege of being able to work from home
on my shiny new computer
and to protect myself that way,
so in a fair and just world,
I'd have been last in the queue for my first jab,
let alone a third.

I can reconcile myself to having something injected into my body
that is still too new to know for sure that it won't have long term problems.
But it pisses me off that yet again,
society has become totally divided into hostile warring camps
over the vaccination issue,
and therefore it is now not even possible to ask sensible questions
without being denounced as a nutter by one side,
or a mindless “sheeple” by the other.
But in the face of a global emergency,

experimental medicine is inevitable
and I'm willing to do my bit
in the project of trying to halt this virus.

I can live with the risks of that,
but I do totally understand why people who are a lot younger than me
might feel less sure about taking risks on their longterm health.
And I certainly understand why no one should trust
the big pharmaceutical companies.
But once again, we're grasping for an elusive certainty.
Once again we desperately want God to give us clear answers,
and once again, no such God is within our grasp.

Once we get beyond the personal risks, it is even bigger.
I resigned myself to the ugly reality
that my nation won't even begin
to generously open up its vaccine stocks to poorer nations
until enough of *us* are double vaccinated.
But no sooner have I resigned myself to that,
than I hear them now talking about rolling out booster shots.
They'll want us triple vaccinated
before they will share.

"My God, my God, what is going on?"
Stop the world, I want to get off.

It doesn't even make sense as a form of selfishness,
because as long as we leave those huge poorer populations unvaccinated,
they will be the breeding ground for dangerous new variants
that will plunge us back into crisis over and over again.
We won't be safe until we make sure *they* are safe.

But I look in vain for a way out of this web of sin,
and again I find myself totally ensnared.
As a follower of Jesus,
I look for the unselfish, Jesus-y course of action,
but it too keeps disappearing like a mirage.
I want to be able to know that I'm making the choice
that Jesus would have me make,
but any grounds for such confidence elude me.

I realise too that even the reasons I want such confidence
contain a web of tangled motives.
Sure, I want to be part of the solution instead of part of the problem,
but I also just want to feel better,
to feel like I'm okay and I've done something good.
I want to feel like something is still within my control,
and that I can work out what is right,
and ensure that I'm one of the people who is doing it.

I realise I'm actually a lot like the man who came to Jesus
in our gospel reading tonight.
He was wanting to do the right thing.
He was hungry for God and for life and for clear answers.

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”
To receive the limitless life that God promises us?
He genuinely wanted to know.
He had grown up in a world where the answer to that question
had to be some commandments to keep.
But a nagging emptiness, a quiet despair inside
told him that he hadn't found it yet.
There must be a commandment he was missing
but what was it?

Clear cut commandments are so comforting
because they give you certainty.
You know if you are obeying them or not,
so they hand you the control.
If God would just give me a clear commandment
about when to upgrade my computer
or whether to try to buy a house
or whether to get a first job or a second job or even a third
then the comfortable certainty of knowing I was doing the right thing
would be within reach, within my control.
It would feel like God was within reach,
and my relationship with God was in my hands,
within my control.

But this man who came to Jesus
had already discovered that it never really works that way.
He was the pin-up boy of virtue,
confidently able to tick off all the commandments,
he'd kept them all since he was a kid.
But something inside him was still crying out,
“My God, my God, where the hell are you?”
He was reaching out for a God who would give him
the certainty and control he craved,
but such a God was nowhere to be found.

What he found instead was Jesus,
and an answer that was his worst nightmare.
Because in effect, what Jesus said to him was,
“You think you need more certainty, more control,
but what you actually need if you are to be free,
is less.
Less certainty. Less control.
Go and offload all the stuff

that gives you certainty and confidence and control,
and then hit the road with me.”

For this bloke, it was money and possessions.
For you or me, it might be something else.
Maybe even our capacity to do our own research
and reach our own independent conclusions.
Whatever it is that we cling on to
because it provides us some insurance
against the vagaries of the future,
some measure of control in a world that’s gone mad.

Loosen your grip and let it go, says Jesus.
Give it up, and come follow me.

At that point, most of us do exactly what this bloke did.
We shake our heads in despair,
and walk away feeling sick in our guts.
That’s asking too much. I can’t let go of that.
With heavy hearts, we drag ourselves back to church
and plonk ourselves down in our old pew
because at least if we are in church,
no one is likely to notice that we said no to Jesus,
and if we’re all nice to each other,
we’ll soon have forgotten that we said no too,
just like everyone around us,
and we can sing happy songs
to drown out the aching voice of protest
that still howls within us.

Loosen your grip and let it go, says Jesus.
Give it up, and come follow me.
The word of truth that opens us up like a surgeon’s scalpel.
Loosen your grip. Relinquish control. Let it go.

The bloke in the story didn’t know this,
but we have found out why we can trust Jesus in this.
We have seen him weeping in the Garden of Gethsemane,
sweating drops of blood
as he howled his protest to God.
We have seen the truth of what our reading
from the letter to the Hebrews said tonight:
“he can relate to the realities we have to live with,
because he has already been through everything we have to go through
– weakness, doubts and torments –
and all without selling out to sin.”

This is not the answer we wanted to our howl of protest.
We wanted something more than an answering howl

from a fellow sufferer.

We wanted a key that would unlock the mysteries,
that would enable us to comprehend the big picture,
and make sense of it all.

We wanted something that would illumine a clear-cut path
that wasn't overgrown with tangled sin,
a path on which we could walk proud and certain,
knowing we had got it right.

What we got seems anything but certain.

A strange man with wounds in his hands,
rising from an anguished prayer,
wiping sweat like blood from his brow.

The desolation hasn't left him,
and yet somehow it has lost the power to derail him.

It's as though in falling to that abyss of despair,
he has discovered that the abyss dropped him straight into the heart of God.

It's as though he has found that in the moment of desperation,
the reason that he couldn't see God any more
was not because God was absent,
but because God was too close.

When your eyes are filled with tears
and your face is buried in someone's breast,
you can't see them any more.

He has no comfortable path of certainty or security to point us to.

He just sets his face back towards the tangled troubled way,
and says, "Leave that quest behind and follow me.

Follow me. We're going back in there.

Back there where all feels god-forsaken,
and troubles are multiplied a hundred fold.

For the wide open spaces of resurrection life,
of freedom, love and justice,
can be reached no other way than through there.

Follow me."