

Lake Shore Baptist Church

May 10, 2020 Charlie Fuller

Title: *Something About a Rock*

Text: Psalms 31:1-5,15-16

I love the Psalms. I probably don't love them quite as much as Bill Bellinger, our resident Psalm scholar, but I do love them. I love them because in my heart I'm still a church musician even though I'm now a pastor. The Psalms are the songbook of the Hebrew people. We don't know what they sounded like, but we know they were sung. Sung in various forms, various settings. Sung in praise to God. Sung in thankfulness to God. Sung to celebrate God's presence.

And they were sung to express their deepest pain, frustration, and feelings of God's absence and their own loneliness. The Psalms are poetry, poetry that even without the music has a unique and inherent beauty. The Psalms are made up of poetry that reflects the whole of human existence: joy, adoration, praise, sadness, depression, anger, envy, and even desire for vengeance.

The Psalms are almost universally loved because they are universally relevant. Any season of life and any life circumstance resonates somewhere in the Psalms. That's true even for our season of COVID-19.

Today's Psalm uses the language of lament as well as the language of hope and trust. It includes a prayer for help and, in some ways, answers its own petition.

The language of lament gets down into the muck and mire of life. The Psalmist cries out to God sometimes in anger, in pain, in the deepest frustration and deepest desperation.

The language of lament is different than the language of complaint. I think of lament as a heartfelt expression of sadness or grief at what is, not a complaint about how we wish things were different.

Whenever people are in times of massive change, they lament. No doubt you've been lamenting some these last few weeks. High school seniors are lamenting the loss of proms and graduation ceremonies. We lament the inability to have proper funerals, weddings, dinners with friends and extended family.

And we lament the feeling of safety and security that we've lost. "I wonder if I'm getting too close. Is my mask on right? Did I wash my hands? Where's that hand sanitizer? I wish that person working the drive-through was wearing a mask. Do I go and have an outside visit with my friend? But what if they caught COVID-19 from me because I was carrying it and didn't know it?"

Others are lamenting, too. Others are lamenting things many of us don't have to deal with: homelessness, hunger, domestic abuse, the danger of having to work in grocery

stores, restaurants, or meat-packing plants without knowing if they're being exposed to the virus or not? People of color and people in poverty who are much more at risk now than the rest of us....

Dare we lament too loudly things like having to wear a mask when there are people going without food? Going without jobs? Going without their health? Going without life?

This week we learned that while it seems as if the world has changed forever, there are ways in which the world has not changed. Ways that we must lament, not celebrate.

Back in the 90's I ran marathons and lots of other road races. I ran literally thousands of miles training and racing. It brought me incredible joy. I was once an interim music minister for a church located in a transitioning area of their city. One Sunday afternoon I strapped on my running shoes and headed out for a run. It was a beautiful late spring afternoon, one made for being outside. Someone at the church asked me what I was about to do. I told them I was going for a run. They said, "You don't want to do that in *this* neighborhood. You won't be safe." I ignored them, went out, and had a wonderful run. I waved to adults and kids playing in the neighborhood and enjoyed the fresh air and exercise.

You see, I was able to do that because I was a white man running in a black neighborhood. As we've seen this week, it's different for a black man running in a white neighborhood. Ahmaud Arbery was shot and killed by two white men. They claimed that he matched the description of someone suspected in a series of break-ins. That's bad enough, but local police say there were no such crimes reported in the weeks leading up to this shooting. And that's bad enough, but it took two and half months before these men were even arrested. And that's bad enough, but no one was arrested until the public saw a video of the altercation.

As we lament COVID-19's onslaught on our nation and world, let's not forget the ways in which the world has not changed. We lament Ahmaud Arbery's killing in Georgia. We lament the delay in bringing his killers to justice. We lament that it takes video to bring justice to black victims. We lament that there are those in our nation who simply don't enjoy the same freedoms that most of us here in our church community enjoy.

We lament, we call for justice, and we pray for God to redeem our very culture. In 1967, Martin Luther King, looking deep into our culture, said, "We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society."

When we put the economy above people's lives, we're putting things above people. When we seek to aid our economy by lining the pockets of corporate executives instead of workers and the poor, we're putting things above people. When we open the economy before we've done what the medical professionals advise concerning testing and contact tracing, we're putting things above people.

When we allow vigilantes to shoot and kill unarmed black men jogging through a neighborhood because there might have been a series of burglaries, we're putting things above people.

Any theology that puts things above people is simply bad theology. It's not what we find in Scripture. It's not the way of Jesus. In days past bad theology was rejected and called heresy. A theology that puts things above people is heresy.

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My father, whose would have been 100 today, served in the Army Air Corps in World War II. As a result, I love documentaries about aviation, especially World War II aviation. This week I watched a beautiful piece on Netflix about the World War II British fighter plane, the Spitfire. During the war in the Mediterranean Sea, a squadron of Spitfires took off from an aircraft carrier to help protect the British-held island of Malta from German attacks. The veteran telling the story was barely trained and had barely arrived when the mission began. The planes took off, one by one, and assembled for their journey. Soon they were headed toward Malta.

It wasn't long before the engine of lead pilot's plane began to malfunction. He quickly lost altitude as well as contact with the rest of the squadron. That was bad enough. But there was another problem. *The now-missing lead pilot was the only one with the map.* Leading the squadron now fell to this green pilot who had just arrived from England and he had no map. What was he to do? How could they find their way in a vast ocean? How could they even find their way back to the carrier?

He did the only thing he could think of to do. He headed due west toward Gibraltar. If you don't know, Gibraltar is a 1400-foot-high limestone ridge on the southern coast of Spain. It served as a British fortress guarding the passage between the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean.

When I was growing up we learned in school to call it the "**Rock** of Gibraltar."

The Psalmist says that God is our rock and our fortress. *The Psalmist says that when you lose your map, aim toward the rock.* God is our immovable, steady, constant, and ever-present help. It is God who delivers us from our enemies, our maladies, and our circumstances. And it is this rock that calls us to lament not only our own circumstances, but those of others as well. The rock of God calls us to lament injustice whenever it occurs and work for justice for all.

May it be so,

Amen.