

FINDING OUR RHYTHM:
LINING UP WITH THE HEARTBEAT OF GOD

Returning

Lamentations 3:31-33, 40-41

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One of the saddest experiences is when a love between two people grows cold. The passion and fire can go out of any relationship. That can be true of a friendship, a marriage, a church or a job. And it's true of our relationship with the Lord. To change the analogy slightly, our spiritual hearts can get out of rhythm with God's. That happens with our physical hearts sometimes. Runners can get out of their rhythm. So can dancers or musicians (have you ever seen Rod's eyes when the choir gets out of sync? It's not fun!).

In the Book of Lamentations, we read about a people who had gotten out of step with the Lord. They were working through the pain of the year 587 B.C. They lost their nationhood. They were led away as slaves by the Babylonians, a theological, social and national crisis. They were asking themselves, "Who are we now?" Here's something you need to know about the Book of Lamentations. It was composed for public recitation (just as we say aloud our memory verse). And they read it during days of fasting and mourning (like our season of Lent).

Last Sunday--when we were snowed out--was supposed to be Launch Sunday--not only launching the season of Lent, but launching our small groups and launching our strategy planning process as a congregation. This spring, summer and fall, we will be seeking God's direction and focus for FBC JC. The key question will be this one: What is God calling us to be and do in Jefferson City and the world today? That's a question the people of God were asking in Lamentations.

Now here's a common mistake many organizations make when they do strategy planning. They hurry it--have a retreat with a few leaders, crank out a plan in six weeks and tell everyone, "Here it is." Churches compound that by telling God--not asking God--"This is what we want to do. Will you bless it?" Eugene Peterson has said, "It is easier to tell people what to do than to be with them in a discerning, prayerful companionship as they work it out."

But we don't want to be that church--telling God what we plan. This is when we need St. Ignatius' prayer of holy indifference. Indifference doesn't mean "I don't care." It may mean we care too much--about our own way! So to pray for indifference means I am willing to let go, to become indifferent about outcomes. Nothing more, nothing else, nothing less than God's will. That's why we are preceding our strategy planning time with this Lenten season of spiritual discernment.

Verse 40 speaks to the heart of this. "...let us test and examine our ways..." In my devotional Bible at home I keep a sheet of paper with an "examen" prayer, with these prompts: 1) Where have I experienced God today? 2) Was there a joyful time? If so, where was God? 3) Was there a time of struggle? If so, where was God? 4) Was God nudging me to anything new today? Other scriptures confirm this examination process. Here's one: "Keep your eyes open for God, watch for his works; be alert for signs of his presence" (Psalm 105:4, *The Message*).

But none of this is possible--the prayer for indifference, the examen, etc., if we do not honestly repent, referenced in the second part of v. 40, "Return..." This is that Hebrew word that is used so often in the First Testament. It means to reverse, to go back, to go home again. Karl Barth said the last wall within the human heart which has to be destroyed is the one that hides our egos. It surrounds our pride and makes all kinds of excuses and rationalizations.

Biblical repentance is more than regret. Regret is backward looking; repentance clears the way and opens us to the new, the Kingdom of Jesus. Didn't you love that illustration in our Lenten devotions last week [*40 Days of Prayer*, by Mark Tidsworth, p. 13]? The trapeze artist must make the decision to let go before she is ever free to catch the new. Repentance clears the way to the new, to change. Oh, but wait! That may be the problem. Maybe this whole discernment process scares us because it might bring change. In the comic strip Dilbert, he says, "Change is good. You go first!" I know. I'm guilty. I don't like change. We'll go in one of my favorite restaurants and they will have a new menu. They've changed it again! And yet, ironically, the Gospel of Jesus is all about change. Changed hearts. Changed churches. Changed communities.

Frederick Buechner once said that maybe the best thing that could happen to the church would be for some great tidal wave to wash away church buildings, church money, church bulletins and the difference we make between clergy and laity. Then, he said, all we would have left would be each other and Christ, which was all there was in the first place. That's basically where the people of God in Lamentations were, starting over again with God. Returning. A strategy plan for a church or an individual is simply this: finding out where God is at work, where God is doing a new thing and joining God. Letting God strip away the old until all that's left are each other and Jesus.