Advent 4: The Art of the Complaint  Ken Wilson 12.18.16

Our reading is about a young engaged couple and the distress the soon-to-be-husband has when his soon-to-be-wife is found-to-be pregnant. He determines to divorce her quietly. But wisely, he sleeps on it first. And has a dream in which an angel tells him this pregnancy is from God and he should chill...

The couple is from The Galilee or Galilee of the Gentiles. Northern Israel, ravaged by Assyrians, Babylonians, eventually Romans. Every invasion brought deportation of thousands of Jews and importation of thousands of Gentiles, especially soldiers.

Thing is, we don’t know what Joseph understood about this pregnancy. An old boyfriend? Had she been raped by a Roman soldier? Later, the Church came to regard this as a miraculous-virgin birth. No indication that was Joseph’s belief at time.

In a shame-honor culture a pregnancy of this sort would be shameful no matter the cause. Joseph would carry the shame as the little man whose wife was pregnant by someone else, not him.

Not a single word from Joseph recorded in Scripture. Perhaps he was just so stinkin’ mad he couldn’t talk.

Psalm paired with this reading, appropriately, is a complaint against God by a man, like Joseph, from Northern Israel under foreign occupation. Not Roman this time, but Assyrian.

A window into a lover’s dispute with the God he loves. Israel is the wife, God is the husband and the wife is mad. Like couples do, they voice their complaints. Elsewhere God has complaints about Israel and here Israel has complaints about God.

Often we have complaints against others that we never voice. Relationship may not mean enough to us to go to the trouble. Or we fear that to voice the complaint would threaten or even end relationship, so we keep quiet, or complain to others instead.

Real complaints are for our closest, most enduring connections.

Let’s go through this Psalm of Complaint in sections:
“Shepherd of Israel, hearken. He Who drives Joseph like a sheep, enthroned on the cherubim, shine forth. Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh rouse Your might and come to the rescue for us. O God, bring us back, and light up Your face that we may be rescued”

Joseph/Ephraim/Benjamin/ Manasseh are Northern tribes devastated by the Assyrian deportation and occupation force.

The abject cries for help reveal the Psalmists sense of vulnerability.
If you’re privileged, you can pretend, not be so vulnerable. It’s the poor and oppressed who understand the existential vulnerability of being human. That we’re not masters of the universe. We are more like sheep, who only survive in a flock led by a shepherd.

True prayer isn’t about getting your words right.
It’s speaking from your vulnerability.

Lord, God of armies, how long will You smolder against Your people’s prayer? You fed them bread of tears and made them drink triple measure of tears. You have put us in strife with our neighbors, and our enemies mock us. God of armies, bring us back, and light up Your face that we may be rescued.

God of armies: Israel had no armies. Assyrians did. For us to call God, the God of armies would have a macho patriotic connotation. For them, it was a subversive resistance to military dominance. These armies were the boss of them and by calling God, the God of armies, they were saying to the occupiers, God is the boss of you!
First of many complaints: something every praying person can identify with: How long will you smolder against our prayers?

Sometimes we get what we need
and sometimes it’s like God is deaf to our prayers.

This church is the result of a string of answered prayers. Emily and I knew we had a month to launch, with only hopes and guesses about whether it was possible. Sheer practicalities daunting. Lord we need a place to meet, and fast! Done. Lord, we need Diane Sonda to lead Sunday School. Done. We need a worship leader—Cassie would be great! Who’s gonna run sound? Done. We need committed people to show up and contribute and volunteer. Done! We need to make our first payroll! Done! We’ve got no money to get the word out, how will anyone find us? Done. And on it goes.
One the one hand. On the other, we had four people with cancer, all too young to die, all needed by their families, all died.

The psalmist is in a prayer desert. Prayers for daily bread? Answered. Prayers for deliverance from oppression? Nothing. And it had been like this for as long as anyone can remember.

He doesn’t explain it away: Sometimes God knows what’s best and the answer is no.

Doesn’t conclude: better not to ask to avoid disappointment
He complains! And his complaint about God rejecting his prayers is voiced in a prayer! This is in-your-face complaining at its best.

And the complaints keep coming: You carried a vine out of Egypt, You drove away nations and planted it. You cleared space before it and struck its roots down and it filled the lands. The mountains were covered by its shade, and by its branches the mighty cedars. You sent for its boughs to the sea and to the River its shoots.

Israel known for its vineyards. To plant one, you clear the land, transplant a shoot from a good vine, plant it, and build a wall around the area. And the vine spreads. But here’s the punchline:

Why did you break through its walls so all passers by could pluck it? [If you took so much trouble to plant us why knock down the wall that protects us?] The boar from the forest has gnawed it, and the swarm of the field fed upon it. [Is this how Joseph felt when his young Mary found pregnant, as so many young women find themselves pregnant when their land is crawling with occupation soldiers invading their homes, taking what they want?]

Maybe Joseph used this Psalm as his psalm of complaint. Maybe we could use it to.

If you’ve got a complaint against God, go ahead and make it!

Bond between Israel & God was a bond of love. Love has a dog-like quality. Like your dog. Strict rule: no table scraps, but your dog remains hopeful, regardless. Love is like that: It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. God didn’t give up on Israel. Israel didn’t give up on God.
The complaint, sometimes, is the act of not giving up. The complaint, sometimes, is the expression of love.

In a committed relationship, you better learn art of complaining. A good complaint is direct, it reveals the feelings that fuel it and it comes with an ask—here’s how you can fix it.

His complaint is direct. Not about God to others, but to God’s face

His complaint uncovers his feelings of injury, his mental anguish. We often frame our complaints as moral accusations: what you are doing is wrong, irresponsible, selfish. The only emotion we’re revealing is self-righteous pissiness. Our real feelings are hidden.

Last year, I’m bent out of shape when Julia is home later than expected. I’m politely pissy about it. Then I realize, I’m feeling intense social rejection. Which doesn’t make sense, not my normal MO. Except year before went through this intense period of social rejection. Made me more sensitive to social rejection in my closest relationships. So, I had to reveal that.

Artful complaints are followed by an ask: here’s what you can do to make it better. In Psalm, every complaint is followed by an ask.

God of armies, pray, come back, look down from the heavens and see, and take note of this vine, and the stock that Your right hand planted, and the son You took to yourself—burnt in fire, chopped to bits, from the blast of Your Presence they perish. May your hand be over the man on Your right, over the son of man You took to Yourself. [Israel is like a vineyard, and like a son] And we will not fall back from You. Restore us to life and we shall call on Your name. Lord God of armies, bring us back. Light up Your face, that we may be rescued.

If you’re feeling detached or distant from God, you may be harboring a complaint that you haven’t taken up with God in a wholehearted way.

In high school, I didn’t feel very close to my dad. He was dealing with some heavy personal issues. I was underperforming academically. Getting by with B’s. Actually, my GPA was 2.9. The thing I was into was track & cross country. And my dad started to threaten to pull me from that if I didn’t get the grades up.
Grinding on me. So one day, when he brought it up again, I just blew up and did something unusual in my family system.

I voiced my complaint directly with feeling: Look! You keep threatening me with this! If it’s so important to you that I get a 3.0 instead of 2.9 pull me out of sports already—not that it will do any good!

Before that, I was just in a cool-detached connection to my dad. Avoiding, resenting. But with that burst of angry complaint, I was bringing my whole self back into the relationship. And he listened. He heard me out. And we had an actual heart-to-heart. And I felt closer to him as a result.

You can use a Psalm like this to prime the pump. You read it out loud. You place yourself in the position of the Psalmist. You own his complaint as your own complaint, you get into the feeling of the vivid language. And maybe as you do, your own complaint will surface and you will be able to make it.

QUIET REFLECTION [Review then walk through]

Identify something you’re thankful for. Hold in one hand. Then, identify a complaint you have about your life. Hold it in other hand.

Hold those two together, one in one hand, other in other hand. Just sit with that for a while, aware of both.

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Imagine God sitting across from you and you’re feeling at ease. Not judging you, not scrutinizing you, not disappointed with you.

Now imagine God is as non-defensive about the complaint as he is about the gratitude. As willing to hear the one as to hear the other.

Rather than go into it in detail now, I’d like to think about my complaint some more and talk to you about it.
For the lead player, on the *shoshamim*, an *eduth*, an Asaph psalm.

Shepherd of Israel, hearken,

He Who drives Joseph like sheep, enthroned on the cherubim, shine forth.

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rouse Your might and come to the rescue for us.

O God, bring us back,

and light up Your face that we may be rescued.

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how long will You smolder against your people’s prayers?

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You have put us in strife with our neighbors,

and our enemies mock us.

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You carried a vine out of Egypt,

You drove away nations and planted it.

You cleared space before it

and struck its roots down and it filled the land.

The mountains were covered with its shade,

and by its branches the mighty cedars.

You sent forth its boughs to the sea

and to the River its shoots.

Why did you break through its walls

so all passers by could pluck it?

The boar from the forest has ravaged it

and the swarm of the field fed upon it.

God of armies, pray come back,

and look down from the heavens and see, and take note of this vine,

and the stock that Your right hand planted, and the son You took to Yourself—

burnt in fire, chopped to bits, from the blast of Your presence they perish.

May Your hand be over the man on Your right,

over the son of man You took to Yourself.

And we will not fall back from You.

Restore us to life and we shall call on Your name.

Lord, God of armies, bring us back,

Light up Your face, that we may be rescued.
Oh, Shepherd of Your people, 
lead us in Your flock.

Oh, God enthroned on cherubim, 
stir Your strength and save us.

Restore us, oh, God 
and shine on us with Your glory.

Return to us, oh, LORD of Hosts. 
Regard us as the vine You set.

With Your right hand, You planted us 
and made strong Your branch – 
Your Son.

Let Your hand again 
be on the Son of Man, 
Whom You have made strong in us. 
Then we shall not depart from You.

Give us life, 
and we shall remain with You.

Revive us to call on Your Name.

Restore us, oh LORD – God 
of the armies of Heaven, 
and in Your shine, we shall be saved.