

The poor Bible study folks heard all about this this week, so I apologize that they're going to have to hear it again, but the other week, I finished what was categorically one of the best books I've read in eons. I told them the fact that at every turn of our conversation I was finding some connection to this book was a testament to how much it was still kicking around in my head, despite having put it down a week ago. *Beyond the Point* follows the story of three women who enter West Point to play basketball and end up forging a friendship that will take them through the best and absolute worst that military life has to throw at them.

One of the things that ended up surprising me so much about it was that in the midst of so much else going on in this book, faith ended up being a major red thread that ran all the way through. From Hannah's complete and ardent trust in God, the cross necklace she never took off constantly gripped in her hand when she needed strength, to Avery's ardent frustration that she could not reconcile the world she lived in with a loving God, to Dani's kind of middle of the road faith that wanted to desperately trust that God had a plan for her. It kind of reached a boiling point between them in the hours after 9/11, as they all gathered in the home of one of their professors whose wife, Wendy, had taken the three of them under their wing, and in the midst of their abject grief, their stunned silence, Wendy finally

encourages them to pray. Hannah and Dani are ready and raring, finding some sort of quiet certainty in that one thing that they could do, but Avery just *loses her mind*. How are they supposed to pray when it feels like the world is coming to an end? How were they supposed to trust in God if something like this could be allowed to happen? She wants nothing to do with it. Anger and rage just boil out of her as she tries to reconcile the world around her and the faith her friends still seem to have a grip on.

Wendy lets Avery get it all out, all the screaming, all the crying, all the doubt, and ultimately says that for her, the most authentic prayer in the entire Bible is Mary and Martha's lament before Jesus that if he had been there, Lazarus wouldn't have died. She says for her, it perfectly encapsulates what it's like to try and walk in faith in the midst of a world gone mad, because that prayer *is* a faith statement. If they didn't believe in Jesus *so much*, they wouldn't feel like he could have done something to prevent Lazarus dying. Wendy tells her that sometimes lament is the best way to hold your faith, even when it feels small, because if you didn't have even the tiniest flicker of faith, you wouldn't feel like God was the one you should be screaming at in the first place.

Now, I know, you're probably sitting there thinking, what in the world? Did I miss the part where the gospel was about Lazarus this week?

What does this have to do with *anything*? Well...what it has to do with is Jeremiah. Because Jeremiah understood what Mary and Martha understood, Jeremiah understood what Wendy understood. Sometimes the most authentic and heartfelt expression of our faith is just to let God have it for a hot second because that's the only way we can soothe our hearts and come to grips with whatever it is that we're wrestling with, and let's be real, Jeremiah is wrestling with *a lot*.

The bare and honest truth is that Jeremiah's life is not one that anyone would want. The life of any prophet is not what anyone would want, and God makes that super well known to them when they get called, but Jeremiah kind of gets the short end of the prophet stick more than most. Jeremiah gets called to this vocation as a kid. He's a little boy when he is chosen to be a vessel for God's word, and then when he's finally at a point in his life of being able to live into that call, his entire world falls into utter chaos. Whereas other prophets have tiny glimmers of hope, the ability to pull people back from the brink, or promise them hope of a new beginning, Jeremiah from the outset has to be like, y'all this is hopeless. By the time he's able to use his voice to speak for God, all of Israel and Judah are deep in the midst of war and devastation. Jeremiah gets to watch his home get ravaged by war and have every pillar of his faith get torn down, Jerusalem

utterly ransacked and the people taken into exile, and all he can do is basically be like, yup, I told ya this was going to happen.

Everyone around Jeremiah turns against him. His family and friends steered clear of him. People said he was insane, that he was a heretic, that he didn't understand God or the world around him. It left him depressed, angry, and insecure about who he was and the call he had been chosen to follow. So when it gets to be too much, what does he do? He *loses his mind* on God, and that's what we get in our first lesson today. All of his pain, his hardship, his frustration, he just lays at God's feet. You're the one that called me to this and said I could do it. You're the one that has made me a laughingstock. I even have tried to *not* speak your word and you make it burn so deeply within me I *have* to speak out and yet the only words you give me to speak are violence and destruction. I'm exhausted. All my friends have abandoned me. They want to see me fail. Your word has become nothing but an anchor in my heart. Help me. Please. Just help.

His words are laced with bitterness and hurt and just confusion because he doesn't get it. How could this be what God destined him for? How could this be what God called him to? How can there be no words of hope for him to share? And yet...just like Mary and Martha...there's a glimmer of faith that shines through, because Jeremiah knows deep within

him that God is the only one that can help him. He trusts that he can lay all of this at God's feet and that God is the only one that will respond, who will bring retribution and protection. We joked in Bible study that the last verse of our lesson seems totally out of place, like all of this angst and animosity and then it's like stop! Wait a second! Praise God! Alleluia! And it seems completely incongruous to everything that came before. Yet...it's not. Even in the midst of all of his anger, Jeremiah knows, trusts, that God is the be all, end all. God is the one who will deliver him and all of those in need from those who are doing evil. And then if our lesson continued we'd see that he goes right back to just laying it on God hard, but he does that because he knows he can. He can lament and he can praise. He can yell and he can trust. He can be angry and he can have faith. They aren't mutually exclusive, no matter what anyone else might think.

I think often we get stuck in that mentality though, that those things are mutually exclusive. We somehow tell ourselves that we can't get angry at God, or if we do, we at least can't actually *say* anything to God about it! We have to keep those feelings to ourselves, quietly tucked up in our hearts where they fester and burn and just make us feel worse. We think that our faith has to be another place where no matter what is happening we have to put on our happy face and pretend like everything is fine when internally it

feels like everything is falling apart. Yet, over and over again, scripture gives us permission that that just isn't the case. The examples are all over the place, Jeremiah, Mary, Martha, *even Jesus*, sometimes just had to let it all out and scream and cry and just throw their arms in the air and basically ask *why?* Why is this happening? Why is it like this? Why is this thing going on in my life on top of everything else?

I don't know if it's some misguided attempt to fool God into thinking that we have it all put together and handled or if it's simply that we think that faith and angst, faith and lament can't walk hand in hand, that somehow if we're angry at God or upset with the world it means we're less faithful, but whatever it is, we've gotta let it go. Because honestly the world is too heavy currently to not give ourselves permission to honestly rail at God when we need to. All of us, at some point, over the last four months have hit this point—whether it's been Corona angst, heartbreak at race relations, devastation about the health of our loved ones, worry about just the general *everything* of the world—where it's just been too much and the only thing we can do is cry and scream and *lament*, and we can do that without have to feel guilty, without having to feel like our faith is diminished or less than or that we don't trust in God somehow. By laying those things at God's feet, we actually are showing an act of faith, because we're trusting that God is

not only listening, but might be the one source that can help. We aren't faithless because we lament, if anything we're faithful because of it. When we stop lamenting, when we give up, that's when we may need to worry, but if we can still let God have it, then our faith is doing just fine.

God isn't going to stop knowing the hairs on your head just because you yell at God a little bit. God isn't going to stop loving you just because you let out a righteous lamentation that the world feels awful and discipleship feels hard. Jesus himself acknowledges over and over again that faith, mission, discipleship...they're all hard, and there will be days when they feel impossible, but we don't have to hold that by ourselves. We don't have to pretend, we don't have to fake it, we don't have to put up a good front so everyone thinks we're put together or that our faith is perfect. We can let ourselves feel it and we can let it out. We can ask God why none of this has been fixed, we can scream that we don't understand why we have to keep killing each other, we can weep that it all feels too heavy to bear. We can lament and be people of faith, that's kind of the beauty of it honestly. So, people of God, whatever it is that you're feeling today, put together or barely holding on, optimistic or woeful, hopeful or just straight up tired, God has got you through it. If you need to yell, yell. If you need to cry, cry. Let it out. Because no matter what, God loves you. **AMEN!!!**