

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, MAY 10, 2020
“Anguish and Hope” *(Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16)*

As a child coming home from school, I always had my Mom there to greet me. She would ask: “how was your day?” If things had not gone well, she would listen patiently to my tale of woe - I had been chosen last for the baseball team (this was usual since I was singularly inept at the game); my best friend had played with someone else at recess; the teacher wasn't pleased with my class's behaviour so she refused to read to us from the chapter book I was so enjoying. Just when I reached the end of my list and was about to repeat and expand on all my complaints, my Mom would stop me: “You are home now. Time to turn your mind to other things.” I didn't fully understand my Mom's approach back then, but now I appreciate her wisdom. She gave me an opportunity not only to lament - naming my issues, my complaints - but also to open myself to possibility - living fully in the present, and looking to the future with hope.

Perhaps, the psalmists had mothers like mine. Certainly, the author of today's psalm is comfortable with expressing both anguish and hope. He feels as if he has been caught in a net. He knows he is in trouble, and he doesn't hesitate to tell God all about it. I remember as a young adult, starting to study the psalms, how surprised I was to discover that these poets complain loud and long to God. I had assumed that while it was good to praise and thank God for all life's blessings, and right to offer prayers of intercession for family and friends, and troubled situations in the world, we were not supposed to bend God's ear with our complaints. We were to paste on a smile, accept the way things are and try to be grateful. And yet, these people of immense faith, these our respected forebears on the spiritual path, let God knows exactly what they are thinking and feeling. What if we were to follow in their footsteps and allow ourselves to

give voice to our complaints as we talk with God? Can you imagine what that would be like? What impact might it have on us?

As we reflect on our experience, have there been times, when in the presence of a good listener, we have expressed our anguish? Have we stopped ourselves before we have gone very far with an: “Oh, I shouldn’t complain. There are people who are far worse off than I.” That is a true statement. Take our present situation with the pandemic. We may complain that we had travel plans; we were really looking forward to our trip, our much anticipated vacation. But what about the Canadians who were trapped on the Diamond Princess with its COVID-19 outbreak or the ones who couldn’t get home from remote spots like Cuzco, Peru? I may complain about having to do meetings with Zoom video conferencing - I find them far more tiring, and miss the opportunity to socialize informally with my colleagues and friends. But what about individuals who have lost their jobs and have no idea how they are going to manage financially? We may complain about being bored - we have gone through all our books, puzzles and DVDs; we have spring cleaned our house and done all the yard work possible in these unseasonably cold temperatures. But what about those who have actually suffered or are suffering through the virus, and those who have not been able to be with a dying loved one or gather for a funeral or wake? You get the idea. We cut ourselves off before we have really had the chance to express all of our anguish.

Sometimes, it is others who shut us down. Believe it or not, clergy are among the worst with one another. When we first tried to form a female clergy support group in Simcoe Presbytery, we floundered during check-in. One of us would share: “I’m having a bad week - two funerals and I am still struggling with my sermon for Sunday.” Before

she could draw breath to continue, someone else would leap in with: “Well, I’ve had three funerals and a wedding”, and another with: “I’ve had that plus my work for Presbytery.” No one felt heard. No one received much in the way of support until we hired a facilitator to make sure everyone got to speak their entire piece without interruption.

Sometimes, others cut us off, not by trying to one up us with their own tale of woe, but by suggesting that we are just whiners: we are not behaving as mature adults should. Brazil has the most confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Latin America. And yet, President Bolsonaro persists in calling it a “little flu” and urging his people to ignore the “hysteria” and get back to work. According to the President, Brazil should “face the virus like a man, damn it, not like a little boy!”

Sometimes, others stop us in our lament by offering a platitude like: “time heals all wounds”; “life goes on”; “your loved one - whether human being or animal - wouldn’t want you to be sad.” Lesley Parrott’s eleven year old daughter, Alison, was abducted, sexually assaulted, and murdered. As Lesley tried to come to terms with what had happened, as she grieved her loss, she needed to tell her story - not once, but over and over. After about six months, a respected elder in her congregation stopped Lesley, and told her the time had come for her to pick up the pieces of her life and move on. As Lesley commented, she would have been happy if she could have done that, but the gaping wound left by her daughter’s death had not even begun to close. She turned away from him to others who would listen and keep on listening.

Lesley knew, the psalmist knew that there is no value in stuffing down our griefs, our complaints, our laments, our anguish, and pretending everything is alright when it

isn't. That would be like a wound care nurse, looking at a thin crust on top of a pressure sore and declaring her job is done, when what is needed is a long, slow healing from the bottom up. When the psalmists complain about their lives, when they lament the way the world is, when they pour out their grief, they eventually reach the end of the list; they get in touch with just how much is wrong in human society; they experience the depths of their sorrow. It is there, they find hope. Not in the cliches we tend to offer each other - "it'll be okay"; "we'll all get through this somehow" - cliches that might prove true in Disney family productions or the "American, romantic, feel-good movies" currently being shown on the Women's television network, but never in real life.

The psalmists' hope is founded in God. In a world where everything is changing - where what is considered the correct response today to this corona virus may not be tomorrow - where nothing feels dependable - places of worship are closed; long awaited grads and proms are not taking place - we can rely on God. God is our Rock - a sure foundation; something to hold onto when the rivers of life threaten to overwhelm us. We can trust God. God is our Refuge. When we hear that word "refuge", we may think of a specific place - a room in our house where we can just be; the home of a friend, a relative where we are always welcome; a woods, a beach, a garden where we can feel at one with creation. God can be a refuge for us at any time, in any place. We can turn to God, and place our times, our very lives in God's hands, knowing they are safe.

The psalmist moves from expressing anguish - "deliver me"; "come quickly to my rescue" - to hope - "you have redeemed me, O God, of truth". This is not some simple linear progression any more than in grief, we move in a strict orderly fashion through the five stages identified by Kubler-Ross of denial, anger, bargaining, depression,

acceptance. Anguish is not left behind as hope is embraced. These two emotions can and do exist simultaneously. Never is that truer than in a time of crisis like this pandemic. We may be ready to complain - this has gone on too long; we are getting restless - and at the same time, recognize the blessings that have been ours through the disruption of our usual routines. We may feel the anguish of loss - of freedom of movement, of opportunities, of community, of health, of a loved one - and at the same time, hope that with God's help, something good may come out of this - a greater connection with the earth as more people walk, grow vegetables, bake bread; an increased concern for elders and the marginalized who have been hit disproportionately hard by this virus; an openness to new and varied ways of connecting; an increased appreciation for what really matters in life.

Anguish and hope go hand in hand. Thanks be to God who listens patiently to our complaints, our laments, our griefs. Thanks be to God, our Rock, our Refuge, in whom we can hope. Amen.