

For over ten years, my grandmother has used a rocking motion to develop the momentum to roll forward out of a chair and then ever so slowly straighten herself vertical on two bum knees. And several years ago her shoulders gave out so raising a fork to her face was out the question—instead she lowers her head to the table. She feels betrayed by her body and annoyed at the way it holds her back. Without cracking a smile and with no hint of irony, she tells me, “Don’t get old.”

Like many of us, she assumed she would be fine until she died. She would be able to continue to do those activities that defined her and the next day she would cease to be. But instead she’s discovered the need for lament—for complaining to God that things are not like she expected, they’re not fair.

Jane Gross, who writes about the new old age says that most of us want, perhaps even expect, a life free of frailty and vulnerability.¹ Because of new technology, the very nature of aging has changed. We are living longer and dying more slowly. There’s now a horribly long in-between time— that didn’t used to exist-- the time between fine and death. Better healthcare and replacement parts have led us to expect that we can be perfectly healthy one day, playing tennis, swimming, driving – and the next day die. But it rarely happens that way. There is one incremental change then another and another, and you go from being independent to dependent on strangers and family for a longer and longer period. But we like to imagine that in old age we’d be in control, that everything is within our power to fix and make right... and in that, it’s like every other age. We humans don’t want to admit that some things are within our reach, and some are out of our hands. We’d prefer to imagine that we can stop the clock—that we make our own destiny. And we will readily deny any evidence to the contrary.

The lyrics of Alanis Morissette say what’s closer to the truth: things happen that just aren’t according to plan. Like winning the lottery the day before you die, or a black fly in your Chardonnay, like rain on your wedding day, or the good advice that you just didn’t take. It’s a little more than ironic.

Enter the Hebrew people who have just been liberated from their Egyptian captors. They’ve barely been on the road a month when they start reminiscing about the safety and security and lamb stew they had back in Egypt and they say, “If only...” “If only we’d could’ve died on our terms, when our bellies were full and we had work to do.” “If only

we had a permanent home,” “if only we didn’t have to endure the hardship of travel, of sand in our sleeping bags, the uncertainty of our next meal, the blisters on our feet. If only...”

Can’t we understand that desire for a place to belong, the attraction of constancy-- when every day with the Hebrew people is temporary, moving on, the loss of place. You know place is important to everybody. In New Orleans, we saw it when those displaced ones were finally able to see their new homes taking shape, and walk through a finished space, to touch the kitchen faucet, and imagine themselves once again rooted in one place.

Next month, Jews will celebrate the Feast of the Tents, and in backyards all over the world, they will erect a little brush arbor to sleep in where they can see the stars and feel the breeze and perhaps the rain and remember the days in the tents in the wilderness. On one side of the doorway will be a slip of paper attached that says “From God.” On the other side of the doorway another little slip will say, “To God.” And in between, tent. We know this truth in our heads, we come from God, we return to God and everything in between is just moving along. Temporary. But we live in denial. We don’t like all these reminders of the change that is part of life.²

We have enough already—the seasons. In the spring, when the world is a poem of light and color and the meadows are turning somersaults of joy, it doesn’t last long. It gets hot, heat waves come off the asphalt...³

and everybody’s trying to get to the Cape or to stay cool inside. Then comes the school bell and somebody kicks a football, and a little chill like Friday and folks start looking to the trees for the leaves to flame, but not for long.

Pretty soon the bony fingers of the trees will pray to heaven for some cover and down comes the snow to blanket them... And somebody says, “Happy New Year.” Just like that. We have enough reminders. Even our own bodies: look at yourself in the mirror.⁴

How does the joke go? Denial is not just a river in Egypt? Perhaps part of the human condition is to deny that which doesn’t meet our expectations, that which is unpleasant or doesn’t conform to our cultural preferences. So we reach for the latest anti-aging cream the television promises will show dramatic results.

Yet our denial of our impermanent nature does not alter its reality. Still, Psalm 88 is a candid and gut-wrenching account of

circumstances when you perceive your life is like dust, when you feel like you’ve fallen into the pit of despair, when you describe yourself a soil that people walk upon. Perhaps it is understandable that the hymnal does not include many of the Psalms of Lament.

If we do not understand the power of crying out to God, it may be because we’re too busy denying those struggles exist. The consistent ability of most United Methodists to look the other way in the face of denominational policies that discriminate and exclude does not make our polity any less painful. Perhaps that is why the Psalmist chose to name the hard place he found himself in. Perhaps it is why those who have found themselves enslaved, those in the Black church, those in the reconciling movement can embrace a Psalm like this. But if we don’t want to admit the tough places where we find ourselves, how can we cry out from the pit?

In her book, *A Bittersweet Season*, Jane Gross describes the difficulty in making decisions about her mother’s care when it became clear that her mom could no longer manage on her own. Jane said she sped through things, uncomfortable to think about the possibilities that the in-between time for her mom might be long-term. And as she and her brother negotiated the decision-making process and her mom’s on-going needs, they butted heads over and over again. In retrospect, it was helpful she said, when her and brother stopped denying patterns of relating formed in childhood and were able to name that the arguments boiled down to some version of the wound, “Mother loved you more than me.”⁵ They learned the wisdom of moving beyond denial, of acknowledging the situation, of naming it, however bad. They experienced the power of “being present” rather than “being in control.” She called it, “living into the present” and it was necessary for that bittersweet season. Life is like that sometimes the Psalmist cries out, life sometimes has more than its share of lament, there’s no sense denying it.

¹ From “**On Being with Krista Tippett**” interviewing Jane Gross (7/21/2011) on NPR.

² From *The Collected Sermons of Fred Craddock* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) 6.

³ From *The Collected Sermons of Fred Craddock* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) 6.

⁴ From *The Collected Sermons of Fred Craddock* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) 6.

⁵ From “**On Being with Krista Tippett**” interviewing Jane Gross (7/21/2011) on NPR.