

PRE-SERMON READING

John 11:32-43

Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled...Jesus wept...Then, Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb...he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out.'

Luke 19:41-42

And when [Jesus] drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying 'Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.'

Matthew 26:36-46

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here, while I go over there and pray.' And...he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and keep awake with me.' And going a little further, he fell on his face and prayed, saying, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.' And he came to his disciples and found them sleeping...Again, for a second time, he went away and prayed, 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.' And again he came away and found them sleeping...So, leaving them...he went away and prayed for a third time, saying the same words again.

Mark 15:34

And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

Luke 23:46

Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!'

John 19:28-30

Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said to fulfill the Scripture, 'I thirst.' A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, 'It is finished,' and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Introducing Lament

November 1, 2020



There is a question we regularly ask as a faith family: “What does it mean to **follow Jesus?**” How we answer this question profoundly shapes our life together. Fundamentally, we believe that following Jesus is to respond to Jesus’ invitation to **be continuously in His presence** with the aim of **inheriting His character** and **imitating His actions**. Being a disciple of Jesus gives us three goals by which we orient our shared life: being with Jesus,

becoming like Jesus, and doing what Jesus did. And so every few months, we circle back to the question, “What does it mean to follow Jesus as Christ City Church, in east Dallas, in our moment in salvation history?”

This month, we’ll ask that question through the goal of doing what Jesus did. To **do what Jesus did** is to enter the kingdom of God as peacemakers in our everyday roles and relationships, co-laboring with Jesus in cultivating a good world as we join in with God’s will being done on earth as it is in heaven. It is taking up the exhortation that Jesus gave us to stay salty and not to hide the light of a life lived in imitation of his.

One thing we see Jesus doing throughout his life and ministry, most clearly the events leading up to and including his death on the cross, is lamenting. Holly and Reagan read several of Jesus’ laments to us just a few moments ago.

If you remember, the last time we focused on this goal of discipleship, we looked at how Jesus “increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man.” (Lk 2:52). We recognized that Jesus, who ministered and spoke what the Father communicated to him, learned to recognize his heavenly Father’s voice and heart through his community and customs as a first-century Palestinian Jew. He matured through routine common worship, habitual recollected prayer, and through the basic language training of the psalms. It is these very psalms that Jesus used to voice his laments throughout his ministry and especially in his final hours before his death. Each of the laments read above contains direct quotations or clear allusions to the individual psalms of lament. Specifically, psalms 31, 42, 69, but most abundantly, Psalm 22. Let me read this psalm to us, and as I do, keep in mind the experience of Jesus in his final days and hours, what he felt and experienced in light of what he believed to be true of himself and his Father.

READ [PSALM 22](#)

Isaiah 53:3 describes the one who will bring salvation from the suffering of sin and evil, the one we know to be Jesus, as a man “despised and rejected...a man of sorrows (pains), and acquainted with grief..” Hebrews 5:7-8 explicitly calls Jesus a lamenter, claiming that,

“In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him [out of] death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.”

Jesus, as we have heard, cries out to God in the face of trouble (the pain of friends, the sin of his people, and the threat of his own death), and God hears and helps him. As we'll discover, this is the basic pattern of lament in our scriptures through which Jesus learned to lament. What we see in Jesus is one who lamented, even as he was the one who answered our laments.

Now lamenting may not be the first thing that comes into your mind when you think about doing what Jesus did, or even a practical and tangible way of cultivating a good world. But, what we will see, and begin to practice this month, is that **lamenting prepares us** for the good works God has fashioned beforehand for us to walk in (Eph. 2:10). And I contend that **lamenting may be the most urgent and productive action for our faith family and a majority of the American church at this moment.**

Today, my goal is to introduce us to lament, specifically biblical lament. I'll do so by addressing two fundamental questions:

- What is lament? (And what it is not)
- What does lament do?

But before we get there, let's quickly acknowledge that lamenting is not our preferred mode of worship, much less ministry. We don't like sadness, especially as modern Christians. Just listen to our songs, and you'll recognize our bent away from grief and towards victory. For instance, the mainline traditions (Lutheran, Episcopalian, Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist) have a set order of worship that includes the psalms in weekly use. One researcher found that most unincorporated psalms in these denominations "books of worship" are lament psalms. The same researcher found that the songs sung in evangelical denominations are just as lacking in lament, only able to classify 13% of the Church of Christ, 19% of the Presbyterian, and 13% of the Baptist hymn books songs as laments. The trend is even worse for popular "church worship," with only 5% of CCLI's most accessed songs qualifying as non-triumphant, much less, lament.¹

The problem with this trend is it runs counter to our scriptural songbook: the psalms. Of the 150 psalms, one can classify between 40-70% as laments. The psalms preponderance of lament reflects the universal human impulse to give voice to pain. A practice shared across every human culture throughout history but often neglected in our experience of "church."

I know many in our faith family have suffered the community of faith as the least inviting place to voice pain. The songs sung and victories preached left little room to share the pain of wounded relationships or difficult circumstances or disappointments, depression or emotional fatigue, as well as pain from societal oppression or ethnic and economic prejudice or any number of social ills. The lack of space is lamentable, for our biblical history is replete with lament.

So what is lament? **Lament, at its most basic level, is a passionate expression of grief or sorrow**—and by that, I mean passion as Barth describes it as "a person's suffering from an unfulfilled desire which seeks fulfillment."² **Lament is a spoken prayer or protest, brought forth out of suffering.** Lament most often rises from a place of powerlessness (dispossession, oppression, and marginalization). Accompanying lament is the

¹ Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: a call for justice in troubled times*, 22.

² Karl Barth quoted by Rebekah Eklund, *Lord, Teach Us How to Grieve: Jesus' laments and Christian hope*, 229.

longing for change. “Inherent in the longing of lament is the pain of a world that should, or could, be otherwise.”³ The sounds projected from our nation's streets over the last six months—not to discount the continuous nature of these voices often out decibel-ed or ignored—is nothing less than the universal human lament: a voiced prayer and protest in response to suffering (one’s own or a neighbor's). A longing which our scriptures and our Savior share in and validate, but with one crucial distinction.

All human lament makes pain audible to the community of the suffering, to the enemy or agitator of suffering, and, at times, to the divine who presumably can aid the suffering. Yet biblical lament is “a persistent cry for salvation [for change, healing, rescue, justice] to a particular God who promises to save, in a situation of suffering and sin, in the confident hope that this God hears and responds to cries, and acts now and in the future to make whole.”⁴

“Lament in the Bible,” argues pastor and professor Soong-Chan Rah, “is a liturgical response [has form and a formula] to the reality of suffering and engages God in the context of pain and trouble. The hope of lament is that God would respond to human suffering that is wholeheartedly communicated through lament.”⁵ The pattern of the lament, or form, we are given in our and Jesus’ “school of prayer” looks like this:

1. Lament begins by invoking the name of God. The **appeal**, “My God, my God!” or “How long O LORD!” frames the lament as prayer.
2. Lament continues by describing the **complaint or problem**. In the psalms, the problem could be God himself, his perceived absence or silence amid challenging circumstances, the apparent injustice of the world of which he is Lord, or even the weight of his wrath. The complaint may be against others who are wronging us—with maliciousness or indifference—or against ourselves for fickle hearts and poor decisions.
 - a. Sometimes the laments will then include a confession of sin or assertion of innocence.
 - b. Sometimes they may also contain a motive for why God should hear and help.
3. All laments eventually include a **petition**—as request or demand—for help, specifically for God to help. “The lament always pleads for God to act: Hear! Save! Help! Vindicate! Heal! Rescue!”⁶
 - a. Sometimes, the laments will then include a spoken curse against enemies as hearts rend open.
4. Nevertheless, all biblical laments (except for Psalm 88 and Lamentations 5) include a voiced certainty of being heard, acknowledging divine help in the past, present, and/or future. The **confession of trust** or assurance of God’s hearing most often begins with a “But” or “Nevertheless.”
 - a. Finally, in some laments, a vow or pledge by the sufferer is made to God after receiving help.

³ Eklund, 77.

⁴ Eklund, 245.

⁵ Rah, 21.

⁶ Eklund, 12.

Our psalmitic training ground for lament gives us **four major movements in the practice of lament**: invocation (appeal), complaint, petition, and trusting confession. These four elements make up the form or liturgy of lament.

One distinct quality of biblical lament is **that enacting the personal lament psalms was a part of the public community worship and usually accompanied by other ritual expressions of grief and joy**. So lamenting, while individually experienced, was limited by form (structure) most often done with the community. We'll talk more about these "boundaries" of lament throughout the month.

Now here is the thing we need to pay attention to as we incorporate the practice of the lament into our faith family rhythms. **The cry for help (for God's saving actions to heal, redeem, show mercy, justify, rescue, restore, or bring shalom) always "occurs within the framework of a particular relationship and is addressed to a specific God..."** This God, argues Rebekah Eklund, is "the creator, who made all of humanity...[who is] the God of Israel, who made promises to bless and protect and be her God. God's self-proclaimed character as a God of [steadfast love] provides the foundation for the lament. [The lamenter] asserts her claim based on God's prior covenant promises [and kingship]."7

Lamenting, at its foundation, makes a "righteous" claim or challenge to God to be faithful to his promises and to his character. Remember what we have said about righteousness; it is "a term that denotes relationship. Every relationship makes claims on conduct and 'the satisfaction of those claims, which issue from the relationship and in which alone the relationship can persist, is described by our term [righteousness]."8 When we cry out, using the form of lamentation, we are mixing mourning with a hunger and thirst for righteousness, **petitioning (challenging), and trusting God to be faithful and responsible to those he has created, covenanted, and over whom he reigns**. Lamenting requires stubborn faith, a refusal to accept the world in any other way than God intends it. Lamenting refuses to let God go. That's what Job is doing in his lament. As Allen Verhey notes, "Job bears witness to a fidelity that is 'neither prudence nor pragmatism.' Rather, Job addresses God 'from the edge of hell.' His lament turns him toward God, and 'that turning toward God—even if only for the sake of confronting God, even if only for the sake of accusing God—turned Job away from the place God was not.'"9

Biblical lament depends on the assumption that attacks from enemies, illness, oppression, violence, inequality, shame, brokenness, racism, etc., are not merely wrong in a general sense, but "they violate something about this relationship with this particular God." Lament contends that suffering disrupts God's promises to be a faithful God to his people and to bring salvation to them." Lament presupposes God is faithful to his intent and in his character, that he is present to hear the cries of his creation, and that he is willing and able to act to save.

Biblical lament is "a persistent cry for salvation to the God who promises to save, in a situation of suffering and sin, in the confident hope that this God hears and responds to cries, and acts now and in the future to make whole."¹⁰ **So what does lamenting do? Why is it essential for us to lament?**

⁷ Eklund, 14.

⁸ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: cultural studies in the gospels*, 77-78.

⁹ Eklund, n81.

¹⁰ Eklund, 245.

I believe that lament prepares us to share (receive and participate) in salvation (in peacemaking). Each of Jesus' laments is in preparation for entering into brokenness to bring wholeness. While not all ministry requires lamenting as a prerequisite, when entering the very heart of sin and sin's effects, we must enter as mourners. Lamenting prepares us:

- By attuning our hearts to the heart of our heavenly Father
 - "Learning to pray lament...means learning to seek and speak to God in the midst of pain,"¹¹ our own and our neighbors, whether we voice conflict speech (towards God or unjust systems) or penitence or anger or sorrow or cries for help. "Contemporary American culture...goes to great lengths to avoid pain, aging, and death. Lament has no such qualms. Rather, in lament the one who suffers tells the truth about the extent of their pains, before God and in community.

Learning to lament and to hear lament means...learning to ache for all the ways the world remains unredeemed, for ourselves and for others, and...to long more ardently [passionately] for the cessation of pain and tears," which is what our Father longs for as well.

Through practicing biblical, personal, and communal lament, we attune our hearts to our Father's and find that we begin to mourn things we might not otherwise long to end or change otherwise. Pains we readily overlook, wounds we are too ashamed to heal, suffering we are too timid to comfort.

- By cultivating solidarity with our brothers and sisters
 - Lamenting, as a faith family, helps us "learn to see the suffering of others." In mourning together, "our ears become attuned to 'the anger, despair, loneliness, and terror of others, more loudly than our own'" Lamenting, "as a prayer of the community...becomes intercession for the other in solidarity with our neighbors."¹²

As Latasha Morris reminds us, "Lamenting something horrific that has taken place allows a deep connection to form between the person lamenting and the harm that was done, and that emotional connection is the first step in creating a pathway to healing and hope," to reconciliation and wholeness.¹³

- By purifying our agendas (nothing hidden)
 - When we enter into communal lament, no matter where we are personally, our hearts are exposed, made vulnerable by the pain of others to the pain we cause others. We cannot regularly lament with hidden agendas, they will surface, and as we cry out to God to be faithful to what he says he will do, we cannot avoid his sanctifying presence and salvation.
- By imprisoning us in hope

¹¹ Elkund, 246.

¹² Patrick Miller, quotes in Eklund, 256.

¹³ Latasha Morris, 39.

- Biblical lament is bookend by faith in God’s character and promises on the front end and hope in God’s intent and ability to act on the back end. Lamenting does not allow us to skip over the protest and complaint, nor petition. Still, neither does lament let what orients us (our identity or conclusion) be the pain we experience. Lament instead admits our need for assistance in our vulnerable condition between Christ’s resurrection and the full consummation of his kingdom. Lamenting in the Spirit, as Paul describes in Romans 8, strengthens us in a relationship with the Holy Spirit for a patient, enduring, and active hope. In the words of Zechariah (9:12) and Cornel West, we become “prisoners of hope.”

We’ll elaborate on these affects of lament as we practice the form of lament together over the coming weeks. For now, let us voice a lament together, recognizing that even if our prayer today “is not my own prayer, it is nevertheless the prayer of another member of the community,”¹⁴ this faith family and the family of God in our city.

COMMUNION | Grab your communion elements, and enter into this psalm of communal lament, with its echos in our world today:

*Rise up, O judge of the earth;
 repay the proud what they deserve!
 How long, O LORD, shall the wicked,
 how long shall the wicked glory?
 They pour out their arrogant words;
 all the evildoers boast.
 They crush your people, O LORD,
 and afflict your heritage.
 They kill the widow and the sojourner,
 and murder the fatherless;
 and they say, ‘The LORD does not see;
 the God of Jacob does not perceive.’*

*Can wicked rulers be allied with you,
 those who frame injustice by statute?
 The band together against the life of the
 righteous
 and condemn the innocent to death.
 But the LORD has become my stronghold,
 and my God the rock of my refuge.*

*Who rises up for me against the wicked?
 Who stands up for me against
 evildoers?*

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together, ___

*If the LORD had not been my help
my soul would soon have lived in the
land of silence.*

*When I thought, 'My foot slips,'
your steadfast love, O LORD, held
me up.*

*When the cares of my heart are many,
your consolations cheer my soul.*

(Psalm 94:2-7, 20-21, 16-19)

We know you hear the cries of your creation and your children, for your Son's body was broken, and his blood spilled so that what is fractured could be whole. With Jesus and one another, we cry out: Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.