

CALL TO WORSHIP<sup>1</sup>

**Lamb of God, Jesus,  
you take away the sins of the world.  
Have mercy on us.  
Grant us peace.**

For the unbearable toil of our sinful world, **we plead for remission.**  
For the terror of absence from our beloveds, **we plead for our comfort.**  
For the scandalous presence of death in your creation, **we plead for the resurrection.**

**Lamb of God, Jesus,  
you take away the sins of the world.  
Have mercy on us.  
Grant us peace.**

Come, Holy Spirit, and heal all that is broken in our lives, in our streets, and in our world. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

PSALM 38 (MSG)

Take a deep breath, God; calm down – don't be so hasty with your punishing rod.  
Your sharp-pointed arrows of rebuke draw blood; my backside smarts from your caning.

I've lost twenty pounds in two months because of your accusation.  
My bones are brittle as dry sticks because of my sin.  
I'm swamped by my bad behavior, collapsed under fifty-pound grain sacks of guilt.

The cuts in my flesh stink and grow maggots because I've lived so badly.  
And now I'm flat on my face feeling sorry for myself morning to night.  
All my insides are on fire, my body is a wreck.  
I'm on my last legs; I've had it – my life is a vomit of groans.

Lord, my longings are sitting in plain sight, my groans an old story to you.  
My heart's about to break; I'm a burned-out case.  
Cataracts blind me to God and good; old friends avoid me like the plague.  
My kin never visits, my neighbors stab me in the back.  
My competitors sour my name, devoutly they pray for my ruin.  
But I'm deaf and mute to it all, ears shut, mouth shut.  
I don't hear a word they say, don't speak a word in response.  
What I do, GOD, is wait for you, wait for my Lord, my God—you *will* answer!  
I wait and pray so they won't laugh me off, won't smugly strut off when I stumble.

I'm on the edge of losing it – the pain in my gut keeps burning.  
I'm ready to tell my story of failure, I'm no longer smug in my sin.  
My enemies are alive and in action, a lynch mob after my neck.  
I give out good and get back evil from God-haters who can't stand a God-lover.

Don't dump me, GOD; my God, don't stand me up.  
Hurry and help me; I want some wide-open space in my life

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from *Common Prayer: a liturgy for ordinary radicals*, 555.

# Lament as Preparation

November 15, 2020



“The lament of Israel is fundamentally a protest, calling on God to account for the way things are wrong in the world, and demanding that God listen and respond—to set right what is wrong, mend what is broken, and bring light to the darkness—just as it is God’s essential character to do so. God is a God of mercy: let there be mercy! God is a God of justice: let there be judgment on the enemy and the evildoer!

When Israel and Jesus lament, it is God’s faithfulness to God’s promises that are at stake.”<sup>2</sup>

The primary lament of both Jesus and the Jewish people is the lament of protest. Laments longing for change that assumes not only that the world is not as it should be, but that the “not-ness” is a violation, a disruption of God’s promises to be faithful to his people, to be rich in mercy, and sure to save. These laments assume attacks from enemies—whether enemies be named nations, oppressive structures, cruel neighbors, hurtful friends, or toxic culture—and bouts form illness—whether personal or pandemic—as well as suffering loss and suffering survival, are “not merely wrong in a general sense, but that they violate something about [God’s covenant] relationship”<sup>3</sup> with his people for the blessing of the entire world.

While passionate expressions of suffering as protest are the primary lament of our Old Testament and Jesus, there is also lament that is penitential in character. That is, laments that mourn and repent of sin. While we suffer because of the world’s sin, we also suffer because of our own sin. These laments of penitence often admit guilt while protesting that guilt requires mercy, for our Father is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Ex. 34:67). For example, “Moses admits Israel’s wrongdoing [after the whole golden calf incident] while still protesting God’s plan to destroy Israel. The psalmist[s] regularly confesses his sin and begs for God’s mercy amid lament [much like Ryan read for us a few moments ago].”<sup>4</sup> Even the most righteous, most godly, most respectable people Israel can produce cry out in confession the people’s sin as their own. Men like Jeremiah, the faithful prophet, whose life is a testimony to suffering for righteousness sake. Even he cries out as a fellow sinner in Lamentation 3:40-42 saying,

Let us test and examine our ways,  
and return to the LORD!  
Let us lift up our hearts and hands  
to God in heaven:  
‘We have transgressed and rebelled,  
and you have not forgiven.’

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<sup>2</sup> Rebekah Eklund, *Lord, Teach Us to Grieve: Jesus’ laments and Christian hope*, 82.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

By all accounts, Jeremiah himself had not transgressed or rebelled but was the last faithful voice in Jerusalem. Yet he joins with his brothers and sisters of past and present to lament their sin **as his own**. Take also the example of Daniel, the one who made it through the lions' den, who would not bow to cultural law—much less pressure—to put God in the background. This famed man of righteousness wrote in Daniel 9: 1-10, 15, 18-19,

'...I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession saying, 'O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke your name to our kings, our princes, our fathers, and to all the people of the land. To you, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us open shame...because we have sinned against you. To the Lord our God belongs mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God by walking in his laws...And now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand...we have sinned, we have done wickedly.

...we do not present our pleas before you because of our righteousness, but because of your great mercy. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act...because your...people are called by your name.'

Again, Daniel is the prime example of a righteous man amid an unrighteous world, and yet he confesses and repents of sin—past and present. His own and his people's.

It is the propensity to confess sin that has dominated most Christian traditions practice of lament. As Stefan Nitsche argues, "we can say that in a certain sense the confession of sin has become *the* Christianized form of the lament."<sup>5</sup> This is part of the reason many of us are more comfortable confessing our individual sins than we are protesting the suffering of others. Yet in the narratives and prayers of our faith heritage, there exists "No neat division" between the laments of "penitence, petition, protestation, and complaint."<sup>6</sup> Rather, all such laments, as Walter Brueggemann notes, find unison in that they are "complaints that *anticipate restoration*."<sup>7</sup>

As Soong-Chan Rah unpacks for us,

"Spiritual renewal emerges as Gods' people engage in a corporate confession of sin, and sincere repentance moves the community toward a changed and renewed life.

...preconditions for renewal involve the awareness of the holiness of God's justice and the awareness of the depth of sin in our own lives and in our community. Confession propels the community to imagine a world beyond their current state of sinful existence...The reality of corporate sin requires the

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Eklund, n45, 83.

<sup>6</sup> Eklund, 84-85.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Eklund, 85.

power of corporate confession...Confession acknowledges our need for God and opens the door for God's intervention. Confession in lament relies on God's work for redemption."<sup>8</sup>

Remember what we said last week, what we've learned over this month so far, as a practice, biblical, Jesus-imitated lament takes place within the community of our Scriptures, the church universal and ultimately in the company of Jesus as both an act of intimate trust and to train us to hear the laments of our neighbors and *prepare us to participate in peacemaking*. Lament prepares us to share (receive and participate) in salvation (in peacemaking).

Lament syncs our heart with our heavenly Father's and develops within us the beating "urgency about the deadly ways of the powers" of this world. In lament, we find ourselves shoulder to shoulder in the throws of all the "little deaths" scattered within our daily stories. Together, as ones who feel the weight of sin (ours and others), who feel the pain and loss of those around us, and feel the Father's tears over suffering and judgment, we raise "the voice of public justice"<sup>9</sup> and righteousness. **Because our Father takes the laments of his children seriously, because he not only validates our praise but our protests as well, we are not crushed by suffering or shame. Instead, we find ourselves in "genuine covenant interaction" with the Lord our God, who is merciful and mighty, who hears and acts.**

**In biblical lament, we take the initiative in our this relationship with God;** we cry out to him and find that we, like Jesus, are strengthened by this relationship (his Spirit) for responsible faith. In a mutual dynamic relationship with God through lament, we challenge God to act righteously (living up to his character and purposes and promises) in his relationship with you and me. Thus we too are challenged ourselves to take responsibility, to do justice, love kindness, pursue righteousness, walk humbly, and boldly in what we know and what we share with God—his heart.

Paul in 2 Corinthians 7:10-11 helps us see that though lament is distressful, our least favorite form of ministry and worship, it is nevertheless **preparatory for a life of peacemaking**. He says,

Distress that drives us to God does that. It turns us around. It gets us back in the way of salvation. We never regret that kind of pain. But those who let distress drive them away from God are full of regrets, end up on a deathbed of regrets.

And now, isn't it wonderful all the ways in which this distress has goaded you closer to God? You're more alive, more concerned, more sensitive, more reverent, more human, more passionate, more responsible. Looked at from any angle, you've come out of this with purity of heart.

From the penitence (confession and repentance) and the protest of lament, we find ourselves seeing God clearly (the promised gift of the pure in heart in Matthew 5:8), which is that final component for us to be peacemakers (Matt. 5:9). Like Jesus, we lament because of and alongside others, so that we might enter into

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<sup>8</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: a call for justice in troubled times*, 130-131.

<sup>9</sup> Rah, 177.

brokenness as salt and light, doing what it is the Father would have us do from the compassion of his power. And so we practice lament.

So let us lament as confession and protest his morning. Such an act will be distressing in experience but preparing in its effects. Remember Daniel's words from earlier? Let me reread them for us,

'...I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession saying, 'O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules. We have not listened to your servants the prophets...To you, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us open shame...because we have sinned against you...for we have rebelled against [you] and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God by walking in his laws...we have sinned, we have done wickedly.

...we do not present our pleas [our laments of confession and protest] before you because of our righteousness, but because of your great mercy. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act...because your...people are called by your name.'

Daniel understood the power of the practice of lament. Not in some magical way, but in a real and relational way with the ONE who is power himself. So, let us follow in the faithful's pattern before us and practice a lament of confession for our sins—personally and corporately. As Rah said, "the reality of corporate sin requires the power of corporate confession."

For the last six or so months, a group within our faith family has been seeking to learn about and lament the history and present conditions of the racial divide in our country. We've been searching after our heavenly Father's heart for justice. And we've been listening to the voices of sisters and brothers who have and are suffering, much like we did last week through the lament Ally read for us. We've done all this in the hopes of becoming peacemakers. And, while we could corporately confess general sin, the power of lament as Daniel demonstrated and Jesus practiced, was not in its generality but its specifics.

Steven Lakkis once wrote, "If the churches ignore their own entanglement in structural sin, sanctify their expression of [a middle-class] existence and, in denial, repress the memory that the Way of Jesus Christ is deeply linked with suffering—that there can be no resurrection without death—then they will find it difficult to offer up authentic, constructive lament; and they will always be subject to the divine challenge: do you think you have any right to be angry?"<sup>10</sup> That's what God asked Jonah (4:4) when Jonah lamented from a clouded and clogged sinful heart, rather than from the clarity, purity, of confession and protest.

So, as we begin to incorporate lament as rhythmic and responsive practice within our faith family, let us begin so from a place of clarity, from confession. Leslie, along with Ally, has been leading many in our faith family towards God's heart for racial reconciliation, will be guiding us in a penitent lament for our past as a nation

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted by Eklund, n32, 259.

and as a church, and for our present as Jesus followers. She will speak for us in parts, but the yellow words we will speak together.

Go ahead and grab your communion elements, for we'll conclude our lament in receiving them. Please stand with me as we lament together.

## A LITURGY OF CONFESSION AND COMMUNION<sup>11</sup>

Leader

Gracious Father, we long to be made right in our standing with you, our relationship with one another, and our understanding of ourselves.

We need to view our sin and its effects through the same eyes as you, heavenly Father.  
We desire to have the posture of the Son toward our enemies and neighbors.  
We want to have the wisdom of the Spirit informing our thoughts about ourselves.

Gracious Father, we desire to receive the remedy for the infection that has spread into our minds, our families, our churches, our society, and our government. We long for healing and deliverance inaugurated through the supernatural release of confession in lament before you.

Show us the way to freedom through the honest uncovering and affirmation of our sins—as individuals and as your people and as a nation. Help us to be moved to the pursuit of truth—truth in our deepest parts and our daily lives.

Group

**Holy Spirit, empower our confession and lament.**

Leader

Father, we confess that we dwell in a nation built on the backs of the oppressed. Violence, bloodshed, and oppression were the means by which our nation acquired large parts of its wealth and dominance. We recognize that a structure of racial oppression was formed at the beginning of our nation's history, a system that, instead of being eradicated, has, in many cases, simply been adjusted to be palatable with the changing times.

Gracious Father, we confess that most often, the church has played a role in establishing, cultivating, and protecting the foundations of the structural oppression that exists in our nation. We confess that the church has taken part in injustice and has often failed to protect your image-bearers in its pursuit of political power, security, and willful ignorance. The body of Christ is meant to display your grace, compassion, and righteousness to the world, but our self-interest and comfort have taken priority over loving our neighbors. We have been willing to ignore the example and words of our Savior Jesus Christ in the pursuit of our own agendas.

Group

**Holy Spirit, we cry out as you convict us.**

Leader

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<sup>11</sup> Adapted from the liturgy written by Jennifer Botzet, found in Latisha Morrison, *Be The Bridge: pursuing Gods heart for racial reconciliation*, 120-123.

Father, we confess as a church that we have modified the meaning of the gospel to justify our lack of effort to pursue justice for the oppressed. We have altered the nature of the gospel message in order to remain focused on our personal piety at the expense of caring for the needs of others. We confess we have created a gospel that is manageable so as to avoid entering into the pain, struggle, and discomfort of bearing one another's burdens—and therefore, we have failed to fulfill the law of Christ.

Gracious Father, we confess we have been complacent in the very areas where you command us to labor. We have been lazy in our pursuit of right knowledge and action toward the things that reflect your heart. We have leaned back on the excuse of emotional fatigue as a way to avoid leaning into our call of bringing your image to bear in the brokenness as peacemakers. Preferring "the absence of tension...to...the presence of justice."

Group

**Holy Spirit, you know the grievous ways amongst us, lead us in your way everlasting.**

Leader

Father, forgive us.

Group

**Father, forgive us for how these sins—our sins—have contributed to the continued oppression of our fellow image-bearers.**

**Forgive us for how our complacency and self-interest have prevented those in pain and suffering from receiving healing.**

**Forgive us for how our pursuit of security, safety, and power has prevented those in bondage from being released.**

**Forgive us for how our neglect of the true gospel of Jesus Christ has allowed a system of injustice to flourish and thrive.**

**Forgive us for failing in these things and not glorifying your name in all the earth.**

**Holy Spirit, empower us in our confession.**

Leader

Gracious Father, may our confession lay the groundwork for us to have renewed minds to hunger and thirst after righteousness. May our lament enable us to have a posture towards you, toward one another, and toward ourselves that models the one who sets the captives free, Jesus Christ. May our penitent laments be catalysts in the pursuit of renewal as we joyfully labor to bring your kingdom to bear for all—for the oppressed and the oppressor.

Please take hold of your communion elements, and join with me in saying...

Group

**May our confession pave the way to freedom.**

**May our lament bring about healing.**

**May our penitence unleash deliverance.**

**Together we confess our sins, protest the way things are, and receive mercy, reconciliation, and responsibility through the one who suffered with those who suffer, died for those who sin, and rose again that we might share in new life, his life, forevermore. We receive this bread, his body broken, and this juice, his blood poured out for us, as forgiveness and a call to make peace. In Jesus' name, amen.**

Song

## Song

### BENEDICTION | PSALM 101

Our theme song is God's love and justice,  
and we're singing it right to, our GOD.  
We're finding our way down the road of right living,  
but how long, O LORD, before you show up?  
We're doing the very best we can,  
and we're doing it at home, where it counts.  
We refuse to take a second look  
at corrupting people and degrading things.  
We reject made-in-America gods,  
staying clear of contamination.  
The crooked in heart keep their distance;  
we refuse to shake hands with those who plan evil.  
We put a gag on the gossip  
who bad-mouths his neighbor;  
we can't stand arrogance.  
But we have our eyes on salt-of-the-earth people –  
they're the ones we want working with us;  
Men and women on the straight and narrow –  
these are the ones we want at our side.  
But no one who traffics in lies  
gets a job with us; we have no patience for liars.  
We've rounded up all the wicked like cattle  
and herded them right out of the country.  
May we purge GOD's city  
of all who make a business of evil.