

PRE-SERMON READING

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1, 9:7-11, 17-20

My joy is gone; **grief is upon me;**
my heart is sick within me.
Behold, the cry of the daughter of my people
from the length and breadth of the land:

'Is the LORD not in Zion?
Is her King not in her?'
'Why have they provoked me to anger
with their carved images and with their foreign idols?'
'The harvest is past, the summer is ended,
and we are not saved.'

**For the wound of the daughter of my
people is my heart wounded;**
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me.

Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then has the health of the daughter of my people
not been restored?

Oh that my head were waters,
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
that I might weep day and night
for the slain of the daughter of my people!

Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts:
'Behold, I will refine them and test them,
for what else can I do, because of my people?
Their tongue is a deadly arrow;
it speaks deceitfully;
with his mouth each speaks peace to his neighbor,
but in his heart he plans an ambush for him.
Shall I not punish them for these things?
declares the LORD,
and shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this?

'I will take up weeping and wailing for the mountains,
and a lamentation for the pastures of the wilderness,
because they are laid waste so that no one passes through...
I will make Jerusalem...and...the cities of Judah a desolation without inhabitant.'

Thus says the LORD of hosts:
'Consider, and call for the mourning women to come,
send for the skilled women to come;
let them make haste and raise a wailing over us,
that our eyes may run down with tears
and our eyelids flow with water.

For a sound of wailing is heard from Zion:
'How **we** are ruined!
We are utterly shamed,
because we have left the land,
because they have cast down our
dwellings.'

Hear, O women, the word of the LORD,
and let your ear receive the word of his mouth;
teach your daughters a lament,
and each to her neighbor a dirge.

Learning Lament Together

November 8, 2020



Jeremiah 8-9 is a confounding text in our scriptural heritage. In these chapters, the prophet Jeremiah's voice and the voice of God so co-mingle that commentators and scholars have a difficult time determining who is speaking at any given moment. But the shared voice of the Message giver and the messenger is not the only confounding aspect of this text; so too is the emotion. In these verses, God mourns. "for the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded," God laments. With "a fountain of

tears," He cries out in passionate distress over the sin of his people and over his own impending judgment. God enters into a lament with the sufferers (the "we's" and "us"). He mourns over the brokenness of his people—even the sin of which they were complicit. And he laments the measures required in his judgment and for their salvation, "weeping and wailing," the consequences of sin's judgment. And here, amidst His own lamenting, God tells us to "Consider" (give attention to) and "call for" (seek out) the mourning women, ones skilled in grieving so that they may teach **us** to lament, to sing out a dirge (a death song like the one Jesus sang over Jerusalem in [Matthew 23:37-39](#) and [Luke 19:41-44](#), which we read [last week](#)).

Lament, this liturgical (having form in a community), passionate expression of pain (grief, sorrow, anger), is something learned, and best learned by those who have suffered most, "skilled" in the necessity of lament. It seems we are not all accomplished at lamenting, but that we are all meant to participate so that our eyes may run down with tears, and our eyelids flow with water as Jeremiah—or God—said should be our response to sin and pain and loss.

Remember what we said biblical lament was [last week](#): 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."¹ It begins with an appeal, is accompanied by a complaint and then a petition before turning on a confession of trust. These spoken prayers of protest and penitence have "boundaries," a framework or structure which encapsulate lament within particular relationships as they are enacted as a community (though certainly having an individual dimension and place in a private setting). This morning, we will briefly look at how lament is **formed within** and **gives form to** a community. In other words, how we learn to lament together.

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 (more on those last two parts next week).

As we learned, "When Jesus laments, he uses the prayerbook of Israel—the [Psalms]...By implication, this means that Christian lament is a continuation of the practice of lament as articulated in the Old Testament and a joining with the longing of Israel for redemption and restoration."² Our faith is a Jewish faith, at least its

¹ Rebekah Eklund, *Lord, Teach Us How to Grieve: Jesus' laments and Christian hope*, 245.

² *Ibid.*, 249.

origin. We should not leave the Jewishness of our scriptures, for as Jesus told his disciples in his sermon on the mountainside, he did not come to abolish the Scriptures but to make them full, to fill them up. The fact that Jesus placed himself as the lamenter through the psalms in his life and ministry means we do the same. And not just the psalms. Rebekah Eklund³ explains,

[Lamenting as Jesus did] means most simply continuing to lament using Israel’s prayers—allowing the laments of Israel in the Psalter, the prophets, and the Pentateuch [Torah] to shape the church’s laments. Continuing to lament in the company of Israel [and her scriptures] surely means at least praying alongside Job (and those who pray Job-like prayers of anguish over personal illness, loss, and distress), alongside Lamentations [which we’ll do shortly] (with those who grieve the destruction and violence in the cities [and nations] they love), and alongside the psalmist of Psalm 88 [that one psalm that doesn’t make that “Nevertheless” trusting turn] (and thus with those who seek God in darkness, [but have yet to see the light]).

Perhaps it also means remembering that Jewish lament cries out for a Messiah yet to come...[so we, with Jesus and Paul, weep for God’s chosen tribe still wandering, even as we cry out for Christ to come again for Gentiles like us. Even as we celebrate an advent come, and wait longingly and urgently for a second completing advent.]

Our scriptures give us not only a cloud of faithful witnesses but also a community with whom we lament. But we not only lament in the company of scripture and its Jewish origin; we also lament with one another as the church of Jesus Christ. The psalms, these public displays of rather personal lament, show us that **we cannot share in celebration if we do not share our grief**. “This suggests,” contends Eklund, “that **the community can bear suffering in a way that an individual might not be able to on his or her own**.”⁴ A community that regularly voices lament together, as Walter Bruggemann notes, “acknowledges present pain and...anticipates transformation”⁵, an anticipation that is at times too far away for the mourner to reach. In lamenting as a community practice, the movements from the appeal to protest to petition find completion in the final turn to trusting confession. At times this congregationally spoken confession is supplementing a lack of confidence for the one within the community who can not voice the words himself or herself. **We mourn *with* those who mourn and trust *for* those who are yet unable to hold it themselves.**

“Defining lament as a practice [with a liturgical or repeated form] places certain boundaries around the expressions of powerful emotions such as grief and anger within,” a Christian community. “These are not boundaries intended to restrict or mute such expressions, but rather to give it shape and voice, to ‘encompass the hurt within a [faith and familial] identity.’ ...the ritual cycle of joy and mourning in Israel [which many church traditions have maintained] set ‘boundaries on the unbounded.’ **Such edges have the capacity to create a form within which the rawest pains and fears can gain their voice and turn to prayer**—even if that prayer is in the form of accusation or complaint over God’s absence [like Jesus who cried “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?”] (Ps.22:1) **Within this ‘formful’ space [the structure of lament and the community of scripture and faith]...attention to hope is fostered, even from within the darkest places of**

³ Ibid., 249-50

⁴ Ibid., 252.

⁵ Ibid., n17.

pain.⁶ Evil, suffering, distress, pain are felt, processed, and shared but are not allowed to have the final word. We cannot speed through lament. Each of the chapters of our book of lament, *Lamentations*, is a poem, the first four of which are acrostics using each letter of the Hebrew alphabet to express exorbitant pain and sorrow. The final chapter is called “alphabetic” in that while it is not an acrostic per se, it does contain 22 verses, which parallel the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

Think about the complexity and intricacy of this voiced prayer of protest. Commentator Kathleen O’Connor notes, “To write an acrostic is difficult in any language, requiring verbal fluency beyond the demands of ordinary poetry. *Lamentations’* acrostics indicate that the poems are not spontaneous outbursts but carefully composed works...*Lamentations’* alphabetic devices...expose the depth and breadth of suffering in conflicting ways. The alphabet gives both order and shape to suffering that is otherwise inherently chaotic, formless and out of control. It signifies the enormity of suffering as a vast universe of pain, extending [as it were], from ‘A to Z,’ to which nothing more can be added. It tries to force unspeakable pain into a container that is familiar and recognizable even as suffering eludes containment.”⁷ Biblical lament does not allow us to gloss over suffering, but neither does it allow us to wallow. Lament requires us to enter fully into and give voice to a real pain in real community and in the presence of a real God who can and will save. The thoughtful complexity of our biblical laments forces us to process through suffering, not speedily (the lament goes from A to Z three times in chapters 1,2 and 4, and then three more times (66 instead of 22 verses) in chapter 3) but not without end either.

“lament [also] is properly a prayer of the whole community, whether it be listening to and ‘mourning with’ an individual mourner in her personal grief, and thus enfolding that private sorrow into the public worship of the body of Christ; or the community giving voice to a communal lament over shared tragedy, loss, or repentance.”⁸ As we mentioned last week, and echoing the words of Bonhoeffer, “Even if a verse or psalm or expressed lament is not my own prayer, it is nevertheless the prayer of another member of the community.”⁹

“Hearing the laments of others,” says Allen Verhey, “within the community has the potential to change the community itself.”¹⁰ It draws together in empathy and unity; it expands our vision for one another and expands our hearts to take in all that our Father feels, mourns, and longs to be right.

The rhythmic and responsive practice of lament will require us (our faith family in particular, myself specifically) to consider and call after the skilled mourners. As we said last week, much of the American church, at least the predominately white and/or affluent church, has disproportionately regulated lament to the sidelines. But this is not true of all churches. Walter Brueggemann suggests this tendency stems from a difference in theology between the “haves” and the “have-nots.”

“[Those who] ‘have’ [tend to] develop a theology of celebration. Those who live under suffering live ‘their lives aware of the acute precariousness of their situation.’ Worship that arises out of suffering cries out for deliverance. ‘Their notion of themselves is that of a dependent people crying out a vision of survival and salvation.’ Lament is the language of suffering.

⁶ Ibid., 247-248

⁷ Kathleen O’Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 12-13.

⁸ Eklund, 252.

⁹ Quoted in Eklund., 253.

¹⁰ Ibid., n19.

Those who live in celebration ‘are concerned with questions of proper management and joyous celebration.’ Instead of deliverance, they seek constancy and sustainability. ‘The well-off do not expect their faith to begin in a cry, but rather, in a song [of praise]. They do not expect or need intrusion, but they rejoice in stability [and the] durability of a world and social order that has been beneficial to them.’”¹¹

For example, African American and immigrant churches throughout our nation’s history have consistently sustained the sacramental source of hope through lament. Arising from the historical memory of the atrocities of slavery and segregation, and from the present experiences of oppressive structures, racism, and disparate violence, black churches, in particular, have traditionally had rich resources for a practice of lament. While suffering and distress know no racial, ethnic, or economic confines, and while pain is not limited to have nots, we (who tend to have more) nevertheless have much to learn from our brothers and sisters here in American (and around the world) who are skilled mourners.

As I mentioned earlier, lamenting *within* community means, at least, grieving in our day through the laments of our Scriptures, like Lamentations. Soong-Chan Rah is a professor, theologian, and author of a commentary on the book of Lamentations. He is also a church planter and pastor of a multi-ethnic urban church and a frontline participant in racial reconciliation around our country. He has written a lament for 2020, especially for and from within the community he lives. He uses Lamentation 5 and brings it into our moment. Ally, who has been leading our faith family’s pursuit of God’s heart for racial and social justice, will read Rah’s *Lamentation 5 for 2020*. It is an uncomfortable lament. Yet, [like our psalms](#), it is an honest lament that assumes that what God desires from us in prayer is for us to be vulnerable, to process our pain and anguish with him, even as we assume he knows when and how to bring relief.

Practicing lament means learning to pray lament *and* learning to listen to lament **together**. If we are to learn to pray lament, we must learn to listen to lamentations as well. So, I pray that we will listen with tender hearts to these words from a fellow Jesus follower on behalf of millions of other Jesus followers: **“that our eyes may run down with tears and our eyelids flow with water.”** (Jer. 9:18)

¹¹ Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: a call for justice in troubled times*, 22-23.

LAMANENTATION 5 FOR 2020 (Ally)

Remember, Lord, what happened to Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd;
look and see the disgraceful way their bodies were treated.
Our inheritance of the image of God in every human being
has been co-opted and denied by others.
The family of Ahmaud, Breonna, and George Floyd has lost their loved ones,
widowed mothers once again grieve their dead children.
We must scrap for our basic human rights (even to sit peacefully in our homes);
our basic needs (even the need to breathe) have a great price.
Corrupt officers pursue us with their knees on our necks;
we are weary and we find no rest.
We submit to uncaring government officials and to big business to get enough bread.
Our ancestors sinned the great sin of instituting slavery;
they are no more — but we bear their shame.
The system of slavery and institutionalized racism ruled over us,
and there is no one to free us from their hands.
We get bread (or jog in our neighborhoods) at the risk of our lives
because of the guns on the streets.
George Floyd is down on the street, his body crying out for air.
Black women have been violated throughout our nation's history;
Breonna Taylor gunned down in her own home.
Noble black men have been hung, lynched, and gunned down.
elders and spokesmen are shown no respect.
Young men can't find work because of unjustly applied laws.
Unjustly incarcerated because of staggering negative expectations.
The elder statesmen and civil rights leaders have been assassinated;
young people who speak out their protest through music are silenced.
Trust in our ultimate triumph has diminished;
our triumphant proclamation of victory has turned to a funeral dirge.
Our sense of exceptionalism has been exposed.
Woe to us, for we have sinned.
Because of this our hearts are faint,
because of these things our eyes grow dim
For our cities lie desolate with predatory lenders and gentrifiers prowling over them.
You, LORD, reign forever; your throne endures from generation to generation.
Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us for so long?
Restore us to yourself, Lord, that we may return;
renew as that we may find a new way forward
unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure.¹²

¹² Accessed here: <https://sojo.net/articles/lamentations-5-2020>.

COMMUNION

Biblical lament is communal lament. Crying out in the company of scripture, the church, and most importantly, Jesus. Jesus lamented, “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?” He joined in our suffering (the suffering we have caused and the suffering which we ignore), and in his joining with us, he has joined us together past, present, and future—from every tribe, tongue, nation, and side of the isle—through his body and blood. Which means he also binds us together in his resurrection. He identifies with us, and we imitate him by remembering his suffering as often as we gather together so that we might live out empathetic, compassionate, and powerful hope amid a world lamenting (groaning) for change.

Read this prayer with me as we receive the grace of Jesus together:

Father, as we become aware of the intensity of the racial and political, and economic divides, our hearts are broken. Help us not to rush from this place of hurting with one another to triumphalism or repair but rather laments as you call us to do. May our lament be a form of worship, a joining of our hearts with yours, as we grieve the lack of your kingdom justice and equity here on earth as it is in heaven. Strengthen us to be the salt and light Jesus says we are, as without you, the overwhelming depth of the problems that must be addressed and acknowledged would be devastating. We know that you mourn with us and comfort us as we mourn with one another. In Jesus’ holy name, amen.

(adapted from Elizabeth Behrens)¹³

PSALM 5 (Maria)

Listen, God! Please, pay attention! Can you make sense of these ramblings, my groans and cries?
King-God, I need your help.

Every morning you’ll hear me at it again.
Every morning I lay out the pieces of my life on your altar and watch for fire to descend.

You don’t socialize with Wicked, or invite Evil over as your houseguest.
Hot-Air-Boaster collapses in front of you; you shake your head over Mischief-Maker.
God destroys Lie-Speaker; Blood-Thirsty and Truth-Bender disgust you.

And here I am, your invited guest—it’s incredible!
I enter your house; here I am, prostrate in your inner sanctum,
Waiting for directions to get me safely through enemy lines.

Every word they speak is a land mine; their lungs breathe out poison gas.
Their throats are gaping graves, their tongues slick as mudslides.
Pile on the guilt, God! Let their so-called wisdom wreck them. Kick them out! They’ve had their chance.

But you’ll welcome us with open arms when we run for cover to you.
Let the party last all night! Stand guard over our celebration.
You are famous, GOD, for welcoming God-seekers, for decking us out in delight.

¹³ Quoted by Latasha Morrison, *Be the Bridge: pursuing God’s heart for racial reconciliation*, 51.