

Laments—misunderstood, truncated, exiled, silenced

Ron Guengerich

When was the last time you heard a psalm of lament read with passion in Sunday worship? How frequently do you hear one of these psalms of agony, suffering, and deprivation in your congregation's services: every Sunday? once a month? once a year? on Good Friday? only in times of community or national disaster?

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the raw emotions of disappointment, discouragement, anger, frustration, and pain that are present in our world, in our community, and in our congregation. It is to these prayers that individuals often turn when they face pain, grief, or frustration that renders them speechless and numb. These psalms give voice to a suffering so overwhelming that it seems almost unbearable.

If one were to scrutinize the lectionaries and daily offices in common use, one would find that many of these worship resources omit a great number of the laments from

Sunday worship, and if a lament psalm is included, the lament portion of it is omitted from the reading.

For example, in the reading for this year (Year B), on the fifth Sunday of the Easter season, the designated psalm reading was Psalm 22:25-31, the portion of the psalm that expresses the assurance that God will respond to the situation of the lament. The first seventeen verses of Psalm 22, a classic and well-known lament (beginning "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"), is usually read on Good Friday, a context in which Jesus

recites these psalm words, and therefore we have trouble hearing this psalm in any way other than in the context of the cross.

What does our denial of the pain and hurt present among us reveal about our understanding of worship? What keeps us from using this incredible resource of laments to acknowledge that “someone’s crying, Lord, come by here”? Do we imagine that the church’s happy hour on Sunday morning is really a balm in Gilead for those worshipers who live with brokenness and isolation? Why do we question that a probing and doubting faith is indeed faith?

Pastors know that people who suffer, question, and feel confused sit in the pews every Sunday. Far too frequently those who are in the midst of pain and loss come to Sunday morning worship knowing that this is not a place where they will find their confusion, hurts, and doubts honored and respected. Far too often no

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one will give voice to the pain they bring into worship as their Sunday offering. Far too much of the time the church advocates, at least implicitly, that Christians adopt a stoic attitude toward untimely death, bankruptcy, divorce, abuse, tragedy, and adversity of any kind.

The psalms of lament, which speak of both suffering and trust, are shunted aside in most public, corporate worship settings. For the most part, we in the established, privileged church have not learned how to name and grieve the injustice, oppression, and suffering in our midst, in our communities, and in the

wider world. The laments found in the Psalter teach us how to shape our woes into prayers that describe suffering in accurate and graphic terms while still expressing trust in God.

I am convinced that we have weakened our faith and trust in God by neglecting and avoiding the psalms of lament. Yet we will not be able to reclaim these psalms without carefully attending to what they say, how they work, and why they have been so important to those who are suffering from illness, injustice, or isolation.

I contend that we neglect and avoid the psalms of lament for several reasons. First, we *misunderstand* these psalms because we do not listen to the precise way they address the injustice and the

horrific circumstances out of which they emerge. Second, we *avoid* these psalms because we have determined in advance that they do not fit our practical theology, which enjoins “giving thanks at all times.” Third, we *are uncomfortable with* these psalms in corporate worship because of the abrasive, polemical language that erupts from the lips of the psalmist. These three reasons for omitting the psalms of lament are interwoven, and they reinforce one another.

Misunderstanding the laments

As we voice our prayers in corporate worship, we need to observe both what we say and to whom we are speaking. The audience of the psalms of lament is a double set of listeners: God and the congregation. The primary and most important person addressed is God. In the lament section of the psalm, which states the grievance and describes the trouble and injustice, the speaker, without fail, addresses God. God is the court to which the psalmist is bringing the accusation. God is the one who is expected to rule (render a verdict) in the case, and God is the one who is expected to carry out the *naḥam* (vindication, setting things right)

for the plaintiff who is bringing the case to God’s attention within God’s court.

The setting of the laments is the court of God’s royal—judicial and executive—authority. The setting transforms the lament from bellyaching and a search for allies into a full-blown court case presented to God for vindication.

We misunderstand the laments when we hear these prayers as moaning and whining by unhappy people annoyed by the situation in which they find themselves. The setting (*Sitz im Leben*) of these laments is not the local coffee shop or sewing circle; the setting is the court of God’s royal authority, both judicial and executive. The setting transforms the lament from bellyaching and a search for supportive allies into a full-blown court case presented to God for vindication. Using the

psalmist’s language, we speak of coming to worship as “entering God’s courts”; if in this setting we bring our lament, what we are entering is the royal place of judgment where the king is present to hear the case and make a ruling. We are not only in the courtyard, outside the holy place, but in the presence of the great king.

The psalms (and all of scripture) see the great king as the one to whom vindication belongs, the one who will make just judg-

ment and carry out the appropriate action to redress the abusive, oppressive situation. God exercises legitimate, recognized power and has authority to intervene in lamentable situations. Furthermore, God's response will set things right. The Hebrew scriptures understand effective vindication (*naḥam*) as producing the desired result of true justice (*mishpat*), righteousness (*tsedeqah*), and peace (*shalom*), characterized by realigning the situation into right, healthy relationships (*tsedeqah*) and providing the parties involved with what is truly needed (justice; that is, *mishpat*), not just what is deserved. Too often we (and the translators of scripture) have

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misunderstood God's vindication (*naḥam*), because we have mistranslated *naḥam* as "vengeance," which has the primary connotation for us of "getting even, repaying in kind, retaliation." As a result, *naḥam* has often come to mean an eye-for-an-eye system of law, a law of retaliation (*lex talionis*).

It is apparent that Jesus understood the significance of lament. Consider, for example, his parable about the oppressed widow (Luke 18:1-8), a riddle about praying and not losing heart. The widow, whose faith Jesus holds up as exemplary, makes her plea for justice and

vindication to an unjust judge—who eventually listens. The widow rejects three possible responses: she will not accept her situation as God-given suffering; she does not wallow in her grief and pain by telling her story to anyone who will listen; and she does not attempt to take matters into her own hands, becoming a vigilante who acts on her own behalf to get even. Though the judge in the parable is unjust (unlike God), the widow still recognizes that this judge alone can carry out *naḥam*, because he has the authority and power to correct her situation. Even though he is unjust, this judge alone can remedy her unendurable situation and deal with her enemy. Jesus concludes the parable with a summary question: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" That is, will people trust and rely on the legitimate judge and sole ruler to work vindication here in our setting?

The lament describes the situation of injustice and suffering not to create sympathy and pity in the listener (the congregation),

nor to vent emotion in order to bring about some cathartic release. The lament is a plea for help, made in the divine courtroom, a plea that requires a description of the situation that needs to be rectified.

Especially when we hear the individual laments in worship, we are not speaking of a situation that all in the congregation are facing. Only when the lament is communal do we express the common dilemma of all who make the lament. In most laments (especially those of an individual), we are raising to God's attention a situation that only one person or perhaps several people are bringing to the bench of God's court.

Avoidance and discomfort

We avoid these lament psalms in worship because they bring raw emotion and abrasive language about present pain into our setting of privilege. The lament that describes oppression from within the

We avoid lament psalms in worship because they bring raw emotion into our setting of privilege. The lament that describes oppression from within the experience of the injustice seems too polemical.

experience of the injustice seems too polemical and passionate for our tastes; it is too explicit about injustices. There has been no cleanup of the disaster; the psalmist depicts it viscerally, in all its messiness.

These psalms work precisely because they are not descriptions by a detached onlooker. We hear the grievance from the mouth of the plaintiff (or the plaintiff's surrogate), rather than listening to a report about the complaint. That is, we hear people who are poor and oppressed tell their own story and make their own case; we do not hear about them as

objects of a bad situation. In laments, the person in trouble, the one with the complaint, speaks as the subject, in the first person. In intercession, by contrast, the person who has the complaint is the object and is spoken about, in the third person.

The laments are powerful and effective because we hear the people who are suffering the injustice and oppression speak personally and immediately about their distress. These prayers of lament come to us not at arm's length, as neutral prayers of intercession about "them," but as intense, impassioned outbursts from the lips of the one being abused and mistreated. This quality

persists even if the case is made by a proxy who speaks for the complainants—who, as the lament often states, have no energy or capability to speak, because of the suffering that enervates and paralyzes them.

No wonder we are uncomfortable with the prayers of lament. It is not surprising that we usher these outbursts about injustice, abuse, and mistreatment outside the walls of our sanctuaries, or obstruct their entrance. It would be shocking to invite those who are suffering to bring their alienation and agony into God's courts. We find it much easier to be "the quiet in the land" (a traditional

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characterization of Mennonites) than to invite those who suffer from poverty, abuse, pain, fear, disruption, neglect, loneliness, and isolation to find their voices within our gatherings. The silencing of the lament becomes more and more prevalent where our congregations are people of privilege, whether that privilege is of affluence, status, education, recognition, or social or political security.

In these lament psalms, perhaps the most misunderstood and therefore excluded elements are the shocking pleas made of God to bring judgment on oppressors because of

their unjust actions. This specific type of petition has commonly been mislabeled *curse*. Although the semantic field of the curse and the petition is similar, the semantic force is directionally different. Both the curse and the petition state the desired impact on the oppressor—with a subtle but important difference. When the curse form is used, the speaker is operating with the assumption that the words themselves have the power to begin the process spoken of. When the speaker curses an enemy, the powerful words of the curse begin to enact the reality expressed in the words. The speaker is unleashing the debilitating effects of the words on the person cursed. The opposite of the curse is the blessing, and the same presupposition holds true for the blessing: the spoken word is powerful, and blessings are actually a process of empowerment effectively strengthening and enhancing the life of the blessing's recipient.

If we transform the content of Psalm 69:22-25 into a curse, the speaker directly addresses the enemy, with the expectation that the speaker has the power to loose the harsh, disabling results:

*May **your** table be a trap for **you**, a snare for **your** allies.
May **your** eyes be darkened so that **you** cannot see,
and may **your** loins tremble continually.
May God's indignation be poured out on **you**,
and may God's anger overtake **you**.
May **your** camp be a desolation;
let no one live in **your** tents.*

When we hear these same words as a petition, the desire may be the same, but the one who carries out the desire is not the one making the plea. The words are addressed to God the great king rather than the enemy, and the action is now screened through God's judicial process; God is the one entrusted with responsibility for carrying out the sentence. Control of the punishment is surrendered to the judge rather than retained by the plaintiff. The petition reinforces the gravity of the oppression and abuse, while at the same time turning the sentencing over to the judge:

*Let **their** table be a trap for **them**, a snare for **their** allies.
Let **their** eyes be darkened so that **they** cannot see,
and make **their** loins tremble continually.
Pour out your indignation upon **them**,
and let your burning anger overtake **them**.
May **their** camp be a desolation;
let no one live in **their** tents.*

This distinction between such petitions and curses or blessings helps us sort out Paul's advice in Romans 12:14: "Bless those who persecute you; bless, do not curse them." As the people of God, we are called to bring blessing on all peoples and nations, whether they be friends or enemies. God's people are not to use words (or actions) that have the effect of tearing down, wounding, abusing, belittling, and diminishing others. As Paul goes on to say at the end of Romans 12, "Leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vindication is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."

Because we have sometimes misunderstood these petitions about enemies as curses, and because we are uncomfortable with

raw and abrasive language, many Christian traditions have selected from the psalms primarily words of praise (hymns) and thanksgiving. The prayers of trust that express the participants' reliance on God are also regular fare in Christian worship.

It is this misunderstanding and discomfort that lead us to exile these psalms routinely and unquestioningly from our worship services. In the lectionaries in use in many denominations, the dearth of laments is striking. Where the laments do crop up within these lectionaries, they are frequently included because the early church found in them allusions to the suffering and persecution of

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Jesus. It is common practice to excise the offensive parts of the psalms, especially petitions concerning enemies, and most often the deleted sections are the parts where the lament itself is stated.

The one place where the laments have traditionally been included in corporate worship is in the daily office as shaped by the Benedictine tradition. The Rule of Benedict outlines a complete reading of the entire book of the Psalms once every week—

including all the laments. As the newer arrangements of the daily office have been made, there is a widespread tendency to select a smaller number of psalms to be read throughout the weekly (or monthly) cycle of reading. The result of this selectivity is that fewer psalms of lament are included in the morning and evening prayers.

Remedying the situation

How can we recover the voice of the oppressed and abused within our worship? The solution is not difficult or profound: use the laments in their entirety in worship. The most helpful approach is for the one speaking the lament to preface the prayer by identifying who today is bringing this prayer to God. Is the lament coming from an abused spouse? a laid-off employee? a social pariah? an immigrant who is being denied basic human rights? a political detainee? a sweatshop worker? someone who is part of an oppressed minority group? The power of the lament comes when we move from making intercession for one of these people to letting

their impassioned statement of grievance and primitive plea resound within our worship. Let the laments begin! Let God the sovereign be acknowledged as ruler of all nations!

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