

Lamentations 5
Lamenting Our Losses
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Introduction

I've been talking about grief and loss this month. Living means losing. Naming your losses helps. Next Sunday when we hear from the youth caravan we will be reminded by them and through the liturgy that showing compassion to others is a great way to work through our own grief.

Today we will examine the use of lament as a way to process grief. Lamenting is defined as "that unsettling biblical tradition of prayer that includes expressions of complaint, anger, grief, despair and protest to God."ⁱ

We don't use the **term** *lament* much anymore, partly because we don't lament much in church anymore. Lament- if we even understand the concept, is seen as complaining, and complaining is discouraged and avoided. (Maybe rightly so, or maybe not.)

But lamenting is the method scriptures give to us for communicating to God our sadness and our grief. In our culture expressing grief is an embarrassment, a sign of weakness and maybe even confused with a lack of faith. We pretend we are OK with others, and even sometimes, with God.

Post-moderns, that's people living after the age of science and reason, often skip lament altogether. It doesn't feel good or right! We all tend to skip over sadness and go straight to the praise, 100% of the time, even when it's a denial of all that is real in our lives. Happy worship has taken over. Maybe the question isn't "what's lamenting?", as much as it is "do we allow for lamenting?"

The Biblical basis for Lament

In the book of Lamentations the 5 chapters are 5 separate laments. They are the pronouncement of the peoples' grief over the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. The imagery is certainly that of

a community experiencing fragmentation and discontinuity, rather like life is for us sometimes!

Scripturally, the laments are heard as either poems or prayers, or probably both. They are carefully elaborated, a “conscious art”, not off the cuff or glib. The first 4 laments in Lamentations are acrostics (alphabet poems). The author took time and effort, chose the words carefully. That’s probably wise-I mean if you are going to rant at God you better have your facts straight and choose your words carefully, don’t you think?

There are many other laments in the Bible, beside those in Lamentations. Some laments are protestations of innocence; of course the lamentation of Job falls into this category!

In the Psalms there are a lot of **types** of laments- communal, individual, penitential, cursing, and imprecatory- a new word I learned this week, which means to invoke evil onto someone else. There’s a lot of violence in the Psalms of lament, more than I like. The point to remember is that these are words and not deeds. Walter Brueggemann, who is a noted current Old Testament scholar “likens imprecatory prayers to venting sessions with a divine psychotherapist: honest words that function as a safety valve against harmful action”ⁱⁱ

But that doesn’t mean it they are supposed be ignored. Nearly 1/3 of all the Psalms are never read or sung in churches because they are “imprecatory” or negative rather than positive- they are strong laments. And they are for worship!

Because God is our audience. When we read the Psalms and the prophets, and the narrative laments we come directly to God.

Because we want to blame someone for our pain, and when we use the scriptures for that, we get to boldly ask: Who or what is at fault? Is God’s power failing or is our sinfulness running amok? Laments ask for clarity.

How do we understand the presence of evil? “Why Doesn’t God Act More Like God?” (That’s another study, the book of Habakkuk, *and* another bookⁱⁱⁱ, one by David Bast.) It can be an honest question for believers.

We lament because God seems to be missing in action, and we think we could run things better than God does.... I'm willing to admit that there have been times when the way God worked things out didn't match my plan.

But in retrospect God's way has always been "far *more* than I can ask or imagine" (Eph 3:20). But we *are* allowed to ask the question! Oh God, why?

Lamentation- it is to happen in the context of worship, with the faithful remnant of God's people trying to communicate their sense of grief and loss. The Book of Lamentations reads rather chaotically because life is *lived* chaotically. In the laments of the Bible we find the ability to ask the really hard questions and to speak the bold truth about our feelings, our struggles, and *our* sense that God simply doesn't *make* sense. The example is in writing, here for us. We are on "holy ground" and are staring at God, face to face. When we are able to voice the painful realities that we and our communities are experiencing, we have an audience in the very throne room of God.

Scriptural laments are intended to affirm God's goodness, power and active providential care, even in adversity. But I don't read that in the last verse of Lamentations 5, do you? That's when we remember Jesus' lament in the garden -take this cup away!" and his lament from the cross- "My God, my God, WHY have you forsaken me?" There isn't much hope there. Or is there?

The Appropriate Use of Lament

There WAS Good Friday before Easter!

If we are using lament as instructed we are proclaiming that we have a relationship with God. I mean who are you more likely to really get frustrated with and argue with? Would it be a stranger, or someone you have a relationship with, especially a conflicted relationship with? Lament! It's an interesting but honest way to profess that you believe in God and that you believe that God is active in our world! Even when God's quiet.

Lamenting "creates space for grief and reminds us that God requires our input"- our relationship. We are people of the covenant- God is our God and we are God's people.^{iv} We can demonstrate a movement from our usual day-to-day relative *independence* to our absolute *dependence* on

God. When we verbalize our pain, it makes suffering bearable. “I wouldn’t be able to survive without God.” But sometimes it’s “sad praise” God is far off. God’s forgotten me. God’s not here helping. (Isaiah 49:14)

Lamenting is not whining, it’s honesty before God. It’s contextual- to a specific problem, not just about bad day. Although what’s wrong with a little honest expression of frustration? My favorite children’s book was always “Alexander’s Terrible, Horrible, No-good, Very Bad Day”. 😊

These past few weeks we’ve been considering the pain we suffer as we move through grief and loss. Some of us carry some very old hurts in our souls. Recovery requires naming the loss. Name it and grieve what’s gone. And be sure to remember to take it to the Lord in prayer.

When I work as a chaplain I often respond to tragic deaths in the emergency room and the unexpected or even expected losses of loved ones in the special care and regular medical floors. I often am asked to pray. Once a young woman asked me for “the last rites”. I said I wasn’t Catholic and she responded “we aren’t either, I just want those kind of words”.

So, as we surround the bed I use my own prayer of lament. “God we hate this. We hate every part of this. The only part we know for sure is that we loved this person and now they are gone. We don’t understand why life has to be this way.” I usually then plead for strength and comfort for the family in the days to come. No one has ever said that it was inappropriate. I think it’s important to be honest in prayer.

The Answer to Lament

Sometimes, really often, as in Lam 5 there is no answer to our grief. Life is probably the hardest for believers “when God is silent”. That’s when we turn back to Rev. 21, which I read two weeks ago: “God will wipe the tears away.”

There is hope and there is a plan. God has made significant promises to us. So we cling to HOPE, but it hurts that God doesn’t help on our schedule. So besides hope we cling to FAITH – believing that God hears.

I think that’s the best reason for us to join together as a body every Sunday and our times in-between Sundays. My professor Dr. Hamman writes that

“As a congregation gathers in communion and worship, a space is created where God’s Spirit brings hope, and where it heals and revitalizes. ... (And we have) communion with others who also grieve”.^v

We are in different places spiritually. You’ve come through some rough times. I have too. I’ll walk with you if you’ll walk with me. As we learn to walk, and work together, we become an even stronger community of faith and of action. Like one of the first “modern” church songs I learned- “And they’ll know we are Christians by our love”.

We lift our community’s prayers to God for help in dealing with the injustices, the violence, the personal and the corporate losses and griefs we are struggling with. We get our commissioning to stand up and make a difference in the world. We become the body of Christ.

A lot happens when God’s people pray. When we lament, when we remember that it’s OK, even good to be honest; it’s powerful and it’s God’s gift to us. Thanks be to God.

References

- 1 Rachel’s Cry, Billman & Migliore, Cleveland, 1999, p. 6.
- 2 *Kalamazoo Gazette*, 071809, p C4.
- 3 “Why Doesn’t God Act More Like God?” by David Bast
- 4 Commentary-“Lamentations”, part of the *Interpretation* series.
- 5 “When Steeples Cry: Leading Congregations Through Loss and Change” Jaco Hamman p.109.

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