

**March 22, 2026 - Trinity Episcopal Church - Lent 5, Year A**

**Theo Patterson**

**“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!  
Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my  
supplications!” Amen. (Psalm 130:1-2 NRSVUE)**

Two weekends ago, I had the opportunity to attend a memorial service in Orange County for the younger brother of one of my long time friends who tragically passed away earlier this year. The service was beautiful, moving, and attended by hundreds of relatives, friends, and neighbors who had come to honor the life of a man who was gone far too soon. Coincidentally, the pastor had selected the gospel passage from John 11 that we read today, the story of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus to preach on for the service. While this story can quickly jump to focusing only on Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, I told my friend how much I appreciated the way that the pastor did not pass quickly through the suffering of the story, but instead spent time detailing how Martha brought her pain to Jesus by running out to meet him. Jesus in turn, also spent time weeping and mourning the death of his beloved friend, which the pastor did not rush through just to get to the more hopeful ending. My friend echoed this same appreciation and reminded me that John 11:35, which in the NRSV translation is rendered “Jesus began to weep,” is the shortest verse in many English Bibles and thus can be overlooked or made important only for its brevity, instead of its deeper significance.

It was refreshing and healing for me to be present at that service because the interpretive focus on the text did not depart from the emotional and relational pain in the room. This practice of holding space for suffering, pain, and injustice,

and bringing it before God, is called lament. Our society, and all too often, the church as well, are not very good at this practice.

Part of the reason why we aren't very good at lament might be because it forces us to slow down. Tears cannot be rushed. Grief cannot be rushed. And in a culture that likes to move at the speed of scrolling and swiping, the speed of sorrow can feel unfamiliar. When Christian leaders write books on lament, they don't sell as well as "The Purpose Driven Life" or "Your Best Life Now." It's not popular or comfortable to sit with feelings of grief, pain, or anger with ourselves, let alone taking those feelings to God or one another. Though it is difficult, lament is vital.

Theologian and scholar Rev. Dr. Soong-Chan Rah, who has actually written one of these not-so-best-selling-but-still-very-important books on lament, shared at a conference I attended earlier this year about a lament experiment he did with one of his kids. Every time they turned on Christian radio, they would count the number of songs they heard that could be classified as having themes of lament. They were extremely generous with this definition, tallying songs that even had a single line such as "I cry out" or a passing reference to "the valley of shadow." Their results after a few months found that even with their generous definition, only about 5% of the songs on Christian radio had elements of lament in them. When they did the same exercise with the liturgical worship songs of the Bible, the book of Psalms, they found that roughly 30% of the psalms were dedicated Psalms of lament, and another 10-20% included themes of lament. The point of this experiment was not to indict Christian radio or Contemporary Christian Music. It was rather to illustrate one aspect of the chasm between the victorious praise choruses, prosperity preaching, and often toxic positivity of the Christianity of our modern America with the diversity of spiritual and worship

practices held by Ancient Israel. It naturally causes us to question that discrepancy.

Why is our worship of the same God today so much more triumphal? What forces have shaped that change? Why don't we make more space for the range of human emotions in our worship? How do we respond when injustice or challenging emotions arise in church spaces? What are we missing when we brush past, sideline, or ignore the practice of lament?

I don't pretend to be able to address, or even have good answers to all these questions, but a key pattern I see reiterated across our scripture readings today is that lament is necessary for resurrection.

In Psalm 130, we hear lament functioning as a personal cry to God. This psalm is called a Psalm of Ascent and was sung by pilgrims who were making their way up Mount Zion to Jerusalem on pilgrimage to the temple. The cry from the "depths" in this context reflects not only a spiritual low point, but also a geographic one. God is seemingly far away and silent, sequestered on a high mountain. The Psalmist is crying out and bringing sorrow and wrongdoing up to God as they make their journey to Jerusalem. It is only after this lament that the Psalmist is able to turn towards a recognition of God's forgiveness, entering into a patient expectation for redemption.

In Ezekiel 37, we hear lament function as a collective response to injustice that is brought before God. The people of Ancient Israel are in exile, suffering under the weight of foreign domination. They cry out to God saying "our hope is lost; we are cut off completely!" God hears their cries and gives Ezekiel a prophetic image to communicate to the people. And although it is an extreme and dramatic sign, it is probably not the most extreme or dramatic of the signs given

by God to the Hebrew prophets. (Check out Hosea if you want something even more extreme). So, God brings Ezekiel to a valley where there are a whole lot of skeletons and bones and tells him to command them to come back to life. Completely normal, right? Well, thank God that God gave Ezekiel an explanation for the sign, telling him in verse 11 that the bones represent the “whole house of Israel.” It was only after the lament of the people that God gives Ezekiel the power to reanimate the dry bones of the valley, symbolizing God’s resurrecting love that will bring a return for the people to their homeland and a revitalization of of God’s spirit among them.

And finally, in the Gospel text today, John 11, the lament of Mary, Martha, and Jesus paves the way for the resurrection of Lazarus. After all, if it hadn’t been for Mary and Martha sending a word of lament to Jesus when Lazarus was sick and in pain to begin with, Jesus may have not even come. There is no way to skip over death or make light of it. Death must be passed through to reach resurrection. In preaching on this passage on All Saints Sunday in November 2024, Rev. Elizabeth highlighted a part of Lazarus’ resurrection that stood out to me in a profound way, so much so that I asked her if I could echo that same idea today, to which she happily obliged. After Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb, he turns to the crowd and asks the people gathered there to be the ones to unbind him. This sharing of the work of resurrection is something that we are still called to do in the world today. Unbinding and releasing the grave clothes that keep our world in the tombs of contempt, division, and injustice. Lament is a key part of that work.

When the grave clothes of war and genocide still cling on tightly, how will we respond? When the stories of survivors are unbound, how will we respond? When the tomb of a nation built on stolen land tries to dictate who is and isn’t here legally, how will we respond?

Church, our first response as people of faith is lament. We cry out to God over and over.

GOD, our hope is nearly lost for Gaza and Iran and Lebanon as month after month after month passes and our bombs claim more and more innocent lives! We are cut off completely from the way of peace and have lost count of our iniquities because they are higher than the count of lives trapped under rubble! We are drowning in the warmongering our greed and arrogance have brought us. Let your ears be attentive to their cries and to ours! Like you did for the Psalmist, bring us your new redeeming mercy!

GOD, where were you when Dolores Huerta was in the depths of her silence? She held her tongue for decades for fear of hindering the Chicano and Chicana labor movement and never saw her abuser Chavez come to justice. God today we demand justice for her and all the women and children hurt at his hands. For too long, O Lord, have abusers and predators prowled in pulpits, political offices, and now picket lines in this country! ENOUGH IS ENOUGH! Like you did for Ezekiel and his people, bring us your new restoration justice!

GOD, if you had been here, our brothers Geraldo and Alex would not have died at the hands of ICE. Our sister Renee would still be with us. Our people would not be afraid to step outside their homes. Our land would not be blockaded by a wall that turns away those who suffer the most. But even now, we know that you are the resurrection and the life! We know that you weep with us and long to raise the deceased to life again. Like you did for Lazarus, bring us your new resurrection life!

There is no resurrection without lament. It is our lament that brings us closer to one another, like the hundreds gathered to memorialize the life of my friend's brother. And it is our lament that brings us closer to the one who restores and redeems and reanimates over and over again. Our God, who is never far off, who is quick to show mercy, abounding in steadfast love, and who knows what it is like to weep with us in the face of death.

And so we continue on our Lenten journey. The wilderness has claimed the innocence and lives of many. We lament. We bear witness. We listen for the divine in "the echoes of silence" as the Sufi poet Rumi puts it. We pray and act as people of faith. We wait, like people intently watching for the morning sunrise. We wait, like the dry bleached bones lying on the valley floor, gazing at the vast sky. We wait, peering expectantly into the dark tomb with Mary and Martha. The world has taught us the way of death. May lament teach us the way of resurrection. Amen.