

Practice Lament

By Tim Moore

“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?” (Psalm 13:1)

The first verse of this classic lament psalm gets to the point immediately -- Where are you, God? The lament prayers (psalms) of the Bible speak honestly, angrily and selfishly to God. They shake fists and sob in open palms. They grieve what is lost and bare their soul. Yet they trust God with their future.

These days may be a good time to recover the practice of lament.

Lament is a lost art in the United States. We tend to practice optimistic Christianity. We count our blessings. We look for spiritual lessons in hard times that will make us wiser for future days. We cling to the idea that there is some greater purpose to our loss. And even when we intellectually reject this notion, we somehow hope that the faithful will avoid decline, destruction or death.

But there are no 200-year-old saints. We all succumb. To lament is to embrace our humanity.

Lament psalms are the most common prayers in the Book of Psalms. One book -- Lamentations -- is a continuous string of prayers of lament. They are scattered among the scrolls of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk and Job. Yet, they are strangely unfamiliar. What did the ancients know that we avoid?

Walter Brueggemann called these laments “prayers of disorientation.” I don’t know what these COVID-19 days are yet, but they are at least disorienting. “How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!” are the first words of Lamentations, and though the streets of Jerusalem in his day were empty for different reasons than NYC or Milan or Seattle or Wuhan are today, they speak to our common loss. The wisdom of lament is that we take our sadness, anger, and frustration at the losses we are accumulating, and we give them to God rather than hold them ourselves. We can speak harshly, even selfishly, because we are not acting on these thoughts, but rather giving them to one who will safely hold them. Lament pushes past what is happening and invites us to name the feelings of fear and vulnerability inside us that will eat us alive if we do not name and release them. Lament may be the best confession we can make in worship for the foreseeable future.

Maybe few have personally lost loved ones to this disease as of yet. But many have lost a sense of security and stability. People have lost jobs and paychecks and retirement savings. Some have lost the once-in-a-lifetime chance to walk across the graduation stage. Workers in hospitals and grocery stores fear for their safety. Grandchildren cannot visit grandparents. Millions are feeling the loss of social interaction, the hugs of friends and the joy of being in a community of your people. The injustice of inequality multiplies these hardships, big and small. People have lost activities that bring happiness

and found isolation in return. Thousands have lost a semester on college campuses. We've all lost the rhythm of normal life, even when normal wasn't that great, and we have a long way to go.

For hope to become real, it has to be grounded in reality. Jesus quoted a lament prayer, Psalm 22, on the cross. Lament names what we have lost, so that its memory remains, and a space for hope is opened. That which can be remembered can be resurrected, not as it was but as it will be.

Practice lament; live into hope.

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