

“Prayer Practices and the Psalms: Living Lamentation”

Psalm 74

Message for July 10, 2022

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It seems that at every turn, just as we absorb a new COVID development or digest the latest news cycle, there is some new horror standing before us that we somehow must attempt to understand – if we are going to be able to continue to move through our lives. While imagining what we might do as a worshipful community in the wake of so many intractable problems and chronic worries, I turned to the Psalms and thought they might provide us the words and practices that can help get us along the journey.

In beginning this theme on prayer practices and the psalms, I thought the best place to start would be “lamentation.” The dictionary defines lamentation as “the passionate expression of grief or sorrow.” I think many of us are in that mindset and heart space right now, so lamentation it is! Of course, there is also the book of Lamentations in the Bible, which tells of the desolation of Judah after the fall of Jerusalem. But in this case, lamentation is one of the forms and one of the purposes of some of the 150 Psalms in the Bible.

The psalms of lament are songs and poems in which the psalmist cries out to God in times of deep distress and despair. These psalms ask God for intervention to deliver the author (or the reader/speaker) from suffering, sorrow, loss, failure, enemies – and as lament unfolds, they eventually express trust in God to act in the psalmist’s favor, often leading to hope and joy. Not surprisingly, there are more psalms of lament than any other type of psalm (cuz life is hard!). Most of the lamentation psalms are written with the individual in mind. However, some of them address the pain and suffering of a people, of a community, and are considered communal psalms of lament. Today seems the perfect time to contemplate a communal psalm and that is what we hear this in Psalm 74.

Quite often when you attempt to study the psalms as a whole, you either get the perspective of a Biblical scholar or of someone who is focused on the spiritual experience of the psalms. However, the American theologian Walter Brueggemann strives to consider the psalms both intellectually and spiritually. He notes the ways that the psalms so deeply speak to our lives as he points to how the forms of the psalms correspond to the seasons of

our lives – there are psalms of orientation, disorientation, or new orientation. Orientation speaks to the satisfied seasons of well-being that we experience. Disorientation addresses our anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering, and death. New orientation consists of those surprising times in our lives when we are overwhelmed with the new gifts of God and attempt to move through times of transition.

All of these seasons hold the potential for transformation. We are moving from one circumstance to another, changing and being changed, finding ourselves surprised by a new circumstance that we didn't expect, usually resistant to a new place and clinging desperately to the old circumstance. Brueggemann says that "The life of faith expressed in the Psalms is focused on the two decisive moves of faith that are always underway, by which we are regularly surprised and which we regularly resist." Along the spectrum of these experiences, the lament psalm expresses faith in God, ranging from deep alienation to profound trust, confidence, and gratitude.

This week I included the actual text of the Bible Wisdom teaching in our bulletin so that you could go back to it and think about the elements that are consistently used by the psalmist as they dive into lamentation. In this case, as I noted, we are thinking communally – we heard pleas for help on behalf of the tribe, of the people, of the congregation, the sanctuary, the temple. In lamentation psalms, language is intended to capture God's attention – sometimes through praise (*"Yours is the day, yours also the night; you established the luminaries and the sun. You have fixed all the bounds of the earth; you made summer and winter."*) and sometimes with big "why" questions (*"why do you cast us off forever?" "why do you hold back your hand?"*).

We hear the psalmist state the problem, naming why God's people are in pain: "the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary." The title for Psalm 74 is "Plea for Help in Time of National Humiliation," and is also described as "A Maskil of Asaph." A maskil is a teaching or insight and the Asaph are temple singers. Remember, this is a song. This song is filled with pleas of the Jewish community in Babylonian captivity. Many scholars believe this psalm followed the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians around 586 BC. Others argue that it is even later, following the desecration of the temple by Antiochus. By either account, this is a time in which everything is falling apart and the people don't know what to do and have no idea what to expect.

After the psalmist describes what is wrong, we hear the ancient tradition of telling God what to do about it (*“Have regard for your covenant”* – in other words, honor your agreement to be in relationship with us – *“Do not let the downtrodden be put to shame.”* *“Rise up...please your cause.”*) The psalmist is telling God that it is time to stand up for them, to advocate for them, to protect them. This is also part of affirming God and naming what God can do: “You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan.” In other words, do you remember who you are and what you are capable of?

This form, this approach, taps into the depths of pain and confusion, anger and frustration. “Do something!” “Fix this!” “We are suffering!” The beauty of this practice is that it reveals the depth of connection and relationship and illustrates the trust that the psalmist (and we who speak this lament out loud) has for God. Yes, we’re angry and tired and don’t know how to move forward, so we are turning toward God and trusting that we will be heard. We believe that God is big enough to handle our big emotions. We have faith that God will show up – maybe not at the precise time or the exact way that WE would like, but God is present. God is accompanying us. God sees where things are going sideways and will guide us in bringing it back to center.

Through the psalms we are provided a road map for prayer, for conversation with God. Even in times of disorientation, or maybe especially in times of disorientation, we can enter into honest dialog with God, acknowledging our pain and confusion rather than denying it - advocating for our communities and naming the pain in the world.

Lamentation psalms give us an opportunity to voice mixed emotions that rise up in the midst of hardship. Part of dealing with pain is actually expressing it. Embedded in our complaint is the foundational knowledge that we can trust God. The lamentation psalm is an honest dialogue where nothing is held back. The psalms tap into the core of human experience in ways that our daily language cannot. The psalms actually teach us how to pray and how to stand faithfully before God; asking, and even demanding, response, action, and answers. The psalmist’s pattern tends to be: turn to God, bring your complaint, ask boldly for help, and choose to trust. Through the honest dialogue of lamentation, we have the opportunity to journey toward hope.

In the coming days, I invite you to consider how you might make room in your life for prayer and reflection, silence and solitude. Through intentional practice, we are better equipped to face the challenges around us and heal what is broken.

In closing, I leave you with a Hasidic tale. The Hasidic Jews share this wisdom:

A disciple asks the rabbi: “Why does Torah tell us to ‘place these words upon your hearts’? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words in our hearts?” The rabbi answers: “It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in.”

May we embrace our broken hearts and let the love and wisdom and hope penetrate them. Amen.