

Psalms as Living Prayers
“Out of the Depths”

Psalm 130

Message for September 11, 2022

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Lamentation is the ancient practice of public tears or wailing. Certainly, as a community, as a country, as citizens of the world, there is much to lament in the wake of COVID, amid war and turmoil, climate change and gun violence. And of course, today marks the 21st anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks. So many deaths on that day and then countless losses connected to a date that will be forever burned into our consciousness.

Even when we are facing situations that so clearly call for lamentation, we struggle to make room for such feelings and rarely honor the depths of our pain. Of the 150 Psalms, about 1/3 are considered Psalms of lament, but we are unlikely to highlight those Bible Wisdom teachings. What we need to remember is that we actually build our resilience by allowing for lamentation. Being human is painful. Living in this world is painful. The psalmist reminds us that we can speak out to God rather than being silenced or shamed.

Last week I mentioned the author, Barbara A. Holmes, and I lift up her work again as she makes some powerful observations about lamentation. She writes that “Lament allows the pain to escape and stitches us to our neighbors. We are called to weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn. Our tears are our prayers when we can’t speak, a baptism of sorts, a salty healing, a sign of vulnerability, and a liturgical response to violence.” Certainly, navigating the shared experience of September 11th and of COVID, even with the understanding that we’ve had our individual experiences and perspectives regarding these colossal events, brings us together.

Dr. Holmes also notes that “lament is risky...because it challenges power structures, it calls for justice, and it makes demands on our relationships with the ‘powers that be,’ one another, and God.” When we lift up our voices, when we march together, when we push for change as we struggle with loss and pain and disruptions, we forge a connection that insists on being heard and seen.

This Psalm is one I have read countless times, and the psalmist. It comes to mind often in a moment of desperation, in those times of fleeting hopelessness. I love how the psalmist calls out - I imagine loudly and demandingly - even though he knows he isn't perfect. We know that we hurt others, that we miss the mark. The psalmist negotiates with God, asking, "Who could stand before You?" We are all imperfect, full of past mistakes that require forgiveness. This psalm reassures me that it is not only advisable, but urgent, – to pursue relationship and connection with God – seeking comfort, forgiveness and redemption.

My hope for each of us is that we find our entry point – that we deepen our connection with the Divine, regardless of our frustrations, our shame, our guilt, our worries over our inadequacies or our perceived unworthiness. That in our pain and suffering, in whatever shape we're in or however we show up, we can say, "Here I am, God. I need help."

Many wisdom teachers and theologians recognize that there are only two major paths through which the human soul comes to God: the path of great love, and the one of great suffering. Richard Rohr notes that both of those paths finally come down to great suffering—because if we love anything greatly, we will eventually suffer for it. Loving anything in depth and over the long term, eventually leads to loss and grief; elements of deep suffering.

The theologian who has been my constant companion throughout this exploration of the Psalms is Walter Brueggemann, who writes, "Psalms of lament are powerful expressions of the experience of disorientation. They express the pain, grief, dismay, and anger that life is not good. They also refuse to settle for things as they are, and so they assert hope."

May we each be lucky enough to suffer, to lament, and come to a place of hope. Amen.