

Psalms as a School of Prayer – Part 2 “Psalms of Lament”

A sermon preached by Zac Klassen at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church, October 17th, 2021

Last Sunday, Linda took time in her sermon to reflect on different songs and prayers of thanksgiving, trust, and praise that she had sung all the way from childhood to later in life. It was especially striking to me how the words from the songs that Linda remembered had some kind of precedent in the Psalms. The Psalms have provided the church with a rich heritage that encourages us to speak words of praise and thanks to the God in whom we live, move, and have our being. Today, as we turn to consider prayers of lament, in some ways we enter a different space from last week. Instead of prayers of praise and thanksgiving arising out of a world that seems in so many ways to be a place of order, and a place where goodness and truth and beauty are all around, today we encounter prayers that arise out of a world that is not all right, that is dis-ordered; a world that includes loss and darkness.

As I reflected on prayers of lament and looked at different Psalms of lament for today’s service, I had to wonder: “how much of the church’s prayer life is shaped by Psalms of lament?” “How often have Psalms of Lament been our guide for prayer; for communication with God?” I am interested to know what your experiences have been because, I must confess, when I thought back to my childhood, prayers of lament were certainly not the prayers that I remembered learning. Perhaps I just do not remember lament prayers because they simply did not register for me as a young person. Perhaps also I may not remember many lament prayers because I was lucky enough to not have too many occasions to lament as a child. On the other hand, I do wonder if one of the reasons I don’t remember hearing prayers of lament or Psalms of lament in the church is because the churches that I grew up in were generally uncomfortable with such prayers and so did not readily practice praying them. “Praise God,” you might say, sounds a whole lot more marketable when you are trying to grow a church than: “How long, O Lord?” “Why do you turn your face from me?” “My bed is soaked with tears!” “Where are you, God, when I need you?” I think we would all be ready to admit that it is our human tendency to try to avoid facing the darkness that we will nonetheless inevitably experience in this life. If we are willing to

admit this, then it is not too much of a stretch to see how our prayer lives might be shaped by what we might call “darkness-avoidance.” Walter Bruggemann, a biblical scholar who has written a lot on the Psalms, has said this about the church’s avoidance of lament or complaint Psalms:

It is no wonder that the church has intuitively avoided these psalms. They lead us into dangerous acknowledgment of how life really is. They lead us into the presence of God where everything is not polite and civil. They cause us to think unthinkable thoughts and utter unutterable words. Perhaps worst, they lead us away from the comfortable religious claims of ‘modernity’ in which everything is managed and controlled. In our modern experience, but probably also in every successful affluent culture, it is believed that enough power and knowledge can tame the terror and eliminate the darkness...But our honest experience, both personal and public, attests to the resilience of the darkness, in spite of us. The remarkable thing about Israel [says Bruggemann] is that it did not banish or deny the darkness from its religious enterprise. It embraces the darkness as the very stuff of new life. Indeed, Israel seems to know that new life is rooted nowhere else. (*Spirituality of the Psalms*, p. 29)

The Psalmist’s cry of “How Long, O Lord,” leads us to acknowledge the darkness of life with honesty. Israel’s Psalms of praise, trust, and thanksgiving are wonderful and necessary parts of our collective prayer repertoire, but they are not the only Psalms we are given permission to pray. We need the Psalms of lament as well to give voice to those unutterable words; those moments of pain that cannot be moved past but simply must be endured.

While I do not recall prayers of lament from my younger childhood years, my first real memory of praying in the mode of lament comes from when I was just about to turn 16 years old. My uncle David passed away suddenly when he was not quite 48 years old. Our family was very close to my Uncle, Aunt, and cousins and his sudden passing shook their world and in its own way it shook ours too. I can certainly say that my uncle’s passing forced me to re-evaluate my 15-year-old worldview—what I had previously experienced as a predictable life. Tragedy has a way of breaking down worldviews like that and I can certainly attest to the fact that the loss of my uncle led to my own teenage prayer life taking a very different shape than what it had had before. Before the sudden loss of my uncle, my prayer life—to the extent that there was much of one—mostly took the form of simple prayers of thanks or perhaps the occasional petitionary prayers for more mundane things. And so, I can recall praying things like:

“Help me, God, on my upcoming test.” I cannot recall how often God responded in turn with the question, “Have you studied?” After the sudden loss of my uncle, however, I began to discover a new prayer language. Now I found myself praying much like the Psalmist: “My God, why have you forsaken him? Why have you forsaken my Aunt and my Cousins?” “Why have you forsaken my family?” Questions like these were questions that I asked a lot. The Psalmists cry of “How Long, O Lord” also resonated with me in the days and months following my Uncle’s death. “How long” will this pain sting so sharply for my Aunt and my cousins? “How long” will it be before life can feel anything close to stable again for them?” “How long, O Lord?”

More recently, my prayers of lament to God have come following the loss of my mother, Esther, at the young age of 62 years. While still so young, mom’s passing was not entirely unexpected. She had not been well for quite some time. She had struggled for much of her life with physical, emotional, and psychological challenges caused by childhood abuse and trauma that had for too many years been hidden and so not acknowledged, believed, and properly treated. In some ways, as hard as it is to say it, her passing brought relief: relief for her from years of suffering, and relief for my Dad and my sisters who cared for my mother through many difficult days.

Since my mother’s passing, I have found myself uttering prayers of Lament for many losses: the loss of a Mom who loved my sisters and I so unconditionally, the loss of a Nana for Jaren, Micah, and Theo; the loss of seeing her and dad grow old together. In addition to these prayers of lament that are more focused on the specific loss my family has experienced from losing mom, I have found myself uttering other laments too: “How long, O Lord, will the vulnerable be abused?” “How long before survivors of abuse are believed, heard, and supported?” “How long will those who misuse power and authority to harm be left unaccountable for their actions?” “How long, before mental health is adequately supported inside and outside of the church?” “How long, O Lord?” Praying these last laments has made me more and more aware of how lament prayers can be an important resource for

mobilizing the church in advocating and seeking change for unjust systems and forms of oppression in our world. Prayer, perhaps especially lament prayers that call into question the supposed “stability” and “order” of things, make it clear that pain and suffering is political: the circumstances that lead to our laments to God rarely arise in a purely private realm or in a social vacuum. Rather, laments arise within some form of common life, be it a national, ethnic, business, familial, or church life.

This more corporate aspect to lament prayers came out clear in Paul’s reading of Psalm 74. There, the lament was a corporate cry to God in the ruins of a decimated temple, likely following the invasion by Babylon’s armies. “Are you really going to just let these people come into your temple and scoff at you, destroy your temple, and lead your people off into exile? Really, God? Why are you not doing something about this!?” One has to wonder, however, whether Israel could pray such prayers without also feeling a summons to respond to the pain with action. Are we languishing in exile? Let’s cry out to God and then let’s find a way to survive and make life work in the meantime. Is the sanctuary destroyed? Let’s mourn and then let’s start to talk about rebuilding...even if that rebuilding is years down the road. Is the name of God scoffed by those around us? Let’s raise it up and extol it! Lament prayers, then, while often so jarringly personal, can at the same time be an inspiration for communal or congregational action.

Here it is instructive to return to some of those words from Bruggemann again. He says:

The remarkable thing about Israel is that it did not banish or deny the darkness from its religious enterprise. It embraces the darkness as the very stuff of new life. Indeed, Israel seems to know that new life is rooted nowhere else. (*Spirituality of the Psalms*, p. 29)

When Bruggemann talks of new life being rooted in darkness he points to one of the more powerful truths about lament prayers. Lament prayers face the realities of darkness and despair with full honesty, but they do not stop there. To be sure, the Psalmist’s laments do not rush through the pain in order to paint a rosy picture over the difficulties of life. Nonetheless, the Psalmists utter their complaints

with an underlying trust that *within the despair and darkness* we face, God is nonetheless present and at work to mend and to heal. Take, for example, Psalm 6 that was read for us earlier.

O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath. Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing; O LORD, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror. My soul also is struck with terror, while you, O LORD-- how long? Turn, O LORD, save my life; deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love. For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who can give you praise?

If this is where the Psalm ended, and it is true that there are a couple of Psalms that do end abruptly like this, we might be tempted to think that lament will leave us only with the pain and the darkness experienced by the Psalmist. But by the end of the Psalm, we hear these words:

The LORD has heard my supplication; the LORD accepts my prayer.

The Psalmist trusts that God has heard and accepted the prayer of lament and that as a result, lament is not going to be a permanent state. There are two important words to highlight from the Psalmist's words of trust at the end of Psalm 6, and those two words are "heard" and "accepts." Anyone who has been through significant loss or pain knows that having someone to hear and accept their sorrow, anger, and confusion—is so important in the process of enduring pain—we need someone to hold on to us in the midst of our sorrow, in spite of how isolated and lonely such pain might make us feel. The Psalmist's trust in God's hearing and acceptance teaches us that our deepest pain, while never erased, while never "fixed," can nonetheless eventually become integrated into and shape new paths of life. As the living body of Christ, the church is called to welcome each other into the presence of God where our pain can be heard and accepted; the church is called to be the presence of God for each other in the depths of our pain, hearing and accepting each other's laments and providing a safe community where that pain can be held and shared.

What do you, what do we, at BMC, lament today? How can we make space to hear and accept each other in our darkness? How can we hold each other in that pain? In a moment, we will hear a recording of a song from Voices Together #691 called "How Long." You are welcome to sing along if you

like, or, if you would prefer, just listen. After the song ends, we will observe 2 minutes of silent reflection. During that time, I invite you to bring your own laments before God. Are you asking God “How long?” about anything in your life? As a church, are we asking God “how long?” about anything? Feel free to pray silently or even quietly mouth your prayer of lament. After our period of silence, as our hymn of response we will sing the song “When Pain or Sorrow/Hold On” (VT#612). By singing this hymn together, we will communicate our commitment to share each other’s pain and sorrow and then following the song, we will do just that by sharing our prayers of intercession and also our prayers of thanksgiving together.