
Learning Lament

Psalm 9-10

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 7, 2020 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

Many months ago, we planned our annual break from the lectionary readings and decided to read the book of Psalms together. We committed to allowing the individual psalms to guide our confessing, learning, preaching, praying, singing, and praising—that is to say our worship—throughout this summer in a more intentional way than they typically do. Of course, knowing what the psalms are to so many people—a rich resource for comfort and assurance and prayer—we trusted, and are trusting, that this turn to the psalms will be deeply edifying for us individually and as a community.

In the various psalms, we hear joy and delight and marvel. We also hear rage, repentance, and resilience in the face of ruin. Lament, loss, longing and love are all packed together within these prayerful songs and melodious prayers. At times, seemingly contradictory emotions, concepts, and beliefs are juxtaposed with one another: inconveniently, uncomfortably, even irritatingly placed beside each other. If you are looking for a biblical book without complication or complexity, and without challenge or confrontation, then you should not turn to Psalms. The writers of the psalms are willing to let everything out before God, and it can be quite glorious and quite gory. By doing this, the writers teach us something about being in relationship with God. They teach us that we should hold nothing back—that all parts of our human experience from the holiest halleluiahs to the most sinful sicknesses of our hearts are to be laid bare before God. In relating to God, there is no need to censor our doubts or fears or frustrations or anger or any other thing. The psalm writers teach us to bring everything before the Lord.

As students in the spiritual classroom of the psalm writers, we approach the psalms this morning in a posture of learning. We stand in need of learning how to pray. Yet the situation of our world does not call us to learn just any sort of prayer; it calls us to learn lament. As one writer puts it, “The prayer of lament is that unsettling biblical tradition of prayer that includes expressions of complaint, anger, grief, despair, and protest to God.”¹ We read the psalms and pray their prayers as those who in this time in our world must learn to lament. We must learn to recognize that not all is well and to cry out to God because of it.

For some of us, lament has not been a necessary or common practice. If you are one whose life is privileged and rights are protected by the systems and structures of our world, you may not have needed to learn lament. No need to be ashamed or feel guilty about this. Simply sharpen your pencil and prepare to learn. For others of us, lamenting is a familiar practice already. If you are one who has lived on the underside or been pushed to the margins or who is part of a community that for too long has not been able to breathe, you likely know lament already. You are likely too familiar with the posture of crying out to God in grief and mourning, anger and despair. Yet even for you who’ve been lamenting your whole life, there are still lessons to learn.

This morning Psalm 9 will be our teacher. Often times, psalms are structured as acrostics that utilize the Hebrew alphabet to encourage and enable easier memorization of the prayers. Psalm 9 applies this common strategy, and in this way will guide us in the ABC’s of lament. Psalm 9 is

¹ Ruth Haley Barton, <https://transformingcenter.org/2016/07/prayer-lament-breathe/>

common in that many of the typical markers of lament psalms show up in it. The psalmist begins by addressing God. It is no small thing to recognize that lament involves addressing God. The writer teaches us that ultimately God is the actor with the power to make things right. Sure, God will equip, send, and use God's people to do the work, but God is the first and most important actor. So the psalm begins by addressing God in praise, "I will give thanks to you, Lord, with my whole heart, and I will tell of your wonderful deeds." Then the psalmist recounts God's faithfulness in the past. The assurance that God is the one who can make things right is rooted in the relationship history of God and God's people. The writer is confident that God will act for good because God has acted before for good.

As an instructor, the writer of Psalm 9 guides us deep into the assurance of who God is and about what and whom God cares. The psalmist prayerfully declares: "But the Lord sits enthroned forever, he has established his throne for judgement. He judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with equity. The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you" (7-10). Declarations such as these remind us of God's ways of justice, especially for those who are oppressed. Learning and remembering what and who is at God's heart is critical for lamenting well. The psalmist reminds us that those beaten down, those with no hope but God, those with a knee on their neck, those contained in cages, those with no roof over their head and no food on their tables—all of these are thoroughly on God's mind. And unless we recognize the ways that the world we inhabit does not align with the world God desires, we will not lament as we should.

I believe a significant factor in the outcry against racism after the deaths of George Floyd, Breanna Taylor, and Ahmad Aubrey is that people with skin like mine are being forced to pay attention to what has long been wrong in our country and our world in ways we are not used to and that are quite uncomfortable. With our lives slowed and diversion diminished by Covid19, we cannot help but notice and recognize what for so many in our country is their daily, lived experience. So remembering that "the Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed" and later in the psalm that "the needy shall not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the poor perish forever" will allow us to cry out to God for rescue and relief and a world made new.

Trusting in what he sees are God's ways, the writer cries out about his own need for rescue and help from his suffering, saying, "Be gracious to me, O Lord. See what I suffer from those who hate me; you are the one who lifts me up from the gates of death" (13). The writer makes his request known and looks to the future where he will be able to praise God and rejoice: "[you are the one who lifts me up] so that I may recount all your praises, and, in the gates of daughter Zion, rejoice in your deliverance" (14). We recognize in this that lament allows us to acknowledge our own needs before God that we might more fully worship the Lord with our lives.

I suspect that for many of us turning to God with our own needs is part of our regular experience. But it is the next thing our instructor does that makes us a bit more uncomfortable. We have learned, and in some ways rightly so, that Christians are not to be judgmental. Jesus himself said things like, "Do not judge that you may not be judged" (Matthew 7:1). Unfortunately, we've assumed what Jesus really meant was "be nice" and "don't cause a stir." And in believing this, we have a hard time when the psalm writer starts calling out people for being wicked and then declaring God's judgment on them. Our discomfort level rises when we hear, "The nations have sunk in the pit that they made; in the net that they hid has their own foot been

caught. The Lord has made himself known, he has executed judgement; the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands” (15-16) and later “Rise up, O Lord! Do not let mortals prevail; let the nations be judged before you. Put them in fear, O Lord; let the nations know that they are only humans.” As uncomfortable as we are with what might feel like self-righteous judgment, the psalm writer teaches us an important aspect of lament through this. What we learn is that to lament fully we must name before God the very things that are wicked in the world and call on the Lord to “Rise Up!” for what is good and against what is evil.

I should make a word of caution here. As the writers lament throughout the psalms, they are inclined both to protest their innocence and confess their guilt. Having an eye trained to spot wickedness cuts both ways—a person must be equally able to recognize the plank in her own eye and the speck in the eyes of others. At times, truthful lamentation must also include the wickedness and evil that has rooted itself deeply in our own lives. By recognizing this, we will perhaps avoid the trap of judgmentalism on the one side and mere “niceness” on the other. But beware. The Lord may indeed rise up and call on you to change or call on you to press for the change you long to see.

While it is no formula, Psalm 9 has taught us some important aspects of lament: the ABC’s so to speak. First, **a**ddress God. Second, **b**e confident in God’s work in the past, as you proclaim what is at God’s heart. Third, **c**ry out against the discrepancy between what God desires for the world and the brokenness of how things actually are. **C**all on God to provide for what you need. And finally, **d**on’t be afraid to call on God to judge what is wicked and evil in yourself and in the world. These are valuable things to know and remember as we learn to lament. The psalmist has taught us well.

But if we stop at the end of Psalm 9, we may very well miss a crucial part of lament. You see, the psalm actually continues. Psalm 9’s acrostic moves into and through Psalm 10. In fact, they really are one psalm. If we stop with 9, it will be like learning only half of the ABC’s. Of course, you can create some words and you have some understanding, but in the end, you are left in an elementary state. Psalm 9 rings with confidence and assurance, focusing mostly on God’s work in the past even as the writer calls out to God for rescue and relief from suffering. But Psalm 10 changes tone. The lament, the crying out, the calling on God grows louder and plunges deeper into where God seems absent. The psalmist prays, “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor—let them be caught in the schemes they have devised.”

It’s as if our teacher knew we needed another lesson related to lament. This lesson connects not as much to the “what” of lament as to the “when” of lament. The psalmist suggests lament is fitting when struggle continues, when God seems to have abandoned God’s duties, when the hope of the poor seems crushed, and when a just world seems impossible. Lament is appropriate when our confidence in God feels most unstable and our certainty of God’s presence is most fragile. Lament is what we need when the wicked are having their way and are thinking to themselves as the psalmist says, “God has forgotten, he has hidden his face, he will never see it.” All this is to say, lament is right for such a time as ours.

By learning the when of lament, we are pressed deeper into life with God. You see, the trust and certainty that abounds in Psalm 9 is not an untested and easy trust. As the psalm continues into 10, the psalmist can either abandon God as untrustworthy and untrue or he can lean in. The writer can lean into lament, lean into the most difficult places, lean into the most seemingly contradictory aspects of life that challenge God’s justice and God’s steadfast love for humanity. Leaning into the

pain and discomfort and challenge is precisely what we are called to do as we lament. Lean in and don't turn away.

Following this call to lean into lament is following the call of Jesus today. Jesus demonstrated through his life and teaching and ultimately through his death that God decided to lean in where justice had not been served and hope seemed put to death. Jesus called his disciples to follow the way where the meek and the mourning are blessed, a way that finally leads to the cross—that place where Jesus cried out in lament with all those who have ever felt God forsaken. The psalmist has taught us, and Christ calls us to lament even today.

So as I close this morning I invite you now to lament with me. I encourage you to lament today for lives lost. Lament for people's humanity being pitted against each other. Lament that the world isn't right. Lament the pandemic. Lament racial injustice. Lament partisan politics. Lament that in our country black lives have not mattered the same as white lives. Lament Xenophobia. Lament hatred of all kinds. Lament that justice is not to served. Lament the absence of love between neighbors. Lament whatever you recognize needs lamenting. I will lead us into this time of prayer with a prayer written by Ted Loder, itself a calling to lament.

I Remember Now In Silence

Lord,
Plunge me deep into a sense of sadness
At the pain of my sisters and brothers
 Inflicted by war,
 Prejudice,
 Injustice,
 Indifference,
That I may learn again to cry as a child
 Until my tears baptize me
Into a person who touches with care
 Those I now touch in prayer:
 Victims of violence,
 Of greed,
 Of addictions;
 Prisoners in ghettos
 In old age,
 In sexism;
 People with broken bodies,
 With broken hearts,
 With broken lives,
Whom I remember now in silence before you
 Because I have too often forgotten them
 In the shuffle of my fretful busy-ness.²

² Ted Loder, *Guerillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle (20th Anniversary Edition)* (Augsburg Fortress: Minneapolis, 2005), 69.