

“Out of the Depths, I Cry to You”: The Healing Power of Lament

Psalm 130; John 11:28-36

It was one of those Biblical trivia games young Baptists played—because there wasn't anything else we were allowed to do. “What is the shortest verse in the Bible?” Answer, “Jesus wept”, John 11:35. Only two words—but some of the most important ones in the Bible. There was Jesus weeping over his close friend Lazarus' death. The text says he “shuddered”, then wept, wept over his friend's death and wept over all the death in the world.

I saw the words in a museum exhibit of photography of religious signs in public. It was of a lonely curve in a road. There were, I think flowers by the roadside, like the flowers we see by the side of the road where a loved one has died in a car accident. But there it was, a hand-written sign in large block letters: “Jesus Wept.” I was deeply moved in a way I'm rarely moved, if ever, by religious signs on the highway. Jesus Wept. Our Lord entered into our weeping and the common weeping of the world.

I

We have a psalm of lament today, one of the major categories of the psalms, though we rarely read them. “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!” These are

songs which come from the darkness of our lives and darkness of our days. We cry them out to God. The poet T.S. Eliot in “Little Gidding” wrote of “the purification of the motive/ In the ground of our beseeching.” Laments come from the ground of the ground of our beseeching.

Laments spring from many conditions of the heart, the sorrow of grief and loss, the sorrow for sin which has caused damage and harm, the sorrow over the madness of the world, the deep darkness of depression.

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.”

Jesus knew the lament of the psalms. On the cross he quoted the beginning of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” There as he was dying he brought his feelings of abandonment by God to God. What is more painful than the feeling of abandonment—by God, or by others. At that moment Jesus was identifying with all humanity who have experienced forsakenness and felt abandoned by God, and by those around them.

If he can, so can we.

II

Over the past decades the church has tossed most of the lament psalms aside. In worship we major on psalms of praise, thanksgiving and trust. Worship needs to be up-beat!

The church has also banished the *hymns* of lament, the hymns that bring our sadness and sorrow, our lostness and need. One church growth expert years back counseled churches, “Don’t play any music in a minor key”. They are a downer! As if we didn’t *live* sometimes in a minor key.

So don’t look for them in your hymnbook. Hymns like

Come, ye disconsolate,

where’er you languish,

Come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel.

Here bring your wounded hearts,

Here tell your anguish

There is no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.

There’s one lament hymn we may still sing, though we don’t often think of it as a lament.

What a friend we have in Jesus,

All our sins and griefs to bear.

What a privilege to carry

Everything to God in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy-laden,
 Cumbered with a load of care?
 Precious Jesus, still our refuge,
 Take it to the Lord in prayer.

So where have the psalms of lament and the hymns of lament gone, banished from the church? To folk music, country music, black spirituals and the blues. Folk music like Joan Baez's "Blowin in the Wind." Country music like Hank Williams' "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry." Spirituals like "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child." And the blues which spring from the black experience in America. One blues song goes:

De blues ain't nothin'
 But a poor man's heart condition

III

What do we do with the blues of our hearts? The psalmist helps us bring them to God and to church. I hope the church can be such a place.

There was a woman in one of my churches who had just suffered the death of her husband and was in deep grief. She told me, "I can't come to church. I'm afraid I will cry." I told her I understood. Sometimes we just can't go. But I hope

church can be a place where it is okay to cry, where we can bring our sadness to church.

Why, how, can the psalmist bring his cry of lament to God? The end of the psalm tells why:

Because with the Lord there is mercy
and fullness of redemption.

There is one who hears in heaven, and there is one full of mercy and ready to come to our aid.

There are our personal griefs we bring, and there is the grief of the world. In his classic, *“The Tragic Sense of Life”*, Miguel Unamuno writes of what he calls “The Common Weeping.” He says:

...I am convinced that we should solve many things if we went out in the streets and uncovered our griefs which perhaps would prove to be but one sole common grief, and joined together in beweeeping them and crying aloud to the heavens and calling upon God. And that, even though God should hear us not; but He would hear us.

Then the last line: *“The chiefest sanctity of a temple is that it is a place to which men go to weep in common.”*¹

Church should be such a temple. There is also the Common Rejoicing, and church should be a temple for that too, a place where we can express fully our joy, our thanksgiving, our awe and delight. Church is where the deepest of all our joys and sorrows can be expressed. Too many churches harness both. We prize moderation in all things, including our emotions. But we can bring our immoderation also to church.

IV

Sometimes our sadness is the sorrow of grief. Everyone grieves in different ways and along different time tables. No one can judge another's grief. The poet May Sarton wrote:

There are some griefs so loud
They could bring down the sky,
And there are some griefs so still
None knows how deep they lie....²

Sometimes the grief comes when life becomes too much, when you want to say, "Stop the world, I want to get off!" The comedian Jerry Clower tells the story of two friends going hunting. One of them went up a tree to look out for game and found himself face to face with a wildcat. Round and round they went up in the tree, their bodies a blur. The man yelled down, "Shoot this wildcat!" The

friend yelled back, “I can’t. I can’t tell who’s you and who’s the cat! The man yelled back, “Shoot up here amongst us anyway! One of us up here needs some relief!”

Life can feel like that. Too many responsibilities. Worn to the bone. Not knowing what to do. We bring that to God too.

V

Some suffer the protracted suffering of depression. The psalmist of Psalm 22, which Jesus quoted described the state of his soul:

I am poured out like water
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like water
it is melted within my breast;
my strength is dried up like a potsherd.

Have you ever felt like that?

There are many causes and conditions of depression. Some depressions are situational, depressions caused by loss, sickness and grief.

There is also clinical depression which is systemic, body, mind and spirit. Sometimes chemicals like serotonin are low, the brain like a battery without water. Such chemicals are important to help the neurotransmitters necessary for

healthy brain functioning. Anti-depressants can help enormously. They can help fill up the battery. God doesn't want you to suffer needlessly and so would want you to search for every means of healing.

Depression affects your sleep and your appetite. It deprives you of any feeling of pleasure, even the hope of feeling pleasure. In one psalm it is called "the noon-day demon", the demon "that wastes at noonday", robbing us of pleasure at the times we normally feel pleasure.

William Styron the noted American novelist suffered deep clinical depression and wrote of it in his memoir of depression entitled, *Darkness Visible*. He called depression a "storm in the brain" and described it in these stark words:

...my brain in thrall to its outlaw hormones had become less an organ of thought than an instrument registering, minute by minute, varying degrees of its own suffering.³

But he got well, and we can too.

I suffered clinical depression for many years and am now thankfully free from its grip. I remember in my mid-to-late thirties going to a psychiatrist who had been recommended to me. When I sat down in his office, I poured out my soul to him and said in a small voice: "I need someone to hold my life with me." Somedays we all do.

So we offer our pain to God. We acknowledge our need. We pray for an end of the pain, and for a way to use our pain for good, we can transform pain into beauty, into compassion, into the cause of justice. God will join us there. The psalmist turned his pain into a song.

There is the healing power of lament. It begins with letting ourselves really feel it. Sadness is not a sin. It is not a flaw. And God understands us in the deepest of our sorrow. God's own son was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. We come to God and God holds our lives with us.

There is an old rabbinic story. A young rabbinical student traveled from his home town to the city to study with a master rabbi. One day he came to him and said, "Master, my life is in torment. Back home everything was simple, everything was clear. I studied and I prayed. But now I cannot study. I cannot pray. Everything is confused. I am lost. Please help me study and pray as before."

The rabbi paused for a moment, then said,

And who told you God wants your study and your prayers? Perhaps God prefers your suffering and your tears.

On the surface this sounds absurd. Of course God does not *prefer* your suffering and your tears. But if suffering and tears are all you have this day to

offer, God would want you to bring that. That is how the healing begins, the healing power of lament.

If your child is suffering would you prefer them to keep it to themselves, suffering alone? If your son or daughter calls you long-distance on the phone and says, “I’m hurting. I don’t know what to do?”, aren’t you thankful they called?

If human parents, Jesus would say, love like that, *how much more your Abba* in heaven.

The past Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, wrote a sermon on intercessory prayer. In it he said we pray for others, we pray for ourselves because we believe that “there is no place where the love of God can’t go”⁴

That is true for you, and for me, and for the world. That is why we “take it to the Lord in prayer.”

1. Miguel Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, (N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1954),17.

2. May Sarton, “Of Grief”, *Selected Poems of May Sarton*, (N.Y.: W.W. Norton and Co., 1978),77.

3. William Styron, *Darkness Visible*, (N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1990), 58.
4. Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), 139.