

A Season of Lamentation
Psalm 130
June 27, 2021
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
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Psalm 130—Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD . . .

There was a time early during the pandemic when I began feeling heavy and numb and oddly detached from my surroundings. People would ask how I was doing. I was fine, in one sense, but I had become spiritually dull. I couldn't explain it, I said.

I found myself trying to hurry the pandemic along, to speed things up. Like you, I missed my family—my sons, distant, faraway. Like you, I had to settle for isolation, for masking, for our travel ban, for exclusion from hugs and handshakes. Like you, I had to settle for less.

Langston Hughes knew about feeling blue:

*When the shoe strings break
On both your shoes
And you're in a hurry-
That's the blues.*

*When you go to buy a candy bar
And you've lost the dime you had-
Slipped through a hole in your pocket somewhere-
That's the blues, too, and bad! (The Blues, Langston Hughes)*

I had not lost my last dime. My shoe strings hadn't broken. But I was not settled. Something was off, out of kilter. Pandemic had turned everything sideways. "How are you doing," people would ask. I was fine, but I wasn't fine. I would ask others, "How are you doing." I often got the same response: fine. But we weren't fine. For me, I had become spiritually dull, emotionally numb. I couldn't explain it. Until some wise someone gave me a word for it. *Lament*.

Lament wasn't something I was feeling, so much as it was something I needed to do.

I needed to find words for my grieving and loss. I needed to articulate the "off-ness" the "weight" the "worry" the "woe." Many of you told me how hard it was to be alone for so long. How hard it was not to see your family, how you were counting the days, how our physical isolation devolved into emotional and social isolation. Our loved ones went into the hospital; we could not visit them. Our loved ones went into physical-rehab; we could not visit them. Our loved ones died; we could not wrap ourselves into the gathered community for prayer and song and tears. The ten available spaces at the graveside were doled out in the cruelest of family lotteries. Our grandchildren went un-hugged. Our classes were taken on-line. We had virtual cocktail hours, dances, dates. You described not only a stir-craziness, but a sadness. We were all getting plenty of rest, but we were all tired. You were mourning. I was, too.

When people asked how I was doing, I began to use my friend's word: I am lamenting. That is to say I began to gather all these worries and woes and I offered them to God. This took some practice because I'm always a little afraid of burdening God. I didn't want to worry God with my concerns. But at some point, I started to let God have it. Have it in full. Have it all.

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!*

I began to lament, freely to lament. About the pandemic. About the news headlines. I walked for justice with you, and I lamented our country's growing edges. Like you, I was angry, frightened, felt helpless, hapless, bereft. The lives of Black people murdered, mattered; The lives of Asian Women murdered in Atlanta mattered, mattered. Immigrant lives mattered. Unemployed and Laid-off lives mattered. Business owner lives mattered. All the lives mattering, mattering, mattering. Reform the police. Reform the church. Reform the heart of mine own heart. Every day, every news cast. The Covid death toll rising, rising. No end in sight. It was so hard, so tiring, such a heavy time.

And I lamented.

I lamented the burdens you shared with me. I lamented the postponed weddings and the down-sized funerals. I lamented that there were others isolated in places less secure, less comfortable, less provisioned than my place.

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!*

Even now, as we ease out of Pandemic, my lament continues, as there are still things to lament about. I lament those brothers and sisters who have chosen not to become vaccinated. I grieve the possibility that they will get this deadly disease from which there is no cure; I grieve they put themselves, their livelihoods, and their families at undue risk. I worry they will get sick. I grieve they may die. How will I stand if called upon to officiate their funeral?

And I grieve the restless violence that grips our community. Mindy Watts-Ellis worked with our DREAM kids at the summer camp which our church is helping to host. They painted over 240 doves that are installed on our church's front yard. Each dove was a prayer for peace for each of the 'shots fired' incidents that have occurred in Champaign from January of 2020 to April of 2021. I can think of over 240 reasons to lament, to find our knees, to look up, to lift up our cries to the Lord.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

* * *

We learn from looking at psalms such as the 130th Psalm, that with lament often comes waiting.

*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;*

Lament and waiting, according to the Biblical witness, go hand in hand. Waiting. Watching. Resting in the Lord. Being patient.

The problem with waiting is that we are NOT good at it. In the age of fast food, express lanes, and instant credit-checks, we are not patient. We have grown increasingly impatient. Everything about life has gotten faster. We have lost the spiritual discipline of waiting.

Andrew Root suggests that "modernity is the constant process of speeding things up."

Technology's long-standing promise has been an easier, more leisurely, and even more meaningful life. But it hasn't worked out that way. The pace of life has accelerated, and the present is compressed—which is a way of saying that the present doesn't last as long as it used to, and keeping up can be exhausting."^[1]

As life moves faster, we have trouble keeping up. And left behind, we have trouble waiting. But the psalmist knew about waiting.

*My soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.*

* * *

I've gotten better at lamenting, and it has helped. I had forgotten to lament. I had forgotten about the need, spiritual and otherwise, for lament: the need to gather my worry and woe, to name it, to reflect upon it, to confront it—and to lift it up to God.

I've not mastered lament, but I've gotten better at it.

I have *not* gotten better at waiting. I'm still dogged by impatience. *How long, O Lord? How long?*

It helps me to remember that my waiting isn't in vain. I'm not waiting just for the sake of waiting. *I'm waiting for God.* And with the waiting comes trust. I trust God hears my prayerful lament. I trust God answers prayer. I trust that God isn't only worthy, God is trustworthy. God's time may not be my time. And God's way may not be my way. I know only part of the picture. I see only part of the story. I am always stuck in time, and often stuck in anxiety. God is not stuck. God transcends all my worry and woe. God is able where I am not able. God can do what I cannot do. I'm not waiting for nothing. *I'm waiting for God.*

I am waiting for God.

And while that waiting often requires more patience than I have, my waiting is oriented in the right direction. I'm not waiting for me. I'm not waiting for you. I not waiting for the government. I'm not waiting for the church. I'm not waiting for time. *I'm waiting for God.*

While I'm not good at it, I know that my waiting is not in vain.

I lament. I lament. I lament.

And I wait.

Trusting God, I lament, and I wait.

AMEN

^[1] The Congregation in a Secular Age: Keeping Sacred Time against the Speed of Modern Life, by Andrew Root, Baker press. Reviewed in the Christian Century by Anthony B. Robinson, June 2, 2021.