

Lament

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

July 1, 2012

Carbondale Community United Methodist Church

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Psalm 130

(please turn in your hymnals to Psalm 130 on p. 848 I want to tell you a little bit about this psalm before we read, and we will read it with some pauses for explanation) Note at the top of the musical response, in parentheses, are the words *Lent, Funerals, and Memorial Services*. This psalm, the psalm chosen by the church for this Sunday's lectionary text is a psalm of lament. Laments comprise over one-third of all the psalms and they are both by individuals and cries of the community.¹ A lament is a human prayer cry; it carries complaint, anger, grief, despair, and protest to God.² In lament, the human voice addresses God in the full anguish of suffering and cries out for help. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman teaches that lament expresses bewilderment and shock at disorienting events in life—events that make unsense of the world we try so hard to render sensible.³ What ultimately shapes biblical lament, though, is not the woe cried out by the human creature, but the faithfulness of the God who hears⁴—a God who hears psalms like 130, uttered during the disorientation of a funeral service. Let us now sing the words of response, as we prepare to enter into this ancient text of lament. (*sung response*)

¹ Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller, "Introduction," in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pen, and Public Square* ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick Miller (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), xiv, xv.

² Sally A. Brown, "When Lament Shapes the Sermon," in *Lament* ed. Sally Brown and Patrick Miller (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 27.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984). See also Ellen T. Charry, "May We Trust God and (Still) Lament? Can We Lament and (Still) Trust God?" in *Lament*, 95.

⁴ Sally A. Brown and Patrick Miller, "Introduction" in *Lament*, xix.

Part I of Lament—Plea

1. Address to God---In the first part of the plea (v 1-2), the psalmist addresses God miserably from the depths of despair. He is a nobody in a nowhere of pain, hoping that the God Yahweh will hear, will hear this ardent cry of his soul. The psalmist even admonishes God to listen, to have open ears. “Hear me!” his words beseech.⁵

So the psalmist invites us to step into the depths with him. Have you ever been in the depths of despair. Have you ever wondered if God hears you, if God’s ears are open? Perhaps you are in such a nowhere place even right now. Let us say these words then, v1-2 and follow by singing the refrain. (*sung refrain*)

2. Complaint/Cry/Protest Against God—In the second part of the plea the psalmist speaks the truth. Typically in a lament, the speaker complains, or names the enemy, or even rails at God in the face of chaos. The lament can often be a cry of protest at circumstances of oppression and injustice. “Biblical faith is never in favor of pious silence. It is rather for direct, assertive, insistent demand that refuses to sit silently while the waters rise.”⁶ In Psalm 130 the psalmist names the source of the pain—in this case iniquities. The psalmist has done something that has harmed him or has harmed people he loves, and that harm has brought him to the depths. He flings that hurt to God and asks for forgiveness—if God is a God worthy of worship.

Perhaps you have a complaint you’d like to throw at God. Perhaps you’re mad at God. Perhaps there is a disease that stalks you, or a wound that won’t let you go—that you need to demand help from God. Perhaps there is an anguish that abides with you, and you

⁵ Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 104.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, “Deep Waters” (sermon on Ps 69) in *The Threat of Life: Sermons on Pain, Power, and Weakness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 101.

need to rail at God about it. Let's join in the lament for verses 3-4, and then sing the refrain.

(sung refrain)

3. Petition (action needed) The third part of the plea in lament is to petition God for help.

The one saying the lament might give motivations that warrant divine action, or protest for their own righteousness, or protest against their adversaries. At any rate, here the one

lamenting at least trusts to lay his or her trouble in the lap of God. In Psalm 130 the one lamenting simply waits. He shifts from complaining, and places his heart and his life in the

hands of God and waits for God. . . Perhaps you have a petition for God, some help you need. Perhaps you have a whole bunch of baggage you just need to lay in the lap of God.

Let us say verses 5-6 together of petition, then sing the response *(sung response)*

Part II of Lament-Praise

Then, after all the lamenting, a kind of catharsis happens. The pain, the bitterness, the false self, the despair---gets shifted, gets transformed by the grace of a God who hears. The form of the lament carries the one praying beyond the present predicament into a new mode of trust and confidence.⁷In the second part of lament, the psalmist moves to praise God. The psalmist leaves his case on heaven's doorstep and trusts in the God who promises to be with us in our pain and beyond.

So trust that whatever you might be lamenting right now, God abides with us. God has God's ears on to hear. With God there is steadfast love for us. With God there is hope and redemption. Let us now say the praise part of this lament, verses 7-8 and end with the sung response. *(sung response)*

2nd Samuel 1, 17-27

⁷ Sally Butler and Patrick Miller, "Introduction," in *Lament*, xv.

From the psalm of lament, we move to another kind of lament, a funeral lament that commemorates the fact of a death. Often called a dirge, the funeral lament can raise the voice of public justice as a complaint is made against the perpetrator of the death.⁸ In the language of Hebrew, the funeral lament is called a *qina*. *Qina* mourns the loss, pleads for help in the midst of the suffering from grief, and can be a cry of protest.⁹ It is a song that honors the dead, and speaks no ill of them.

Here in 2 Samuel, we have a *qina* that scholars believe was truly penned by the musical David at the deaths of King Saul and his son Jonathan. (to fill in between last week and this) Since David defeated the giant Goliath, he has become a leading warrior of Israel. He has become devoted friends with Jonathan, beloved of Saul's daughter Michal---and in an ongoing cat-and-mouse chase with King Saul, who tries to kill David. Saul finally takes his life on Mt. Gilboa, while his sons die in battle all around him. Hear now the funeral lament of David for Saul and Jonathan. (before reading, insert that Gath and Ashkelon are two Philistine principal cities.)

Read 2 Samuel 1, 17-27.

In this *qina* lament, David tries to place King Saul in the best light for the sake of Israel. After all, Saul, despite his faults, did give Israel hope in the face of the Philistine threat and pride in their identity as Israelites. David tries to sing a truth that transcends Saul and Jonathan's struggles and celebrates their gifts and way they gave honor to Israel. Now, truth be told, David does engage in some hyperbole found often in eulogies. Saul and Jonathan's relationship was complex and troubled. Jonathan, David's best friend, and one who saved his life from Saul was dearly beloved by David, but Saul. . . probably not so much.

⁸ Nancy C. Lee, *The Singers of Lamentations: Cities Under Siege, from Ur to Jerusalem to Sarajevo*, Biblical Interpretation Series 60 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 33.

⁹ Bruce Birch, "2 Samuel" in *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 1205.

Nonetheless, despite a little hyperbole, David’s funeral lament can help to interpret us to ourselves in times of death and grief. David uses the traditional forms of a *qina*, beginning first by wailing and expressing the pain of loss “Your glory, O Israel, lies slain! How the mighty have fallen! He gives voice to the wailing and moaning in his soul---and gives us permission to do likewise in our own grief. Then he does the second part of a funeral lament—he offers a description of the catastrophe (of how the deaths happened) and expresses anger at those Philistines who caused the deaths. “Tell it not in Gath. . . you hills of Gilboa. . . for there the shield of the warriors lay rejected.” How cathartic for grieving people to speak how their loved ones died—to say what did it and where—and to show anger if one feels it. Then David moves to describing the lives of those who died. “Saul and Jonathan, beloved and cherished! They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.” So too, grieving people need to tell the stories of the life of the one they’ve lost, to remember them. Lastly, David calls for the people of Israel to grieve over their first King Saul and his loyal son, to urge them to mark this significant life and era in Israel. “O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul.” So too, in the death of a beloved, Christians gather to mark the significance of someone’s life, to support the family and bereaved. David’s funeral lament models for us how we can express the grief we have over the loss of a close loved one.

I offer to you as a modern day example of a *qina* by Ann Weems, who wrote this upon the death of her twenty-one year old son. In this she combines both elements of a dirge with a psalm-like lament. She goes through the steps of a lament—wailing her loss, complaining against God, petitioning for help. . .and ultimately ending in praise. Here now her lament.

O God, what am I going to do?
He's gone—and I'm left
With an empty pit in my life. . . .
How could you have allowed this to happen?
I thought you protected your own?
You are the power:
Why didn't you use it?
You are the glory,
But there was no glory in his death
You are justice and mercy,
Yet there was no justice, no mercy for him. . . .
O Holy One, I am confident
That you will save me. . . .
You are the power
And the glory;
You are the justice
And mercy.
You are my God forever.¹⁰

Amen.

Where can we go from here, except into prayer ourselves? Now, my friends, you will be given space to write your own prayer of lament as you wish. This is what the notecard is for. We have seen the words of the Psalmist, the words of David—even the words of fellow lamenter Ann Weems. Now it is time for you to craft your own words. Perhaps you need to write a psalm of lament over a struggle, or a wound, or an anger that you harbor. Or perhaps, you need to write a *qina* over a death. A few of you have experienced recent tragic deaths. Many of you have a death of a loved one that you hold, and whom you will always, always remember. This is your prayer time, your choice to share what you need with God, who is sure to have ears opened. Let us open by singing the Psalm 130 refrain, and then we will have a period for prayer. You may bring your prayer to the altar, you may write it at the altar, you may take it home, you may leave it on the altar, and I will pray over them. Let us sing (*refrain*)

¹⁰ Ann Weems, *Psalms of Lament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 20.

