

Lament and the Psalms – a Lent Study



Session 4. Collective Grief

Listen/Watch – the clip of Hannah Malcolm on Collective Grief

***With someone else, discuss what you have heard and how it relates to the Psalms being helpful in seeing a bigger picture for our loss and grief.*

Read 1 Samuel 4:1-11 and 2 Samuel 10:1-19

***With someone else, spend a short while reflecting on the sort of setbacks that David suffered (this forms the context to Psalm 60).*

Psalm Study

Read Psalm 60

***Reflect on what you hear in this psalm and perhaps discuss your initial impression with someone else.*

The heading for this Psalm in my NRSV Bible it says:

“To the leader: according to The Lily of the Covenant. A Miktam of David; for instruction; when he struggled with Aram-naharaim and with Aram-zobah, and when Joab on his return killed twelve thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt.”

This sets the context and explains why we read from the two books of Samuel at the beginning. We remember from last week that “*The Lily of the Covenant*” might refer to the tune or setting. And in this context “*A Miktam of David*” could well mean David’s prayer or plea to God. Whilst

this appears to be a personal prayer, like many such psalms it is on behalf of the wider collective of all those in David's kingdom.

Structure

We start by looking at the layout and structure of the psalm in the light of what we've discovered about Lament already in our journey of discovery in the Psalms of Lament.

Verses 1-3 The defeated nation - a plea for mercy from God who has afflicted His people. David and the armies of Israel fought against foreign armies and experienced some defeats. David knows that when the Lord is on his side, victory is assured. Worse than the defeats themselves then, is the sense of rejection and separation from God.

Verses 4-5 Hope in His deliverance - David feels that God had cast off and broken Israel, yet he won't not stop flying the "*banner*" of allegiance and trust in God. "*Rallying*" to this "*banner*" will keep his army safe, out of range of the enemy. David is beginning to say what he hopes of God.

Note the '*Selah*' at this point, suggesting especial attention to this fact. It's for the sake of the banner that the cry for deliverance is raised.

Verses 6-8 God's word of triumph over the nations - as the nations battled, it was as if David understood the LORD to be announcing each nation that was to yield to His authority. The metaphors are particularly good in this Psalm: "*Moab is my washpot; over Edom I will cast My shoe*".

Verses 9-12 Renewed trust in the God who helps - David knew that their previous defeat was because God did not fight for them but still he trusted that God would lead Israel to victory. David understands that Israel shouldn't wait passively to see what God does. Instead, they should fight, but fight through God. If their fighting through God is brave and valiant, they would see God defeat their enemies. The psalm that has begun in defeat will end in victory. This is the reversal that we have come to see in the psalms of lament that we've looked at in the earlier sessions.

Discussion

There is a clear distinction between grieving and mourning. Grief is the internal experience of sadness, sorrow, anger, loneliness, anguish, confusion, shame, guilt and fear as a consequence of loss. Grief can be shared by an entire culture. Remember the great international grief after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York in 2001, the suffering in Haiti in 2010, the Japanese earthquake and tsunami in 2011, the Christchurch mosque shootings and Sri Lanka Easter bombings in 2019 or our current grief as the loss of so many lives and the curtailment of our freedoms during the Covid Pandemic. In all of these we are collectively traumatized.

Mourning, on the other hand, shows us how we might handle grief or cultural trauma so that healing can occur. It embraces two simultaneous and complementary strands.

First, it references the cultural rituals which publicly acknowledge that the people who are bereaved or disorientated are experiencing real grief. This may be acknowledged in collective lighting of candles, laying of wreaths, books of condolence and services of memorial. Recently there has been a resurgence of interest in the November 11th Remembrance services at war memorials and in churches as we acknowledge the contribution made by those who have died in conflict.

Second, it also conveys the agonizing inner journey that the suffering and the bereaved must make to accommodate their loss and pain, in order to be able to establish a new pattern of life. Funeral services encompass both these strands, allowing the bereaved to start their journey from disorientation towards re-orientation, but they do that in the company of the friends, family and neighbours who can walk with them on their path.

Unless grief can be publicly articulated in mourning rituals, it will haunt the living, evoking both heartache and anxiety. It's very important for someone who has suffered loss, that others hear that their grief hurts and to be able to express this freely and unashamedly. Alfred Lord Tennyson offers this crucial advice: "*Ring out the grief that saps the mind; For those that here we see no more*". And in the words of the psalmist: "*Weeping*

may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning ... You have turned my mourning into dancing,” (Ps 30:5, 11).

Through mourning we can rediscover inner peace, joy and energy to move forward in hope to a revitalized spirit. True, we mustn't forget the past and its lessons. But we must be released from excessive attachment to it.

For many people who face loss or injustice, especially at time of local or national tragedy, above all, what they're asking for is a public recognition of their hurt and the public space to mourn and tell their stories. Without this there can be no final healing for them. Henri Nouwen wrote in his book *Reaching Out*:

“Healing, means, first of all, the creation of an empty, but friendly space where those who suffer can tell their story to someone who can listen with real attention”.

Lament is a passionate expression of grief or sorrow. Traditionally the Church has played a significant role in the public expression of collective lament, through ceremony, rituals, performances and the invitation for communities to gather together and publicly share and express their collective grief within the safety and beauty of the sacred space at the heart of their town, village or city.

Whether it be a ceremony of national importance, or the coming together of a small community to share in the loss of one of their own, the Church acted as host and comforter to their neighbourhood. But is the contemporary Church in danger of losing this significant role within the public square?

A third of the Psalms are about lament, complaint or protest; they are called the Psalms of disorientation and as we have already seen in the last couple of sessions, they call attention to the reality of human pain, loss and suffering without imposing any blame. Together with many other texts within the Old Testament, including the prophets and the book of Lamentations, they explore the notion that it's part of our humanity to grieve and that it's in the midst of our suffering, doubt and protest that we learn to have faith and deepen our journey towards God.