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Psalms in Our Lamentable World

Don E. Saliers

At the very time when the media are saturated by news of human carnage, enmity, and suffering, Christian liturgies have largely avoided or simply neglected lamentation and complaint. I speak not only of phenomena such as the “prosperity Gospel” or what can be called “ultra-bright” forms of Christian worship, but also of more “liturgical” traditions that follow the lectionary with its appointed psalms. Where do worshipers go with the moral pain taken in with images of war and gun violence?

In *Psalms for Preaching and Worship*, Roger Van Harn and Brent Strawn contend that “it is both wonder and scandal that the modern church in the West has largely lost touch with the Psalter. . . . The reason for such neglect, articulated by Claus Westermann, is related to the very reason that [the Psalms] must be recovered among us, namely, that they are *direct speech* about a *realistic faith* that traffics in the extremities of human life and human experience.”¹ This is especially true of psalms of lament and complaint that constitute nearly two-thirds of the entire Psalter.

Scholarship on the Psalms has focused attention on lament and complaint. Claus Westermann’s *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, The Message of the Psalms by Walter Brueggemann, and Irene Nowell’s *Pleading, Cursing, Praising* are but three of many such studies.² Concern about questions of trauma as well as violence in religious belief across traditions has given sharp point to matters of lament. *99 Psalms*, a recent book of prayer-poems by the Iranian-born German poet Said, have dramatized this concern.³

After reflecting briefly on some liturgical implications of “lament denial” in our current social/cultural context, I will discuss three psalms of lament, two of which appear in the lectionary and one not—Psalms 13, 42/43, and 88. In examining these texts, I will raise questions that Rabbi Larry Hoffman called to our attention in his *Beyond the Text*.⁴ What is not said? What is “done” in performing the texts as acts of worship? What pastoral/liturgical issues emerge when we engage the psalms of lament? What are the theological implications of praying these psalms mindfully in Christian common worship? In short, how might such demanding psalms open up some crucial yet neglected dimensions of liturgical theological work?

¹ Roger E. Van Harn and Brent A. Strawn, eds., *Psalms for Preaching and Worship: A Lectionary Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), xv–xvi.

² Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Kenneth R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen (Atlanta: J. Knox Press, 1981); Walter Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984); Irene Nowell, *Pleading, Cursing, Praising: Conversing with God through the Psalms* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2013).

³ Said, *99 Psalms*, trans. Mark S. Burrows (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2013).

⁴ Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Beyond the Text: A Holistic Approach to Liturgy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

“Lament Denial” and the Psalms Today

When we consider the images and narratives of human pain and suffering ingested daily from the range of media now available to us, one wonders how human beings can live easily with such reality. It may be that we have become so accustomed to the persistence of such reports that we are dulled to their moral and spiritual implications. Perhaps this is related to what some have called the “banality of evil.” Perhaps the suffering and pain have demonically become part of the endless “entertainment” our culture craves. More to the point, we daily swim in such an ocean of information that we don’t have time or patience to ask (or even to conceive) the theological questions that are carried by the tides. When we lose our sense of critique and protest, I contend, something is lost to our theological sensibility. Lament denial has theological implications.

At the same time, individual and family grief and bereavement continue to affect persons in every congregation. These, too, are brought to Christian liturgical assemblies. Yet a disconnect between the sorrowing, the grieving, and the poetry of the biblical Psalms occurs too frequently. Even funeral liturgies often fail to invite a shared anger and lament over loss, to sing, in Brian Wren’s language, “an honest aching song.”

So we must ask: What is at stake for Christian faith when our liturgical life loses the capacity for lament? For many of us, visits to several Sunday assemblies are likely marked by a notable absence of lament and protest in the actual singing, praying, and preaching in the assembly. The musical settings given the Psalms are often perfunctory or held captive by popular taste (or by elegant “aesthetics” as well). Roman Catholic and other “liturgical” churches may feature pleasant lyrical settings of praise psalms, but rarely encounter more demanding settings of difficult psalms. The assembly may never have an opportunity to understand why this is a problem.

In many Protestant traditions, psalms may not appear as prayer at all. In either case, what is lost to the Christian assembly is a more robust and faithful reception of Scripture, along with (at least) diminished theological anthropology. While anguish and inner struggles with suffering and injustice may be going on in people’s (private) personal lives, the challenge and grace of shared protest and lament, and the resource of communal solidarity in speaking the truth about God and world, can be lost. At the same time, traditions that have stayed in touch with human suffering—for example, African-American spirituals—have less problem ignoring or domesticating psalms of lament.

At the risk of oversimplifying, I find three principal reasons for the domestication and/or the neglect of psalms of lament. First, widespread biblical illiteracy means that the role of the Psalms as containing almost all the major themes of Scripture is not generally recognized. In so many cases the Psalms are simply not taught as integral to the understanding of God’s relationship to history and to the created natural order. In particular, most worshipers do not know how the great prophetic and messianic themes are found in poetic form, let alone expressed as addresses to God in prayer. The richness of the intertextuality of psalms and biblical readings goes wanting, and liturgical imagination is impoverished. This in turn can dull the assembly’s ability to “hear” the Word of God in reading, singing, and preaching.

Second, with some exceptions, the actual use of psalms of lament in worship is vestigial at best. Relatively few lament psalms are in the Sunday lectionary. Furthermore, the way in which the psalms are “performed” is often *incongruent* with their emotional and theological content. This shows up especially in the musical settings, as well as in the way the psalms are led or prompted. Often one has little sense of the prophetic and social force of lament. We have all heard the complaint about singing or chanting the Psalms: “boring.” A fine irony!

A third reason for this neglect is that many worshipers do not *know how* to conjoin their real experiences in life with the poetic and rhetorical style of the psalms of lament. “What does my joy, my anger, my grief, my confusion have to do with these ancient Hebrew poems? They aren’t written in my ‘language.’” Such an attitude raises both cultural and catechetical issues. Unless those who worship are familiar with the way poetry and literature create shared emotional value, the disconnection will remain. Although some Christian liturgical patterns employ the more demanding and difficult psalms as “texts” from time to time (as in Good Friday liturgies), little attention is paid to forming and expressing the actual life experiences that people may bring to the liturgical assembly with the Psalter.

Some psalms are familiar in personal devotional practices—such as Psalm 23 or 100—yet few people are acquainted with the anguish and questioning in the Psalter. Some don’t touch the Psalms because they think them too full of violence, a phrase from the ending of Psalm 137 often being cited as an example. “Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” (137: 9). The imprecatory psalms are, of course, a legitimate concern in a time of so much religiously sanctioned violence. But the context of violence and loss under persecution or tyrannical captivity is rarely considered, even though it fills our “news-permeated” time. This is particularly true of vast ranges of the biblical psalms of lament. Contemporary Christians prefer the “happy” psalms. One should note, of course, that authentic praise and thanksgiving make their own demands (!), and that these psalms may also suffer domestication.

Three Lament Psalms

Let us turn to three psalms that may provide significant clues to the ways in which lament is necessary for authentic theological faith and faithful liturgical participation. It may well turn out that these will shed light on particular theological deficiencies as well as possibilities. The venerable slogan *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the pattern of prayer is the basis for the pattern of belief) can be made more illuminating for the work of liturgical theology when such psalms are made a necessary part of “living liturgy.” *The issue here is one of “truth telling” and the capacity to hear the truth about the lamentability of the world in which we find ourselves.* Truth telling has to do with emotional recognition of ambiguity and ambivalence. This is a form of “affective knowledge.” Such forms of knowing involve more than cognitive understanding. Truth here involves the cultivation of the affections of sorrow or grief over what is described. The felt significance of what is lamented is awakened in the subject. So we

begin with Psalm 42/43, a paradigmatic instance of both ambiguity and ambivalence in addressing God (appointed for the sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, with readings from 1 Kings 19: 1–4 and 8–15a, Galatians 3: 23–29, and Luke 8: 26–39).

Psalm 42/43

Unlike many typical lament psalms, Psalm 42/43 (taken as a unity) features a series of complaints mingled with expressions of trust. But it remains at the end in a state of tension with no easy resolution. This tensive quality is part of its theological and spiritual character. For it is from first to last a prayer welling up from deep desire for God. This is a psalm of searching and yearning, signaled at its beginning by the image of the thirsty and distressed doe (or “hart” in the King James Version). God is the true object of this continual restless yearning, and “thirst” is a central metaphor of the psalm.

At the heart of this desire is the theological question “Where is your God?” This is not a standard question that most worshipers expect to hear. Of course, many have already asked this question outside the liturgy. There is in this psalm an uneasy contrast, perhaps we might even say an emotional oscillation, between despair and hope. So the emotional question correlated with the skeptic’s question about God is, “Why are you cast down, O my soul?”

In the midst of this ambivalence and theological ambiguity, we find two instances of remembering. One is of temple worship, indeed of a festival liturgy in which there is a deep pull

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
while people say to me continually, “Where is your God?”
These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng, and led them
in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.
Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.
My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.
Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows have gone over me.
By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,*

toward reliving that experience. This memory supplies an even greater intensity of desire for recapturing the sense of God’s saving presence. The second instance is a memory of sublimity. The turbulent waters roaring from sources high on Mount Hermon create the headwaters of the Jordan River. This memory image carries something of natural awe, perhaps even of what Rudolph Otto called the *mysterium tremendum*—an overwhelming sense of power and might out of human control, a feature of encountering the holy. In the liturgical acclamation of the Sanctus, the phrase “God of power and might” is said or sung with little connection to the sublimity the words convey. Isaiah 6:8, from whence the thrice-repeated “holy” comes, is filled with fear and trembling.

and at night his song is with me,
 I say to God, my rock,
 "Why have you forgotten me?"
 Why must I walk about mournfully
 because the enemy oppresses me?"
 As with a deadly wound in my body,
 my adversaries taunt me,
 while they say to me continually,
 "Where is your God?"
 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
 and why are you disquieted within me?
 Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
 My help and my God.

Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause
 against an ungodly people;
 from those who are deceitful and unjust deliver me!
 For you are the God in whom I take refuge:
 why have you cast me off?
 Why must I walk about mournfully
 because of the oppression of the enemy?
 O send out your light and your truth;
 let them lead me;
 let them bring me to your holy hill
 and to your dwelling.
 Then I will go to the altar of God,
 to God my exceeding joy;
 and I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.
 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
 and why are you disquieted within me?
 Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
 My help and my God.
 (New Revised Standard Version)

Here then is a psalm of lament that offers self-awareness and self-critique in the *tensive experience of God's absence and presence*. God is living and powerful, yet so elusive. Theologically speaking, what we have here is the necessary *apophatic* dimension of liturgy while being confronted by our own need for God. We use language to characterize God, knowing that our language is not adequate to transcendent deity. Without this awareness, Christian liturgy is diminished because its enacted theology tends to presume to fully name and describe the God of Scripture and of eucharistic and baptismal participation. The apophatic preserves the necessary mystery in all human discourse about the divine life, preventing literalism and idolatry.

David N. Power has written extensively on why Christian liturgy cannot be the same after the Jewish Holocaust⁵ (and we might include other holocausts, such as those perpetrated against the Armenians and African-American slaves). For Power, Christian liturgy cannot be in the world without the lamentable remembrance of human history. If Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is at the heart of our rites and our proclamation, then the lack of lament signals lack of solidarity in his suffering, death, and resurrection. Psalm 42/43 holds before us the tension between hope and

despair. It thus mirrors the continuing dialogue between our life experience and the voice of Christ who continually prays this and all psalms of lament on our behalf. Perhaps as William Brown has observed, this psalm acknowledges "that the life of faith is itself bipolar."⁶

Psalm 13

Psalm 13 (appointed for the sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, paired with Genesis 22: 1–14 [Abraham and Isaac], Romans 6: 12–23, and Matthew 10: 40–42) is a classical lament psalm. In six brief, tense verses, the psalmist cries out in the face of suffering, "How long, O Lord?" This is a primal question that transcends any one religious tradition. Not once but four times the

⁵ See David N. Power, *Unsearchable Riches: The Symbolic Nature of Liturgy* (New York: Pueblo, 1984).

⁶ See Brown's comments on this psalm in Van Harn and Strawn, *Psalms for Preaching and Worship*, 154.

psalmist calls upon God to act. Here we find a raw sense of abandonment, reminding us of Christ's cry of dereliction from the cross in Psalm 22. Psalm 13 is urgent, confronting God with

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.
But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me. (NRSV)*

God's own forgetfulness—or simply God's utter hiddenness, giving emotional force to the old theological term *deus absconditus*. While the circumstances of distress are not clear, the lament clearly encompasses God, the self, and the "enemies." Its insistent, bold imperative—"Answer me, O Lord my God"—will remind an attentive assembly of Jesus's own parabolic admonition to "importune" God (as did the figure knocking on his neighbor's door at midnight [Luke 11: 5]). While God may have "forgotten" those who pray, they have not forgotten: God should *not* be like this! So the

psalm wants "light to my eyes" but also demands God's answer to the destruction of the psalmist's self and world by enemies. Here the liturgy must face honestly the question of who the "enemies" are. The psalm gives opportunity for this. Skillful use of images from the psalm in the prayers of intercession and the sermon or homily can unfold and reinforce the urgency of the psalmist's prayer.

At the same time, Psalm 13 concludes with an expression of trust and a brief burst of thanks and praise. The vocative of complaint is, after all, addressed to the God whose name and nature are faithfulness and loving kindness. But this is precisely the tensive question: Will our cries force God into action? Or does the very vehemence of complaint and lament bring about a deeper recognition that God has heard in the past and will hear again?

Again, the liturgical use of Psalm 13 (indeed, of almost all lament psalms) involves connections with the readings from Scripture. In the case of its appointed Sunday, it is the story of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac that commands our attention. The psalm can be heard as a cry on behalf of all such demands for sacrifice, while looking ahead to the promise of Romans 6, in which God leads from death to life. For the Christian community, then, the intertextual force leads to the theological claim that the cry for mercy and rescue is continuously found (and rediscovered) in Christ. Christian liturgy celebrates the astonishing claim that the suffering and the hope, death and life, are found together in God's act in Christ. But perhaps most surprisingly, it allows all the more the "importuning" of God in the face of injustice and seemingly unmitigated human suffering. "How long, O Lord?" we exclaim more intensely because the liturgy sets forth the fullness of incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection side by side with the prophet's cry. Here we may be reminded of Martin Luther King's appeal in the context of the African-American civil rights movement: "How long?"

Incidentally, this is why a musical setting of Psalm 13 in C major with a jolly melody will simply not do! Something more like John Bell's dialogical setting in D minor with its insistent

falling minor third is called for.⁷ Even more extraordinary is Johannes Brahms's choral setting of Psalm 13.⁸ A particular musical setting and its style of being prayed by cantor and congregation thus carry theological import.

Psalm 88

Finally, we turn to a psalm not found in the lectionary and rarely used in Christian worship: Psalm 88—the one utterly relentless lament, with no standard turning to praise and thanksgiving.

*O Lord, God of my salvation,
when, at night, I cry out in your presence,
let my prayer come before you;
incline your ear to my cry.
For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol.
I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I am like those who have no help,
like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.
You have put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep.
Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
and you overwhelm me with all your waves.
You have caused my companions to shun me;
you have made me a thing of horror to them. I
am shut in so that I cannot escape;
my eye grows dim through sorrow.
Every day I call on you, O Lord;
I spread out my hands to you.
Do you work wonders for the dead?
Do the shades rise up to praise you?
Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,
or your faithfulness in Abaddon?
Are your wonders known in the darkness,
or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?
But I, O Lord, cry out to you;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
O Lord, why do you cast me off?
Why do you hide your face from me? Wretched
and close to death from my youth up, I
suffer your terrors; I am desperate.*

Psalm 88 has traditionally been regarded as a prayer of someone afflicted with a mortal illness. But careful attention to its actual range of metaphors, and to its descriptions of the threefold lamented crisis, shows that the theological and spiritual issues are deeper than sickness. We might say it is closer to “sickness unto death” in Kierkegaard’s terms. Loneliness, imprisonment, hopelessness, deprivation of rights, and the keening sense of abandonment—all these are given expression in this psalm. The psalm itself contends with God in the face of death and the loss of meaning. This is something rarely acknowledged about the liturgical act of a congregation in grief or unbearable sorrow, or of indignation over the way of the world.

An intricately composed poetic text, Psalm 88 presses the issue of “letting life come before God [*coram deo*].” The imagery is relentless: by day, by night. This prayer poem challenges all secure and easy ideas of God’s presence. The music of this psalm must be heard from the standpoint of the sufferer. Here again, the question of a Christological reading of the psalm comes to the fore. Can we think of this, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Thomas Merton did, as the prayer of Jesus Christ? Construing the psalm in his voice shifts the ground in which we conceive the liturgical act itself. In this way, this most desperate and relentless of lament psalms may lead to a different way of conceiving the liturgy as the

⁷ Wild Goose Resources Group, Iona Community; repr. in Elise S. Eslinger, comp. and ed., *Upper Room Worshipbook* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2006), 234.

⁸ Johannes Brahms, “Herr, wie lange,” Opus 27.

*Your wrath has swept over me;
 your dread assaults destroy me.
 They surround me like a flood all day long;
 from all sides they close in on me.
 You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;
 my companions are in darkness. (NRSV)*

ongoing intercession of Christ for the whole world. What seems to be the darkness of a set of personal complaints against God turns toward the startling prayer of Jesus Christ, who embraces all that is described of the lamentable world.

Some Pastoral/Theological Implications

Each Sunday most Christian communities offer prayers of intercession. The psalms of lament, both within and outside the discipline of the lectionary's appointed psalms, provide a biblical and theological resource for deepening the assembly as a community of intercession in the face of the world's injustice and suffering. Each of the psalms we have touched on offers distinctive challenges for planning, preparing, and engaging in the living liturgical actions of a gathered assembly. The *lex orandi* that neglects the psalms of lament forfeits something necessary to a more faithful and authentic *lex credendi*. Wrestling with God is intrinsic to the ongoing divine-human exchange that constitutes the heart of Christian liturgies. For the tensive and paradoxical figure of Jesus Christ is central.

Our brief inquiry tells us that much further work needs to be done by theologians of Christian worship. This task is intrinsic to pastoral/liturgical theology. Theologians should bear in mind the three reasons for the neglect or avoidance of the psalms of lament stated earlier:

1. Understanding the Psalms as liturgical actions in themselves—as reflected in their use of the vocative case (“O Lord”)—will, I am convinced, reveal and even establish the language and gesture of the indicative mood (the mood of action and truth telling). This is necessary to counter the naïve idea that if we only *think* the content of these texts, we will come to believe more profoundly. Psalms of complaint and lament embody the tensive experience of bringing our ambivalence and ambiguity to our worship. In that sense, critical biblical and theological thinking must be built into training in the Psalms at the same time we make the emotional connections with the metaphors and the verbs of the Psalms: “O Lord, make speed to save us” A rediscovery of the Psalms in the liturgical assembly is itself a step toward overcoming biblical illiteracy. Precisely because the Psalms contain all the major themes of Scripture, the linkages are implicit when a congregation receives thoughtful, authentic practice in the Psalms. Exploring that kind of intertextuality quite naturally suggests a form of biblical exploration that is simultaneously affective and conceptual.
2. Much more attention needs to be paid to how the Psalms are prayed in the assembly. My chief concerns are with the musical settings and the style of leadership in prayer. The assembly should not merely be entertained by the setting, but participate in the liturgical action. Of course, I want to include spiritual participation by listening, as in those traditions where choir, priest, and cantor sing the liturgy; this requires another kind of training, of both ear and heart. But principally we need to reconnect catechesis,

biblical study, and devotional use of the Psalms with forms of the assembly's "performance practice." Praying the Psalms thoughtfully together in the liturgy and alone in personal prayer are both necessary if the church is to participate in truthful lamentation before God.

3. The first two points in turn suggest that the ministries of the congregation and the ongoing life experience of social and personal suffering must be honestly conjoined to the poetry of biblical texts. The Psalms can no longer be regarded in isolation from discerning choices in hymns, songs, and sermons, and especially from the ongoing intercessory prayer by the whole assembly over time.

Underlying almost all these issues is the matter of desire for God. Unless a passion is awakened that leads us into deeper self-understanding *coram deo* (living before the face of the divine), our liturgies will never shape human lives in the way of being in the world the Hebrew and Christian scriptures portray. The extremities of life are figured in the psalms, and the *lex orandi* of Christian common worship needs them for what Aidan Kavanagh called the "transaction" of liturgical action—the actual intercourse between God and humanity. The scriptural foundations of liturgy are at stake, just as theological integrity and pastoral relevance are at stake in the recovery of the psalms of lament for our ongoing prayer in the Christian traditions.

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