

Bring Your Burdens to God

Scripture: Psalm 102; Philippians 4:1-14

Last week we used words from Psalm 150 to call on everything that has breath to praise God. Today we're using Psalm 102 to plead with God to hear our prayers and bring us relief from our problems. Last week we celebrated. Today we lament. Of course, we do both of these every Sunday during the time when we share our joys and concerns with each other and with God.

This is what Paul talked about in his letter to the Philippians. He experienced hardship and comfort, hunger and plenty, rejection and companionship. And through it all he looked to Jesus and to other people for strength and support. We might read Philippians 4 and think that to be good Christians, we must always put on a happy face. But the psalmists and other biblical figures such as Moses, Jeremiah, and Job provide examples of being honest with God about every feeling, including complaints.

Although about half of the psalms are songs of lament or poems of complaint, Psalm 102 is the only psalm that describes itself as a lament.¹ In the *New International Version* the description is: *A prayer of an afflicted person who has grown weak and pours out a lament before the Lord.* And from *The Message*: *A prayer of one whose life is falling to pieces, and who lets God know just how bad it is.*

In some laments, the writer pours out their particular troubles to God. Others are written for use by the larger community. Psalm 102 appears to be a mixture of these. The psalmist voices personal complaints and then sees the plight of the community mirrored in their own suffering. This psalm is included in a collection of songs used by the Israelite community for worship. It must have been used as a corporate lament like the way we might use songs from our hymnal to lament together.

The first eleven verses of Psalm 102 are a personal lament. The writer begins by crying to God for help and then continues by voicing all their complaints: a deteriorating body, loneliness, desolation, sleeplessness, taunting enemies, isolation, and the brevity of life.

The psalm continues in verses 12 through 22 with a hymn of praise and a prayer for God to restore the kingdom of Israel. Even as despair abounds, the writer rebounds with emphatic words of trust and praise. The psalmist comforts all who hear the prayer with a list of what God will do. The Lord is still king. God will rule, have compassion, show mercy, rebuild what was destroyed, and hear the prayers of the destitute. The writer is confident that the next generation will be able to praise God when they see that all of these predictions have come true.

After a brief interlude for individual lament and a prayer for rescue from death at the midpoint of life in verses 23 and 24, the psalmist regains confidence and returns to praise in the

¹ Sources consulted include Walter Brueggemann, Introduction to *Psalms of Lament* by Ann Weems, Westminster John Knox Press, 1995; James H. Waltner, *Psalms, Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2006, pp. 492-495; and Karmen Krahn and Marlene Kropf, "Send Our Roots Rain: Resources for a Six-part Worship Series on the Psalms," *Leader: Summer 2015*, MennoMedia, p.30.

last four verses. Even if a person's life is brief, God the creator is great. The Lord will endure. The eternal God will be the security of future generations.

If we expand our view from this one psalm and look at all of the complaints and laments, we discover that there is a recurring pattern to them. The writers and the community learned how to order grief, to be sure that grief was fully expressed and delivered, while not being turned loose with destructiveness. The rage, anger, and sadness are expressed honestly; but the emotions are ordered, mediated, and stylized to make the rage and hurt more effective, available, and usable.

The classic model of Israel's speech of grief, pain, and rage has six regular elements, which may occur in all sorts of configurations. Not all the elements will be present in each one.

The lament begins by naming God in an intimate address such as "My God" or "God of my fathers." The complaint isn't made to a stranger. It's a truthful utterance sent out in the middle of an ongoing relationship of trust and confidence. The lament is not spoken to an "empty sky." It is addressed to a sovereign friend who is believed to be listening intently.

The lament moves immediately to complaint. It tells God, with some specificity, how troubled life is and what the trouble is. The complaint usually engages in hyperbole, much as a child does with a small hurt in order to get attention from a busy adult. The overstatement is intrinsic to pain, but also a strategy to get God's attention and persuade God to act.

Third, the lament comes to its focus with petition. It addresses God with a large, demanding, unapologetic imperative. God can save, the psalmist confesses, if only God can be mobilized.

Fourth, the lamenter adds motivations to the petition. The speaker seeks to give God some good reasons for acting. The motivations appeal to virtue, to repentance, to precedent, to God's honor, and even God's vanity. The speaker often assumes that human need is not enough, God must be shown that something is at stake for God in the trouble as well. The motivations voice a dimension of faith that isn't very respectable. But it's not unusual for hurting people to risk the unrespectable or even the unthinkable.

Fifth, a lament usually asks for vengeance against an enemy. In addition to the good asked for self or for community, the lament also asks bad for the opponent. These poems often include a wish for doing something hurtful, punishing, and destructive to the human adversary. Laments are extreme. They don't demonstrate noble human intention. Instead, they show what is most unacceptable in conventional theology and social relations. These are the sections of the psalms we're tempted to leave out, especially when read in our worship together. These are the sorts of thoughts we don't like to admit to having.

Finally, a lament ends in rejoicing and praise. Something unexpected happens. The mood and the tone of the psalm change. The psalmist's anger and protest appear to be spent, and pain moves to a positive resolution. The speaker is, at the end, confident of being heard and dealt with bountifully. It isn't clear what permits such a turn. It may be that the loud protest is cathartic, and for the psalmist, expressing the complaint is enough. The poem resolves a need and the speaker is, at the end of the poem, in a very different place.

Psalms of lament are courageous and daring acts of faith. They represent a "spirituality of protest." In place of our denial, pretending with each other and with God that "all is well," laments boldly recognize that all is not right in the world. Instead of being docile before God, laments identify "enemies" to blame or hold God accountable for what is failed, dysfunctional, and unjust. Instead of accepting easy clichés conventionally ascribed to God – all-knowing, all-loving, all-powerful – laments seize the initiative and dictate what God must do. The psalmists

believe that intervention, transformation, and miracle will not happen without such complaints and demands.

Psalms of lament provide us with a pattern of prayer for desperate times. We don't need to hide our misery from God; we don't need to pretend that all is well. Instead, we name our grief, acknowledge our misery, and shed tears. The prayer of lament is cathartic. Naming our woes and crying out to God opens a pathway to new awareness of God's presence. This can be especially true when we lament together in the community of faith, writing or singing our own psalms of lament. God's healing grace becomes palpable, and we find strength to continue to be faithful in the midst of struggle.

An extraordinary modern example of truth telling in lament can be found in the collected prayers of Ann Weems.² Ann's son Todd died less than an hour after his 21st birthday. In the years following that loss, she gave voice to her continuing grief, rage, and faith in a series of harrowing and beautiful psalms of lament. Here is one of them, *Lament Psalm 5*.

O God, find me!

*I am lost in the valley of grief,
and I cannot see my way out.
My friends leave baskets of balm at my feet,
but I cannot bend to touch the healing to my heart.
They call me to leave this valley,
but I cannot follow the faint sound of their voices.
They sing their songs of love,
but the words fade and vanish in the wind.
They knock,
but I cannot find the door.
They shout to me,
but I cannot find the voice to answer.*

O God, find me!

*Come into this valley and find me!
Bring me out of this land of weeping.*

O you to whom I belong, find me!

*I will wait here,
for you have never failed to come to me.
I will wait here,
for you have always been faithful.
I will wait here,
for you are my God,
and you have promised that you counted the hairs on my head.*

In the preface to her book, Weems writes: *Of course, I know my psalms are not finished. Anger and alleluias careen around within me, sometimes colliding. Lamenting and laughter sit side by side in a heart that yearns for peace that passes understanding. Those who believe in the midst of their weeping will know where I stand.*

You may be wondering why I chose lament as the theme of our worship today. Two events influenced my decision. Last Saturday I spent much of the day preparing for our

² Ann Weems, *Psalms of Lament*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

Celebration Sunday and then went to bed because I wasn't feeling well. I didn't access any news sources until Sunday afternoon, so I was surprised by this Facebook post from a friend living in Africa.

I am grieving and angry to see news of another shooting in the U.S., another hate crime. Ten human beings had their lives cut short. I am in Bor, South Sudan, this week, where conflict from decades ago is a source of resentment and conflict. How do we let these wicked ideologies fester, and allow people to have weapons to carry out horrific acts? In both countries, I think that we as average citizens have a significant role to play. We can find ways that we can acknowledge wrongs of the past, work towards healing and freedom, and find ways to protect each other. We can examine ourselves and be willing to give up our sense of innocence, or privilege, or right to own a gun (especially assault rifles!!) in the interest of protecting each other and promoting the wellbeing of all. Lord, have mercy on us.

She ends by quoting Philippians 2:4-5. *"Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be same as that of Christ Jesus."*

After reading this post, I quickly learned of the mass shooting at the grocery store in Buffalo during which ten people were killed and three others were injured. The teen-aged shooter whose mind was filled with hateful, racist ideologies and conspiracy theories targeted black people. This is cause for lament.

God of all people, have mercy. How can you allow such hate to grow and be acted out? How has my silence or lack of action contributed to the devaluing of many of your beloved people? God, hear the cries of those who are in danger simply because of the color of their skin. Too many people have died. Change the hearts and minds of those who hate. For you are a God of peace and desire for all your children to live in safety. Your love can break down the walls that divide us and transform enemies into friends. May it be so.

The other event on my mind is the special assembly of our denomination next week in Kansas City. Several of the resolutions we will be considering include lament and confession. They offer suggestions for how to address exclusion and hurt, how to right some of the wrongs of the past. They also acknowledge our desire to be faithful to God's ways. Will God's leading be clear? To me? To my table group? To the delegate body? Will we continue in fellowship with each other no matter the outcome of each discussion and vote? Anticipation of this event has caused me to lament.

God of all people, have mercy. Are you speaking to us? Why can we not hear you? How could we get things so wrong in the past? Will we be able to agree on the best way forward? Open our hearts and minds to your voice and your ways. Help us to hear each other. For you have the ability to bring people together and remain in community even when they disagree. Let your wisdom prevail in the delegate assembly. May it be so.

Psalms of lament teach us to pray our inner conflicts and contradictions. They allow us to shout out our complaints to God. They give us permission to shake our fist at God one moment, break into praise the next, and repeat the process as often as is necessary. I encourage you to use them as you tell your truth to God.

I invite you sit in silent reflection for a few moments. Name the sources of brokenness, grief, pain, and despair that you are experiencing in your life or that you are witnessing in the world around you? Perhaps you could begin to write your own lament. Let's bring our burdens to God.