

*Gary Harder, January 12, 2014*

**“Lamenting our way through the disorientation”**

**Texts: Psalm 145:1-9**

**Psalms 137 & 55**

**Psalm 98:1-6**

### **Introduction**

We are preparing for a service of LAMENT next Sunday. Lament. Naming our disappointments, our hurt, our anger, our despair, our brokenness, our unhappiness with how life has treated us. These laments might be very personal, reflecting difficult and painful personal experiences – a death of a loved one, a broken relationship, a missed opportunity, a failure of one kind or another. Or these laments might be very communal, especially reflecting our church story of the last several years. It is this story which has led to these two Sundays focused on lament.

There are an amazing number of lament Psalms in our bible. These formed a rather central core of Israel’s worship. The people were not afraid to bring their complaints and their anger before God in worship. Sometimes these laments were very personal, as individuals struggled with one calamity or other. Sometimes they were communal as the whole people brought their anguish before God.

The Psalms are so honest, so real. They name it like it is. All human emotions are named. The Psalms cut through the layers of anesthetized greyness. They cut through the shallowness and the denial and the trivialization and the self-deception that we humans hide behind. They cut to the core of life without benefit of anesthesia. In them we feel pain, and sometimes rage, at the depths. In them we feel exultation at the heights of celebration.

The Psalms go deep and they go high. In them poets express great candor and pain and passion and joy. In them God meets the community and the individual in the middle of untamed darkness and despair. In them God is present in surprising moments of celebration.

My favourite Old Testament scholar is Walter Brueggemann. He writes about three kinds of Psalms, reflecting three stages of our human experience.

**Psalms of orientation**

These are Psalms that express a satisfied sense of well-being. These Psalms articulate the simple joy and delight in the goodness and reliability of God. Life is good. God's creation is wonderful. Family life is healthy. The whole community is supportive. The future looks hopeful.

These Psalms express a confident, even serene settlement of life at its best. Life is good. Faith is strong. Doubt is far away. God is known to be trustworthy and generous. Life is well ordered and secure. Every breath, it seems, breathes a sense of thanksgiving for the goodness of life and the faithfulness of God.

One of the most familiar of these Psalms of orientation is Psalm 23, read as our call to worship, loved and read and recited perhaps more than any other Psalm – a wonderful expression of a satisfying life rooted in deep confidence and faith in God

Another Psalm of orientation is Psalm 145, full of praise and full of total confidence in the goodness of God. We hear verses 1-9 of Psalm 145.

#### **Psalms of disorientation**

But Walter Brueggemann goes on to talk about Psalms of disorientation – and there are a great many of these. These are an outpouring of lament. Life does not stay in that satisfied state of well-being. At some point – for each of us – life gets disoriented, gets thrown off the nice track. Crisis, discouragement, even disaster. There are a whole series of Psalms of disorientation – Psalms for life in crisis, in pain, in doubt, in rage, in struggling with the absence of God. There is in them a language of entering the darkness.

Human life does enter anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering, and even death. And then language of rage, resentment, of self-pity, even of hatred is, and perhaps needs to be, blurted out. And so there are abrasive poems of lament in the Psalms. The old, the familiar, the safe, the secure way of life is threatened or even dismantled. It is so Jewish to challenge God then. And so Christian to, I think.

A lost job. A broken relationship. A medical diagnosis. The death of a loved one. A marriage runs into a rough patch, as all marriages do. A congregation comes into conflict, into crisis.

I was 22 years old when my dad died of a heart attack. I didn't really know how to express my grief and my anger at God. I bottled my emotions up inside. But then they stayed there. I had not yet learned that lamenting was okay, and even necessary. Years later I had to revisit that time and those emotions and finally express them and release them to God.

Psalm 137 is one of the most familiar poems of disorientation – and of rage. Jerusalem, and the sacred temple, had been destroyed. The people had been taken into exile in Babylon. And there they finally pour out their lament.

## Read Psalm 137

But this Psalm makes us quite uncomfortable, doesn't it. Especially the last verse. "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" Wow. Feelings of rage and revenge. Should we even read a Psalm like this in our worship? Usually we leave out that last verse.

We do have several songs in our hymn books which use the text of the first part of this poem.

(sing a couple of lines of 22 Sing the Journey "By the waters of Babylon, where we sat down, and there we wept when we remembered Zion. For the wicked carried us away, captivity, required of us a song, how can we sing our holy song in a strange land?").

To me this music is way too nice. The music sounds too superficial, more melancholy and sad rather than angry. It is as if we just don't want to enter the deep emotion of the Psalm. Especially not the rage. This song – but certainly not the Psalm, ends with another Psalm, as if it is way too uncomfortable to end with "happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock." So the song taken from that Psalm, ends so much more "properly" - "Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O God". As if we were repenting of even singing what we did, over nice as it was. It doesn't quite capture the spirit of "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!"

It is important to remember that the cry for vengeance is verbal, and is offered to God. The Psalmist, the speaker, the community, doesn't DO anything about it. So far as we know, in the cries for vengeance no action was ever taken. This lament is not spoken to the enemy. It is offered to God – and it stays there (Praying the Psalms, p.70).

Maybe, just maybe, if we learned to express our deepest feelings to God, especially our feelings of despair or of rage or of revenge, we wouldn't need to hurt other people with our words or our actions.

A second Psalm of disorientation is perhaps closer to our own experience. Most of us have not had our city destroyed or been taken into exile – though for those who experienced the Stalinist terrors in Russia, like some of our parents did, or the bombing of Germany, or the genocide in Rwanda they would immediately identify. For most of us, lament grows out of things much closer to home.

So we turn to Psalm 55.

"Give ear to my prayer, O God; do not hide yourself from my supplication. Attend to me, and answer me; I am troubled in my complaint...My heart is in anguish within me... It is not enemies who taunt me – I could bear that; It is not adversaries who deal insolently with me – I could hide from them. But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend, with whom I kept pleasant company; we walked in the house of God with the throng..."

**My companion laid hands on a friend and violated a covenant with me with speech smoother than butter, but with a heart set on war; with words that were softer than oil, but in fact were drawn swords”.**

**And right after that comes the verse that has been set to music to become a favorite hymn – “Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved.” That feels right to me. Take all this stuff, all this anger and despair, and pain – this deep lament – and bring it to God. And leave it there.**

**Psalms of disorientation, of crisis, of lament offered to God. As a part of our service this morning we want to invite you to name your own lament, your own disorientation. Your lament may be very personal, having to do with the personal or family things you are struggling with. Or it may be communal, especially relating to our conflicts here at MFM. We will try to gather these into a long Psalm-litany of lament which we will offer to God next Sunday. The point is that these will be brought to God – and left with God. You may want to write a longer lament, but offer only one sentence or two sentences of it for our Litany. Your lament is meant to express what is on your heart. It is not meant to be an attack on another. It is meant as an act of release, of prayer, of worship.**

**The Psalms of disorientation, of lament, do give way to poems of reorientation.**

**Psalms of Reorientation – surprising songs of newness.**

**There are a whole group of Psalms which sing a new song at the other end of disorientation, after the deep laments have found voice and have been prayed to God. There is a new orientation which is quite unlike the old status quo. It is not the old status quo revisited. It is something new, something beyond the original naiveté, something more profound than the original innocence.**

**Says Bruggemann, “This is not a return to the old form, a return to normalcy as though nothing had happened. It is rather “all things new”. And when it happens, it is always a surprise, always a gift of graciousness, and always an experience which evokes gratitude”. (p.22, Praying the Psalms).**

**Listen to the new note, the new song, of Psalm 98:1-6 (Lydia to read).**

**After my father died, my mother, at 50 years of age, now a widow, tried to make a new life for herself. She, together with my 13 year old brother, lived on an isolated farm in Rosemary, Alberta. We three older sons lived our own lives far away in three different provinces. I think mom had an awful first year of widowhood. The first month after dad died many people from the church stopped in to offer support and condolences. But then that stopped, almost totally. Partly this stopped because other people were finished their grieving by then, but also because there was a culture of gossip in Rosemary. A man could not visit a widow after a month or so without being gossiped about, and none of the women could drive. And so mom became very isolated. Much reason to lament.**

And mom, like most wives then, was very dependant in many ways on dad. She hadn't ever written a check or looked at the financial picture. She couldn't drive a car. But she was absolutely determined to learn. In fact, two days before dad died she and I went to the hospital in Bassano, 12 miles away, to see him. I assumed I would drive. But she insisted she had to learn and that she would drive. I was, quite frankly, nervous. She did okay going there, but on our way home she was getting more and more anxious. I could feel it. Our driveway crossed a bridge over a large irrigation ditch. She didn't slow down soon enough, screeched the brakes, made the bridge with maybe an inch or two to spare, and stopped, gasping. She said, "I was getting more and more afraid of that turn, and that paralysed me a bit, but I am determined to learn".

And learn she did. A year later she sold the farm, moved to B.C. took nurses aid training, got a job at the Menno Home, and made a new life for herself there – a very significant and deeply satisfying life. I had so much admiration for how she created a new life, and sang new songs of orientation, and lived so fully with so much joy and faith and love.

### Conclusion

After the disorientation comes a reorientation. After the deep laments, if we are honest enough about them, come new songs of praise. Not right away of course. It may be a year later, as it was for my mother. But they do and will come.

So "sing a new song, for God has done marvelous things... Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises..." But first bring your deep laments before God.