

2018

On Lament

Steven Classen

George Fox University, sclassen@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/comm_fac



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Classen, Steven, "On Lament" (2018). *Faculty Publications - Department of Communication, Journalism, and Cinematic Arts*. 18.
http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/comm_fac/18

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Communication Arts at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Department of Communication, Journalism, and Cinematic Arts by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolf@georgefox.edu.

ON LAMENT

STEVE CLASSEN

O God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth, *Have mercy upon us.*

O God the Son, Redeemer of the world, *Have mercy upon us.*

O God the Holy Spirit, Sanctifier of the faithful, *Have mercy upon us.*

O holy, blessed, and glorious Trinity, one God, *Have mercy upon us.*

Remember not, Lord Christ, our offenses, nor the offenses of our forefathers; neither reward us according to our sins. Spare us, good Lord, spare thy people, whom thou hast redeemed with thy most precious blood, and by thy mercy preserve us, for ever. *Spare us, good Lord.*

—Excerpted from “The Great Litany,” *Book of Common Prayer*



Not long ago, I had the privilege of participating in an invigorating roundtable conversation with regionally-based artists, scholars, and administrators in downtown Portland. We met to discuss the funding of the arts as well as strategies and concerns connected to issues of “Faith and Art” in the region. We convened in a beautiful space—the remodeled Pacific Northwest College of the Arts. It was a heady time, marked by generous curiosity. We talked art, faith, futures, frustrations and dreams. We initiated new friendships and discussed new projects. I was inspired and encouraged.

But, inevitably, such gatherings end, and as this one did, I stepped outside into a cold and breezy Portland night to walk to my car parked a few blocks away, in a part of the city where the homeless population gathers on the sidewalks and in storefront doorways. I soon met Jennifer, who looked homeless and cold, wearing only a light wind breaker over a short summer dress, and appeared as though she may be transgender. She was very polite as she approached me, saying, “I’m so sorry to bother you, but I’m so hungry, and really need some dinner. Do you have any money you could spare?” I was struck by both her very kind tone and smile, and so, as I gave her some money, I asked her name. She replied, “Jennifer, but my friends call me Jenny.” She smiled as she said it, and I smiled back, “I’m Steve. Nice to meet you, Jenny.” I paused, and added, “I’ll pray for you tonight.”

The instant these last words came out of my mouth, her face fell. It seemed like I’d slapped her. She looked unhappy and, frankly, a little scared, as she drew back. Given a few minutes to reflect on it, I was sure that she heard my words in judgmental ways that I did not intend. “Praying for you” was heard not as an affirmation of care, but as a dismissive comment of condemnation. The conversation ended. I felt at a loss as she withdrew.

As I drove home I felt humbled and saddened. I thought about how communities of faith, (including those I’ve been a part of) have, sometimes unwittingly, sometimes intentionally,

scared and scarred some of the most vulnerable in the world around us—the transgender, the homeless, the outcast—those whom Jesus spoke about, and personally ministered to, so often. Thinking of Jenny regularly reminds me how often I live at a safe distance from the real grief and hurt that God feels, and that we should all feel, as we ponder the consequences of our individual and collective inadequacies and sin.

Even though the Bible has much to say about lament—for example, in the Psalms, Lamentations, and Job—I grew up in a church that didn't spend much time talking or thinking about it. Instead, when faced with human grief, pain, or very deep loss and sadness, the church suggestion was not to spend much time expressing our grief and hurt to God, or sharing that pain and grief with others, but instead to find a quick "fix" or "solution," and to appear whole, even in times of brokenness. Some friends from this tradition suggested that I could have fixed the conversation with Jenny with better words or prayers. Perhaps I should have said something different. Perhaps I should have done this or that. Perhaps. But that really misses the point, which for me was Jennifer's pained response. I fell short, and the church falls short so often, of ministering to those in need who live outside of our comfort zone—those who recoil because people of faith have deeply injured, or simply ignored, them. This is my lament.

My work in the world of art centers on teaching film. And the films that strike me as the most powerfully spiritual are those that deal honestly with human pain and suffering and lament. These are works of art that look at pain and loss without the quick fix or solution and explore human brokenness with the hope of redemption. As one of my favorite film critics, Alissa Wilkinson, puts it, "Good movies and real religion tend to explore the same sorts of things: pain, gladness, playfulness, fear, and existence."¹ In recent years, films such as *Of Gods and Men* and *Calvary* are among the most "Christian" films I've viewed and discussed with my students, as they face death, sin, and brokenness head on, but also show how fallen people may imperfectly navigate life's challenges. *Tree of Life* by Terrence Malick—one of my favorite independent film directors—offers



Unknown Italian Artist, *Crucifix with Mourning Virgin and St. John the Evangelist*, c. 1270–1290, tempera and gold leaf on panel, 98 x 89 x 1.562 inches.

a visual poem centered around the loss of a son, and a father's lament, juxtaposing human loss with God's created beauty and visions of redemption in the midst of it all. In regular viewing, reviewing, thinking about, and discussing such good films, I find the power and practice of lament. It is no surprise to artists that some of the best and most powerful of all artistic endeavors flow out of human loss and pain.

The writers of Psalms remind us that alongside lament comes recognition of God's faithfulness and goodness. We are not left to lament without hope. God is with us. As Christians around the world meditate on the Way of Grief, Sorrow or Suffering, known as the Stations of the Cross, during the Lenten season and stop to take time to think deeply about the accounts of Christ's suffering and death, it seems an especially powerful moment in which to consider how lament connects us, and our art, with one another and our Lord.

1 Alissa Wilkinson, "Can Indie Filmmakers Save Religious Cinema?," *The Atlantic* (March 18, 2015).

Steve Classen is Professor and Chair of Communication, Journalism & Cinematic Arts at George Fox University. Previously, he was the Graduate Advisor for the Department of Television, Film and Media Studies at CSU Los Angeles. He is author of *Watching Jim Crow: The Struggles Over Mississippi TV, 1955–1969* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).