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Loss of Lament

Anderson Campbell

On a hot summer night in 2012, I tossed and turned in bed, unable to sleep. I was angry and frustrated. The year before I’d been fired from a large church for “not being a good fit.” After blaming the church leaders failed to satiate my anger, I turned to blaming God. If God was omnipotent and loving, why didn’t God prevent this from happening to me and my family? I’d committed no great sin; there was no moral or ethical failure that led to my dismissal. Yet, within just a few weeks of being let go, my family and I moved out of our house and headed to a duplex on the other side of the country.

As we settled in to our new place, we became quick friends with the couple renting out the other half of the duplex. He was a mechanical engineer from Switzerland and she was a nurse from New Jersey, both in their mid-forties. They’d moved to Oregon from Nashville only a week before us. As we got to know them, we danced around the topics of faith and religion. They knew I worked at a seminary in the area. I learned that he was an atheist and she was a lapsed Catholic. Both were angry at God and religion.

See, she’d been battling breast cancer for a long time. A few years prior, it had gone into remission (again). Then, in 2010, she lost her house in the Nashville floods. All the church could offer her for why bad things kept happening to her was an paltry, “It’s all part of God’s plan.” She decided that God was a jerk and that she’d done nothing to deserve the tragedies that seemed to follow her around. She left church and never returned. The reason they left Nashville and moved across the country was to try and make a fresh start, to leave behind cancer and chemo and flooded houses and Christianese.

Less than a year after the move, she learned that her cancer was back. She had to quit her job at the hospital and become a patient in it. She underwent round after round of treatment, losing large amounts of hair and weight. That restless summer night in 2012, I’d just had a conversation with her husband who confided in me that things were looking bad.

As I tried to go to sleep that night, I was angry. I was still being angry with God for what had happened to me and my family, and now I was angry that God allowed our neighbor’s cancer to return. These friends already shouldered more sorrow than was their fair share. So I tossed and turned, anger welling up inside me and, for the first time in over a year, I prayed. It went something like this:

“Who do you think you are, God? You call yourself ‘Love’? There isn’t anything loving about this. What we’re dealing with here isn’t fair. It’s not right. But I don’t want you to do anything for me. You want to do something? Heal HER. Destroy her cancer. Give her hope. Or maybe it would be better if you just left us all alone.”
I waited for the lightning to strike.

It didn’t.

And I felt a little better.

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We have lost the art of lament and it is killing our faith.

Western, affluent, success-oriented Christianity is so focused on blessing and praise that it doesn’t know what to do with tragedy or pain. In a weak attempt to offer consolation and hope, we sputter out platitudes about what God’s motivations must be (“God needed another angel in heaven”), what the grieving person should do (“just trust God’s plan”), or what we’ll do on their behalf (“I’ll pray for you”). At our core, though, we have no idea what to do with anger and tragedy and grief, so we do or say whatever we can to put some distance between us and it. In doing so, we rob ourselves of the opportunity to lament.

Lament is a deep and passionate expression of sorrow, grief, or anger, usually in response to the intense pain of injustice, tragedy, or loss. Other cultures, notably those in parts of Africa and the Middle East, have maintained public expressions of lament. Our culture, however, has not. Instead of giving ourselves to our grief, we run from it and we hide from those who grieve. Worse still, public outpourings of lament, such as the #BringBackOurGirls phenomenon that swept through social media earlier this month, are met with public scorn and cynicism.

We need to learn how to cry out to God, full-voiced, unfettered and unfiltered. That is lament.

The Israelites knew well the power of lament. I mean, there’s a whole book in the Old Testament that is one long series of laments. We tend to skip over that book when it comes to preparing sermons or doing morning devotionals. The psalms are full of lament, but we often rush through those in favor of psalms of praise.

In the Old Testament, there are basically two kinds of lament to God: those that are addressed to God but are against one’s neighbor (cries for justice) and those that are addressed to God and are against God (cries for relief). Walter Bruggemann reminds us that we desperately need to recover the lost art of lament. Why? Because the act of lament “redresses the redistribution of power between the two parties, so that the petitioner is taken seriously and the God who is addressed is newly engaged in the crisis in a way that puts God at risk” (Brueggemann 1986, 59). Lament is initiative taken by the grieving toward God for God to act in the world in a certain way. Things aren’t right and God has the power to make them right. So do something, God!

Our concept of God is often way too small to accommodate lament. It makes people uncomfortable when you blame God for things. We appear to have the praise and blessing thing down, but when it comes to engaging in lament together, we’re lost. This has dire consequences on our communities. Again, Brueggemann:
Where lament is absent, covenant comes into being only as a celebration of joy and well-being…. [God] is surrounded by subjects who are always ‘yes men and women’ from whom ‘never is heard a discouraging word’…. Where the capacity to lament is absent, one is left only with praise and doxology. God then is omnipotent, always to be praised. The believer is nothing, and can uncritically praise or accept guilt where life with God does not function properly. The outcome is a ‘False Self’, bad faith which is based in fear and guilt and lived out as resentful or self-deceptive works or righteousness. The absence of lament makes a religion of coercive obedience the only possibility (60, 61).

Sound familiar? “The believer is nothing, and can uncritically praise or accept guilt where life with God does not function properly.” An individual or a community who does not engage in lament has only the thinnest understanding of who God is. In the absence of expressing one’s full range of emotions to God, one is left with a God who can only be addressed in the good times and who is conspicuously absent in the bad times. To engage in lament, however, is to drastically broaden God’s reach into one’s life. It is a move that boldly demands that God be real and present and accountable in the bad times as well as the good. This is the difference, according to Brueggemann, between a God who is “a dead cipher who cannot be addressed and is only the silent guarantor of the status quo” and a God who “can be addressed in risky ways as the transformer of what has not yet appeared” (64). It is a call for God to remain with us in the “already” as well as in the hope of the “not yet.”

Psalm 88 is a striking example of lament. The psalmist proclaims that he is as good as dead because of the affliction poured out on him. He minces no words, accusing God of making him repulsive to his friends, of ignoring his cries for help, of engulfing him with terror and despair. The psalm is raw, unfiltered, and sad. It is real.

Such pure emotion in the scripture shows us that God is big enough to take on whatever we can serve up. It is an encouragement to not hold anything back, to be fully ourselves before God. “A God who must always be praised and never assaulted correlates with a development of ‘False Self’, and an uncritical status quo. But a God who is available in assault correlates with the emergence of genuine self and the development of serious justice” (65). Lament isn’t giving up, it is pressing in.

Finally, it is only through lament that we come to real praise. It is through engaging God in the painful, broken, unjust parts of our lives that we are ultimately taught the depths of gratitude and praise. When we trust God with our darkest emotions we learn to trust God with our most ebullient emotions as well. God is big enough to respond to both.

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In August of 2013, my friend and neighbor died from her cancer. My wife and I were home when the ambulance arrived. We had to call her husband and tell him to come home right away, that things were bad and she was being rushed to the hospital. He arrived just after the ambulance left, tossed me his keys, and my wife drove him to the emergency room. I joined them some hours later. The three of us sat in her intensive care room while the doctors turned off the machines and removed the tubes. Her breathing slowed and finally stopped. We wept.
Her illness and death weren’t peaceful and they weren’t fair. She was in a lot of physical, emotional, and spiritual pain right up to the end. Her husband sobbed as I held him in the hospital and then again several times over beers in the months that followed. In my prayers, I’d remind God how unfair the whole ordeal was, how unjust and unloving it was. But this time I was aware that I wasn’t shouting into the void. God was near and attentive.

That is, ultimately, what we express when we lament. **We cry out to a near and attentive God and we beg, plead, and demand that God do something.**