

# Preaching Lament and Praise

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The book of Ecclesiastes tells us there is "A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance." (3:4) How are we to preach lament and praise? Lament expresses sorrow, grief, pain, anxiety, frustration, disappointment, and loss. Some people express laments using Spirituals and the Blues. Laments become the benchmark for those who suffer intensely, for bottled up emotions and for hypertension. But most churchgoers are not exposed to the lament psalms, or don't even know they exist. One third of the psalms, or according to one estimate 57 are taken up with laments and complaints, whereas 32 are psalms of praise. So laments outnumber the praises that can startle our listeners. Many of the lament psalms are in dialogue style especially with God. So this give and take can be very emotional or even humorous at times. They often depict how people feel or what they

are presently experiencing. Life is made up of valleys and peaks, but the majority of the time is probably lived in between or what Alan Lewis calls "Holy Saturday." Lament psalms are not ecclesial whining or a gathering of people complaining how terrible things are and wishing we could return to the good old days. Rather lament is the pain expressed often in broken relationships or a protest against evil. Lament is not meant as despair nor praise as polyanna.

Praise expresses joy, pleasure, gain, and happiness. C. S. Lewis called praise "inner health made credible."<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton in his book *Praying the Psalms* wrote, "Praise is cheap today. Everything is praised. Soap, beer toothpaste...movie stars, the latest gadgets...everything is constantly being "praised"...and since everything is praised with the official low enthusiasm of the radio announcer, it turns out in the end that

nothing is praised."<sup>2</sup> Doris Donnelly believes that praise is nothing more than telling the truth, and that often is in short supply. In "The Color Purple" Snug corrects Célie saying, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it."<sup>3</sup> We can certainly praise God for the monarch butterfly (weighing less than a gram) migrating 3,000 miles from Ontario to Central Mexico. Scientists still have not found an explanation.

Because there is a reluctance to praise, Blanchard and Johnson in *The One Minute Manager* suggest that when we see something good being done we should spend a minute in praising it. This will help others to feel better about themselves and build up their self-worth. But in spending a minute doing this, we find out how inadequate we are in offering praise. All of us need praise (including preachers) but are reluctant or tightfisted to give it even to God. Ask our listeners why they might be miserly in offering praise. The psalmist certainly invites us to praise God, "Praise the Lord all you nations, glorify him all you peoples." (117:1) "Sing praise to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and melodious song." (98:5) Centuries ago Augustine maintained that we are born to praise and our lives are incomplete without praise. The angels praised God at Christ's birth (Lk. 2:13). Jesus praised the faith of the centurion who asked healing for his slave (Lk. 7:9).

He also rejoiced in the Holy Spirit saying, "I give you praise, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike" (Lk. 10:21). Mary sang lavish praise to God in her canticle (Lk. 1:46-55). Elizabeth also sang her praises to God when Mary visited her for she who was barren was now with child. Francis of Assisi's canticle to Brother Sun still remains a masterpiece of praise.

In contrast to praise we read in the book of Joel how the prophet invited people, priests and religious to lament because of the land being invaded by locusts. It was a wake up call to weep and mourn. (1:3-14) "Certainly this was not the time to say "So what." This was a time not only to weep and let everything hang out, but a time of prayer, fasting and self-searching. Lament when properly performed leads to deeper contemplation and peace.

God made it very clear through the prophet Amos, "I hate, I spurn your feasts, I take no pleasure in our solemnities. Your cereal offerings I will not accept nor consider your stalled peace offerings. Away with your many songs. I will not listen to the melodies of your harps." (Any reference to singing at our liturgies?) People were rejoicing while many injustices were left unaddressed. What they needed was to lament and be contrite. How true is that today?

## Connection between lament and praise

Lament and praise are two sides of the same coin, or they are comparable to dance partners. They go together much like sin and suffering were connected for the Israelites. Jesus said, "Blessed are they who are now weeping, for you will laugh" (Lk. 6:21). He also said, "You will weep and mourn, while the world rejoices; you will grieve, but your grief will become joy" (Jn. 16: 20). Their connection is brought out in the book of Habakkuk. The author asks why the Lord remains silent "while the wicked man devours one more just than himself?" (1:13) Because the Israelites knew that silence can kill, they devised ways to lament. Physical pain often silences our capacity to speak. The Israelite became rather fluent in their loud groans. Lament was interconnected with their desert experience when they asked God what they were doing there. At one time Israel had no food but fortunately had a voice. When they received a steady diet of manna, they wanted meat. Even Moses complained, and in a sense forces Yahweh to respond mainly because of the covenant between Yahweh and the people. Walter Brueggemann maintains that lament is an antidote to silence. As preachers we need not remain silent but can ask similar questions today of why God is silent

broadening them to international affairs. But Habakkuk's question gives way to praise, "Are you not from all eternity, O Lord, my holy God, immortal?" (1:12) He realized how God has intervened and the people are "more righteous" than the evil Babylonians. At one point Habakkuk had it when he said, "How long, O Lord? I cry for help but you do not listen!" (1:2) Gradually he begins to wait from his watchtower where he receives a different perspective. God responds to him assuring him, "The rash person has no integrity, but the just person, because of one's faith, shall live." (2:4) The prophet sees in a vision the Lord's glory and praises "God, my Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet swift as those of hinds, and enables me to go upon the heights." (3:19)

In "Schindler's List" the final scene celebrates how many Jews Schindler saved from Nazi extinction. But Schindler also laments how many died showing the connection between lament and praise. The difference, however, between lament and praise might be as thin as a razor's edge. We can praise the marvelous wonders of nature that God has given us, and at the same time notice the destruction we are heaping on our ecosystem like 33 toxic waste sites or the failure to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Preachers need to alert their listeners to practice responsible stewardship and become lovers of nature.

Psalms 69 begins with lament and ends with praise, whereas psalm 40 begins joyfully and ends pleading for deliverance. Psalm 71 begins with a lament, "O, God, have you cast us off forever?" and in verse 21 "May the afflicted and the poor praise your name." And in psalm 126 one line contains lament and praise, "Those who have sown in tears shall reap rejoicing." (v.5) Many people are grieving because of the loss of a loved one, having gone through a divorce, lost a job or maybe having to retire early. We need to preach that loss is part of the ebb and flow of life, and the need to be hope-filled because God's grace is there to help us as we look beyond this life. Lives, however, are impoverished if we guard against lament. Our faith enables us to lament, laugh and praise.

## Lamentations

Kathleen O'Connor who teaches Old Testament exegesis was asked if she found the study of Lamentations depressing. She emphatically responded, "No!" She maintains that the book mirrors our present pain and comforts those who suffer; it helps people to weep in times of loss and turmoil. Lamentations depicts the destruction Babylon heaped on Jerusalem, destroying its buildings and deporting its citizens. Lamentations offers a stunning testimony to

a city's fall. Because of all these sufferings much comfort is needed. "How lonely she is now, the once crowded city, widowed is she who was mistress over nations." (1:1) She who was once filled with treasures is now empty and abandoned, and no one to comfort her. Once filled is now empty; once a princess is now a slave; once a wife is now a widow. She asks, "Whether there is any suffering like my suffering, which has been dealt me when the Lord afflicted me on the day of his blazing wrath." (1:12) A ray of hope, however, is evident in chapter three, "I called upon your name, O Lord, from the bottom of the pit, "You heard me call, Let not your ear be deaf to my cry for help!" You came to my aid when I called to you, you said, "Have no fear." (55-57) Psalm 6 makes it clear that the Lord hears our weeping and is concerned about our distress and hurt. The psalmist blurts out, "Awake! Why do you sleep, O Lord?" (44:24) Zechariah gave instructions how lamentations had to be in good order and what families needed to lament. (12:11-14)

## Facing pain, sorrow and loss

As preachers we need to point out how our culture denies or does not want us to face pain, sorrow or loss. We are a nation more attuned to celebration, pleasure and gala events.

Our preaching is often more directed toward being happy, healthy and wealthy. Men are urged not to cry especially in public when some tragedy strikes. Many people, however, had to embrace calamity because of the tragic event of September 11<sup>th</sup>. But how short lived that has become. We often trivialize pain instead of honoring and finding meaning in it. Once we do we offer praise to our loving God. We read in the book of Revelation that once the lamb is slain and now lives on the throne of God, we can also give praise to God (5:9-13) Because of his death Jesus vindicates the suffering of innocent people.

A chaplain described September 11<sup>th</sup>, "It looks like the center of hell, but we are watching heaven." Can the edge of hell become the threshold for heaven? After that tragic day, however, instead of grieving we seek revenge. Instead of addressing the problems of racism, sexism, the homeless, single mother, the unemployed, we want to go to war. Not all is well in our nation. We have a commitment to power and wealth rather than powerlessness and sharing. Like the psalmist we need to lament and cry for help, "Save me, O God." (69:1) Lament is an honest way of appealing to God in a direct and personal way. It also applies to the group as well, "O God, you have rejected us and broken our defenses." (60:1) We can point out to our listeners that they have to mourn

or grieve before they can be comforted. To help people engage in the difficult task of weeping can be most challenging. The paradox is that even in suffering we can find joy and wholeness in our brokenness as the saints did. Otherwise, we short circuit the process of lament and praise.

### Ritualizing lament

Because of all the terror and violence in our world preachers are also challenged to speak about grief and mourning in creative ways. Laments in the Hebrew Scriptures are better understood as flowing from rituals. The Israelites had laws for praising God, and similar or comparable ones to lament. They rejoiced in the opposite way they mourned. While mourning they would pray, fast, put ashes on their heads, wear sackcloth and abstain from sexual intercourse. When rejoicing they would eat, drink, wear beautiful garments, offer prayers of praise to Yahweh, and indulge in sexual intercourse. When disasters came the priests helped them to ritualize their grief and mourning. Is this true today? Do preachers help in the process? Too often the grief and mourning are short-lived. We want a quick fix. Our culture turns to other forms of therapy.

For the Israelites family and friends supported the mourner as

was true of Job. "...they began to weep aloud; they tore their cloaks and threw dust upon their heads. Then they sat down upon the ground with him seven nights, but none of them spoke a word to him, for they saw how great was his suffering." (2:12-13) Failing to do this or rejoicing in a misfortune was considered as betrayal or you were considered an enemy. "Her friends have all betrayed her and become her enemies. All my enemies rejoice at my misfortune." (Lam. 1: 2, 21) Lament and praise also indicated distance or closeness to Yahweh. How often we read in the psalms. "Where is your God?" or "why?" or "How long, Lord, will you stay hidden forever?" (89:47) "How long, Lord? Will you utterly forget me?" (13:2) These expressions resonate with our listeners who have suffered some tragedy and might ask, "Where is God?" "Why me or my family?" "What did I do wrong?" "Why is God punishing me?" We cannot fathom the distress or begin to comprehend it. Life is a mystery to be lived not solved. Much faith is needed to deepen our trust in God. The motif of trust pervades the psalms even where we might not expect to find them in the psalms of complaint and lament.

In the book of Revelation we read how the people are invited to rejoice over Rome's demise. (18:20) The author invites the martyrs, prophets and saints to praise God for Rome's suffering. That raises a question for

preachers. Do we invite our listeners to rejoice when injustices are punished? The answer is obvious. We praise God when the injustices finally end. To make the unjust suffer just perpetuates the cycle of violence. Sin or evil has its own punishment ultimately. Truly structures of injustices need to be dismantled and often are by their own devious ways of acting as happened with Rome and other evil empires. Psalms 37 and 73 invite us not be envious of evil doers or the prosperity of the wicked.

### Lord's Supper: Praise and lament

We can ask: is the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, praise and lament? It is a place where we are nourished with the body and blood of Jesus, a place where our faith is deepened and our unity is strengthened. But we also acknowledge our sinfulness and grieve over Christ's death. So both praise and lament are present. As preachers we need to point out both the tragedy and the triumph. We need a death before a resurrection takes place and assure our listeners that Christ's resurrection is a guarantee of our own resurrection, that a better life does exist once we die. As Jesus said, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it produces much fruit." (Jn 12:24) No

wonder altars were often built on the graves of martyrs to remember and celebrate their lives.

Another example of lament and praise concerns a statue that has been erected in Enterprise, Alabama, with a woman holding not a flag or a torch but a boll weevil. (Is it the only statue in the world erected to a bug?) The story is that the people in this city had one crop, cotton. When the boll weevils migrated from Mexico they wiped out their entire cotton crop leading to economic disaster. In desperation the people decided to grow peanuts and marvelously not only regained their losses but also prospered. The change was a stroke of genius that led them to erect this monument to the boll weevil. What a powerful story of lament and praise, something comparable to what happens at the Lord's Supper.

### Gospel lament and praise

When Mary and Joseph lamented that Jesus was lost and found him in the temple with the doctors, Mary said, "Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety." (Lk. 2:48) They undoubtedly praised God for having found him. Jesus said in the beatitudes, "Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted." (Mt. 5:4) Women wailed and lamented over Jairus' daughter, only to have Jesus bring her back to life.

How much Jairus must have praised God. The healing of the paralytic and how the people "glorified God, and struck with awe, they said, 'We have seen incredible things today.'" (Lk. 5:26) Jesus tells the widow concerning her only son who had died, "Do not weep" and raises him back to life. The crowds glorified God exclaiming "A great prophet has arisen in our midst and God has visited his people." (Lk. 7:13,16) How the father must have grieved over his prodigal son only to see him return and then celebrate lavishly. Martha and Mary lamented Lazarus' death only to undoubtedly praise God for his being raised back to life. Jesus said, "I say to you, you will weep and mourn, while the world rejoices; you will grieve, but your grief will become joy." (Jn. 16:20) In Jesus' entry into Jerusalem we have a reversal of joy and lament, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord (even) the king of Israel." (Jn. 12:13) and later they cried out "Crucify him, crucify him." (Jn. 19:6) The women wept and mourned at Jesus' death only to rejoice and praise God for his resurrection. On Easter our Wal Mart's and other stores have lots of chocolate bunnies but very few crosses. Even during Lent Sundays are not considered part of it because they were to be observed as celebration days in the midst of a wilderness. So as preachers we need to find the balance between the crucifixion and the resur-

rection. We cannot avoid preaching about the dark realities of life, but at the same time offering hope to a sinful world. To preach hope as a Christian virtue in contrast to pie in the sky outlook remains a challenge for us. The lament psalms when examined closely offer a turning point toward praise in the midst of sorrow and pain. Indeed an odd juxtaposition. We preach Good News while at the same respecting people's pain and sorrow.

Much of life consists of lament and praise. As preachers we need to deal with the sorrows and joys of our listeners, their broken relationships as well as their commitment to each other. Maybe more mourning and weeping needs to be encouraged so that praise can resound even more forcefully. We lament so that a full

flourishing or new life can take place here on earth. The psalms are mainly concerned with *this* life. Some day, however, we will be unburdened of all the trials and tribulations for "He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, (for) the old order has passed away." (Rev. 21:4)

#### ENDNOTES

1. Doris Donnelly, "Praise: Telling the Truth," *Living Pulpit* (Oct.-Dec. 2002) 20.
2. *Ibid.* 30.
3. *Ibid.* "Stories Between Lament and Praise," 31.

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*"Families today can serve a prophetic function when they evangelize through preaching the Gospel. The question that I'd ask us to think about, however is this: How does a family accomplish the task of evangelization in the context of daily life? They do it simply through witness in daily life."*

*"As the community [in the Acts of the Apostles] gathered together to share life, something happened. Simply because of the witness of Christians, day after day people were added to the community. So with no extraordinary activity but with the witness of the integrity of the lives of Christians, evangelization took place. I think that's the way families are called to evangelize -- through witness -- through the content and conduct of their lives."*

*"Families -- all kinds of families in all sorts of diverse circumstances -- are committed to serving the Gospel. People who are married, divorced, single, try, day in and day out, to be faithful to the message of Christ. The U.S. bishops remind us that 'wherever a family exists and love still moves through its members, grace is present. Nothing -- not even divorce or death -- can place limits upon God's gracious love.'"*

*"Families with all their diversity, are called to be evangelizers in their day-to-day lives."*  
-- Professor Joann Heaney-Hunter  
Symposium on *Familiaris Consortio*