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De profundis: Lament in Worship

Abstract

"If we come into God's presence as whole persons, we come burdened with illness, grief, and confusion as well as with joy; with regrets and sorrows as well as with thanksgiving."

Posting about honest faith from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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in things

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De profundis: Lament in Worship

Karen A. DeMol

“Out of the depths, O Lord, I cry to you.” (Psalm 130:1)

The worship of our holy Triune God is a dialogue of covenant renewal, in which God speaks and we respond. Word and sacraments, prayer and praise are essential parts of this dialogue. But how about lament? Is lament part of our worship, and if so, how?

Lament encompasses sin, brokenness, and grief—all difficult. Lament, as we confess our sins and as we wrestle with all that is not as it should be in our lives and in our society, is painful. But lament is indeed part of worship in which we renew our relationship with God. How could it not be? If we come into God’s presence as whole persons, we come burdened with illness, grief, and confusion as well as with joy; with regrets and sorrows as well as with thanksgiving. In worship, we bring our sins to God, begging his forgiveness; we bring our sorrow, grief, and troubles to the Lord, crying for his healing, comfort, and guidance. “Lament is an honest cry to a good, powerful God—a cry that recognizes that a given set of circumstances is not aligned with God’s character and purposes, a cry that expects an answer, and therefore leads to peace, hope, and even joy.”¹ Lament is part of honest faith and healthy worship.

Why do we avoid lament?

In some worship contexts, unfortunately, lament is avoided. It may be considered too much a “downer,” or a hindrance to seekers. Worship is then focused on praise and piety, while confession and distress are separated out and assigned to private pastoral care.² But, that approach prevents us from coming to worship as whole people. Describing this situation, one person writes that in her depression after the burning down of her house and the suicide of a friend, “I did not feel I could bring my whole self into a context in which only praise seemed acceptable”³. She began to hear from others who also “felt they had to leave part of

themselves at the door if they were going to be able to worship God.”⁴ Excluding lament in our ordinary congregational worship can also leave us unequipped in times of great community or national tragedy; for example, after 9/11 many praise-focused churches had no worship habits in place appropriate for such a difficult time.

The current emphasis on praise is evident in our name for teams of worship music leaders (“praise bands” or “praise teams”) and for entire services (“praise and worship”). It is possible that the current “feel good” atmosphere of our culture has influenced these names. But, there are those of us who mourn, who struggle, who are burdened with sin (that is all of us), and we are not served well by a worship that is limited to praise.

Absence of lament in worship can unfortunately imply that if we are people of faith, we should not and will not have struggles and sorrows. We need “lament and worship,” too. In fact, some churches, realizing how difficult Christmas can be for people with recent losses, have instituted “Services of Lament” or “Blue Sundays” in which people can pour out their sorrowing hearts to God—a modern equivalent of “sackcloth and ashes.”⁵ It has also been suggested that churches develop “requiem choirs” to serve as a congregational ministry at funerals.⁶

Why do we avoid lament in worship? Perhaps because we are guarded or shy or want to “save face;” we do not like to look vulnerable, showing our need and brokenness. Some sorrows, such as illness and death, are commonly addressed in the company of the congregation; but depression, unemployment, and family woes are more difficult to express and can remain hidden. Perhaps we falsely believe that we should always be up-beat, positive, victorious; we believe that lamenting is only complaining, revealing a lack of faith. But true lament is expressed in the context of faith and of trust in God.

Lament in the Psalms

Perhaps we also avoid lament because we do not know what to say. For help, we can turn to the Psalms, which are unreserved in their voicing of fear, abandonment, and anxiety. Indeed, one-third of the Psalms are Psalms of lamentation. As we memorize familiar Psalms of comfort (as Psalm 23) and praise (as Psalm 150), we could well afford to memorize Psalms of lament as well so that we have the words ready when we need them. The words of the Psalms are blunt and urgent.

King David and other Psalmists were not timid in crying out their distress:

1) their cries for help: “Save me O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold.” *Psalm 69: 1, 2a*

2) their sense that God was distant: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” *Psalm 13:1-2*

3) their penitence and plea for forgiveness and renewal: “Blot out my transgression; wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.” *Psalm 51: 1a-2*

4) and their sheer down-heartedness: “Give ear to my words, O Lord, give heed to my sighing.” *Psalm 5:1*

These cries are from the Bible, which is the inspired Word of God. They give us permission to lament as well as words for our own individual prayers and for our corporate worship as well.

Lament in corporate worship

Regarding our corporate worship, how can lament be included and expressed? In prayers, litanies, songs, sermons, entire services, and seasons of penitence.

In the prayers of the people (the pastoral prayer)

Fortunately, lament has not disappeared from our congregational prayer. With both boldness and pastoral sensitivity about delicate situations, we bring to the throne of God the needs of individuals, the congregation, the Church, the nation, and the global community. Adoration and thanksgiving are part of these prayers as well; but no congregation avoids lifting in prayer the needs of its sick and bereaved, or the crises in local and national life.

In regular confession of sin and sinfulness, followed by God’s merciful assurance of pardon

However we may avoid thinking about our sinfulness or try to explain away our wrong attitudes and actions, confessing our sins liturgically helps us to confront that sinfulness.

In the communal confession of sin in worship, we confess not only to God, but also to our fellow believers in the Body of Christ and “to the whole communion of saints in heaven and on earth, that we have sinned by our own fault.”² For if we deny our sin, what need have we of redemption? We must know and confess “how great our sin and misery are;” then we can know how we are set free from sin, and *then* “thank God for such deliverance” (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q&A 2). Our confession of sins and our hearing of God’s forgiveness and restoration is an essential part of corporate, congregational worship—a spiritual discipline.

After hearing of God’s forgiveness, we are prepared to hear his Word. My former pastor, after the assurance of pardon and the congregational responses, always said, “Now we are cleansed and ready to hear God’s Word in today’s Scripture passage...”

In immersion in the Psalms

Immersing ourselves in the Psalms—all the Psalms—gives us words for our laments as well as “permission” to lament. Those who follow the lectionary know that the Psalms specified for

every Sunday are not only the happy Psalms. Some of them, such as Psalms 13 and 22, can even serve as outlines for difficult intercessory prayers.

In songs that speak to our sin and our griefs.

Most worship songbooks include a section of songs of confession. The new *Lift Up Your Hearts* also has an entire section marked “In Difficult Times.” One song laments aging: “When memory fades, and recognition falters, when eyes we love grow dim and minds confused.”⁸ “A Congregational Lament” in the *Psalter Hymnal* of 1987 has verses for a wide range of severe hurts:⁹

Why, Lord, must evil seem to get its way?

Why, Lord, must he be sentenced, locked away?

Why, Lord must she be left to waste away?

Why, Lord, must broken vows cut like a knife?

Why, Lord did you abruptly take him home?

Why, Lord, must any child of yours be hurt?

These words speak to situations we hope that no person and no congregation ever needs to face. But when we do, we need words for them and the habit of wrapping them into our worship. God hears those cries.

In focus on lament in Advent and Lent

The joyful festivals of Christmas and Easter are preceded by the long penitential seasons of the church year—Advent and Lent. These seasons can be used to train us in penitence as well as in expectation. Specifically, Ash Wednesday is a highly-focused penitential occasion.

When needed, entire services focusing on confession or difficulty

In certain situations of crisis, conflict, or transition, congregations may need to devote entire services to confession or to lamentation. Models and inspiration for such services can be found in several published orders of service. One example details the Psalm-based worship of a congregation after it was severely affected by the recession of 2008,¹⁰ and another example describes a church’s response to the earthquake in Haiti.¹¹ A service for any difficult situation is detailed in “The Psalm with Painful Lament—Psalm 13.”¹²

Lament and praise

When we have voiced our laments , we can move to praise. When we have not hidden but confessed our sin, we can hear God’s word of forgiveness.¹³ When we voice our grief and loss we can be open to God’s comfort. When we lift up our troubles and confusion. our eyes can be opened to God’s guidance. And *then* we can praise.

See how David’s Psalms of lament end in praise and trust:

Psalm 69:30: “I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving.”

Psalm 13:6: “But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation; I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.”

Psalm 51:30: “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.”

Psalm 5:12: “For you bless the righteous, O Lord; You cover them with favor as with a shield.”

In healthy worship, lament and praise are interwoven as we come in honest faith as whole persons. Our *Kyrie eleison* (Lord, have mercy) can become our *Gloria in excelsis Deo* (Glory to God in the highest).¹⁴

FOOTNOTES

1. Stacie Gleddiesmith: “Identifying with Christ: Why We Are Called to Lament in Our Suffering World,” *Reformed Worship* 98 (December, 2010), pp. 42-22
2. Walter Brueggeman: “The Friday Voice of Faith, *Reformed Worship* 30 (December, 1993), pp. 2-5
3. Stacey Gleddiesmith: “My God, My God, Why?” *Reformed Worship* 96 (June, 2010), pp. 3-5
4. *Ibid.*
5. “The pressure to have it all together or to appear happy can be both overwhelming and downright disheartening for many people at Christmas time.” Bethel Christian Reformed Church in Lacombe, Alta., holds a special service they call “Blue Sunday” to acknowledge that for many who have experienced loss in their lives, Christmas can amplify feelings of grief, sadness, and even despair.”

6. Karl Moyer: "How to Develop a Requiem Choir," Reformed Worship 66 (December, 2002), p. 45
7. The Worship Sourcebook. Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 2004, p. 561
8. Lift Up Your Hearts. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2013, 449
9. Psalter Hymnal. Grand Rapids, Michigan: CRC Publications, 1987, 576
10. Kevin Adams and Gerry Adams: "Praying Our Emotions," Reformed Worship 96 (June, 2010), pp. 13-19
11. Martin Tel: "Difficult Psalms for Difficult Times," Reformed Worship 96 (June, 2010), pp. 22-23
12. "The Psalm with a Painful Lament—Psalm 13"
<https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/the-psalm-with-a-painful-lament-psalm-13/>
13. "While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the guilt of my sin." Psalm 32:3-5
14. John D. Witvliet: "Lament and Praise as a Way of Life": Reformed Worship 121 (September, 2016), pp. 30 – 31. See also his three-part series on lament in Reformed Worship issues 44, 45, and 46 (June, September, and December, 1997).