

Learning to Sing Lament

If we are to be honest when we pray and sing to God, then we have to bring the whole of our experience into that prayer and make it part of that song. We need to bring every situation before God—and that includes moments that call for lament.

This is hard for us, because we lament about things that seem insoluble. Sometimes it even seems as if God cannot take away the pain that causes us to lament. Lament comes from the core of our being, where our deepest feelings are born. It is not the primal wail or scream that comes when a person's or a people's world falls apart, when even articulate language fails. Rather, lament comes in a return from the edge of chaos, when we find ways to make the unspeakable spoken, when we find some measure of faith that someone will hear our cry and respond. Lament is truth telling that captures heart and mind; it is a complaint against continuing evil.

Lament really is an act of hope. St. Augustine said that the two beautiful daughters of hope are anger and courage. Our anger arises when we recognize that something is terribly wrong and therefore has to change. Such anger can propel us to courageous action to make that change. Lament, then, is the opposite of what the Bible calls "hardness of heart."

Our faith tells us that even lament has become part of the redeeming act of God in Jesus Christ. There is a saying among theologians: Anything human that was not taken up by Christ was not redeemed. But, since Christ was fully human as well as fully divine, everything that is human is part of the redemption—including lament. And when we "put on Christ" in baptism, we become joined to all the suffering in the Body of Christ that leads to lament, anger, and a commitment to change things for the better.

How do we bring this lament to prayer? The psalms offer repeated examples. They call on us, as a community, to bring our complaint to God (and even to complain *about* God). They teach us that a final resolution to human tragedy will only come about with God's help or through God's

intervention, and they bring us, finally, to place our trust in God's word and God's presence among us.

Our liturgy offers a further library of prayers, postures, gestures, and environmental and musical resources to express our lament to God. They sum up the horrors that bring us to lament as death and sin, but they also promise salvation from death and redemption from sin. Baptism and reconciliation (penance) are sacraments of lament and reconciliation, and the Order of Mass offers moments for lament as well.

Our songs, too, call us to voice our lament, for any church that goes around singing "happy songs" all the time, in the face of raw reality, is doing something very different from what the Bible and our liturgy call us to do. We need songs of lament, lest we unintentionally give the message that all is well with the world, that suffering doesn't touch us, or that there is no need for Christians to be concerned about what is going on around us. We need to face and name the hard realities of human experience. Without prayers and songs of lament, we may fail to stir up compassion in our churches and so fail to move toward the deeds of mercy to which Jesus' Gospel calls us.

For lament, like the liturgy, calls us to action. The Gospel tells us that there is a way things ought to be and that disorder needs to be corrected. We require that things be other than the horrors that human beings seem to manage on a regular basis because we have a dream and a promise of a different way of being human. We not only look forward to a future that we call the reign of God; we believe that this future is here among us now and that we are caught up in it and are called to do what we can to make it real. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and because we are incorporated into Christ through the sacraments of initiation, we have a sense of what God's future is like and a call to help others experience what the reign of God is like *now*.