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LAMENT: FROM PREACHING TO PERMITTING

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ABSTRACT

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Lament: From Preaching to Permitting

The 2007 decision of Port Nelson United Church in Burlington, Ontario Canada to adopt an inclusive marriage policy resulted in significant congregational division and, among other things, feelings of loss. A time of grief followed – grief over the loss of people and grief around the shift in expression of what the church valued. Regrettably, opportunities to express this grief publicly in order to begin to make space for embracing a new contextual reality did not abound. Lament is the Bible’s most prevalent and poignant expression of grief and loss. Despite its common place in scripture, it is scarcely utilized in preaching. This project examines the place and use of lament in sermons. Homiletical expressions of communal loss and accompanying grief that a specific ministry setting inevitably experiences from time to time are explored and modeled. In openly preaching about and engaging in lamentation, permission can be given for listeners of sermons to give voice to their own individual feelings of loss and grief. Further, through the act of using lament in sermons, the preacher may appreciate the value of the genre in the homiletical toolbox, and may find voice for her/his own personal experienced losses.

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“Preachers might take note that the local congregation is most likely the only place in town to host in serious ways the impossibilities of loss and newness that are the truth of our life with God.”¹

*Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen; nobody knows but Jesus;
Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen; glory, Hallelujah!²*

CHAPTER 1

LOSS AND DENIAL

Visiting with Loss

I would soon realize that, as they trickled slowly into the china cups during a first-time pastoral visit, the drops of tea represented deep concern. Violet was the epitome of a church matriarch.³ She had, literally, been there since day one. As we sipped tea, Violet recalled the recent history of the church she had helped to build – the church she had grown with, laughed with and cried with – the church she loved.

The year prior to my arrival as Minister of Port Nelson United Church in Burlington, Ontario Canada was tumultuous. The fruitful tenure of my long-time predecessor ended with his retirement amid the most divisive issue for the congregation in a generation. The church had approved an inclusive marriage policy that granted ministers the authority to marry whoever demonstrated “a deep desire for marriage, a strong commitment to the journey of faith, a desire to express their devotion to each other before God, and an openness to receive God’s blessing in the celebration of this covenant.”⁴ The new policy meant that the church’s ministers would be

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 148.

² Traditional Spiritual (Anonymous)

³ Used with permission; name changed to protect identity

⁴ “Port Nelson United Church Marriage Policy.” (Burlington, Ontario, 2007).

free to marry same-sex couples. In the six-month period following this decision, over 90 families left.⁵ There was significant division. Relationships were fractured. Friendships ended.

Violet continued to describe how, amid the conflict, a representative of the denomination had suggested the congregation – her church – needed to grieve. She reflected on this suggestion. “We don’t need that,” she claimed. “Let’s move on.” It seemed to be a less-than-subtle hint for me, the new pastoral leader.

As Violet continued to speak, her voice began to quiver. She poured more tea, and the drops in the cups felt like stand-ins for the drops of tears that Violet knew she should shed, but could not. Something held her back. She seemed to lack permission to weep.

The pastoral visit continued. I listened to what was obviously Violet’s lament over the loss of friends who had left the church, the loss of a former identity, and the loss of a sense of what the community had been. For Violet, however, the loss she felt and expressed was not only the corporate, congregational change. It was also her personal grief. In the preceding year, two of her close family members had died.

As I listened, my own mind and heart wandered. On December 24, 2008 – just two weeks prior to my visit with Violet – I had shared worship for the last time with my former congregation. To the casual visitor, it probably seemed like a typical Christmas Eve service. However, for me and for many regular attendees, the occasion was what the culture might label “bittersweet.” Joy mingled with sorrow. Spiritually, it was the stark presence of palpable lament on an evening of celebration.

⁵ Membership statistics from 2005 to 2010 indicate an average yearly reduction of 2 percent. However, in 2008, 108 individuals were removed by request or transfer, representing an 11.2 percent drop. “Port Nelson United Church Annual Report.” (Burlington, Ontario, 2010).

I did not openly talk about my own sense of loss. I was taught that preachers should minimize their personal involvement in sermons. That service was the anti-climax of my eight-month lament over the loss of my pastoral relationship with this congregation, and my unwanted call to serve elsewhere. It seemed inappropriate to mention my own plight on that Christmas Eve, let alone the experience of many in the congregation who were also lamenting. People had gathered to celebrate the arrival of Jesus, not to lament the departure of a minister. I have no memory of what I preached about that night. Clearly, sermon and reality were highly disconnected.

During that January 2009 pastoral visit, Violet's hesitancy to weep over her personal losses and the communal travail of her church collided head-on with my own denial of the deep void I had recently experienced. It was into this context of significant shared loss that I arrived as the preacher in a new congregation. However, despite our mutual grief, the articulated mantra was, "Let's move on." We did not truthfully identify or name our shared losses.

The Death-Denying Challenge

This situation is not unique. The first (and often lingering) reaction to unpleasant circumstances is to attempt avoidance of the perceived causes of the matter. In cases of loss and resultant grief, denial is common.⁶

Churches are not immune to societal realities, and we as a people are increasingly denying death. Says Thomas Long, "Death in our culture is a mixture of taboo and terror."⁷

⁶ I refer to "loss" in a general sense to mean any situation when one loses something of significance and value. "Grief," for me, is also a broad term that refers to feelings, emotions and spiritual experiences that follow any loss; a well-known understanding of grief is articulated in the landmark book by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1978), as "stages of grief." However, I do not wish to limit grief to particular stages or a definable process.

⁷ Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 22.

Preachers are not immune to this either. Paul Scott Wilson reminds us of his own childhood experience of hearing his great-uncle preach and, at times, wondering if he was shedding tears during the sermon.⁸ He goes on to say that “for earlier generations, it was common for ministers in the pulpit to cry because of people’s sins,” and that we may have lost something in not calling people to weep.⁹ In fact, for hundreds of years, public, ritual cries of lament were integral parts of both Jewish and Roman funeral traditions.¹⁰ Not so anymore.

It seems that weeping in contemporary preaching and worship tends to be viewed as unhelpful and even inappropriate. Not only is the cultural response to death typically denial, but increasingly, attempts are made to mitigate significant losses by means of celebration.

Consider this arguably extreme example: In March 2013, a 12-year-old girl died in my hometown. She had eaten an ice cream cone in a local shopping mall. Within minutes she went into shock and, after being rushed to hospital, succumbed to what doctors concluded was an undiagnosed allergy. Just a few days following the girl’s tragic death, her mother was quoted in a local newspaper as saying her daughter wouldn’t want any mourning, and that she would prefer everyone “put the ‘fun’ in funeral.”¹¹ Furthermore, the article states that, at the service for the young girl, “Music from [her] favourite recording artists – Justin Bieber and One Direction – will play in the background, and mourners must abide by a sunny dress code.”¹² It was to be a “celebration of life.” Thomas Lynch, a funeral director, describes the so-called “celebration of life” as “the subtle enforcement of an emotional code that approves the good laugh but not the

⁸ Paul Scott Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 132.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, 65-66.

¹¹ Molly Hayes, “Sunny Dress Code,” *The Hamilton Spectator*, March 18, 2013, A5.

¹² Ibid.

good cry.”¹³ Given the circumstances surrounding this death, I wonder how many people were actually celebrating. I wonder how strictly the “sunny dress code” could be enforced.¹⁴

This cultural shift presents a unique challenge for Christian preachers. Since the homiletical predication that “every sermon must be intentional and specific about offering good news”¹⁵ continues to be widely accepted, it would be very easy for contemporary preachers to simply offer “sunny dress code talks” in all situations and settings. To do so, however, would be to ignore a significant reality in the experience of every person at various points on the spiritual journey. That reality is the sadness, anger and denial that inevitably accompany loss.

It seems that what the family of the deceased 12-year-old girl sought was to hear “good news” without first acknowledging the “bad news” of their unfortunate situation. Charles Bartow reminds us that “humanity, after all, can be blinded by excess of light, and unmediated glory would not thrill, but devastate us.”¹⁶

The focus of most preaching resources has been, appropriately, on approaches for rendering good news in order to rattle off “sunny dress code” sermons. In stark contrast, far less help seems to be available to assist in the homiletical appropriation of the despair, grief and loss that is naturally part of any human life journey.

¹³ Thomas Lynch, “All Saints, All Souls” in Thomas G. Long and Thomas Lynch, *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 236.

¹⁴ In her essay “Four Funerals and a Question” in *Touchstone* 31, no. 2 (June 2013): 51-54, Lois Wilson reflects on recent funerals she had attended and asks the question, “Has grieving any part in the celebration of life?” She goes on to say that the funeral “becomes a celebration of life based on private wishes and not a celebration of the Creator, the triune God who gives us life.”

¹⁵ Gennifer Benjamin Brooks, *Unexpected Grace: Preaching Good News from Difficult Texts* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2012), 5.

¹⁶ Charles L. Bartow, “Till God Speaks Light” in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 161.

The Preacher's Response of Lament

It is into this experienced reality that the preacher steps – not just on the occasion of a death – but every week. In any preaching context, there are, naturally, those who are celebrating and those who are lamenting.¹⁷ There may even be individuals who both celebrate and lament within the same worship experience. One member of Port Nelson United Church tells about attending Easter Day worship shortly after her father died. With tears streaming down her face, she recalls seeing a chorister who had experienced a recent, tragic loss of her own and saying to herself, “If she can still sing of Easter, I can sing too.”¹⁸

Perhaps the most useful tool available to preachers for the work of responding to this dilemma and this challenge is the biblical language of lament. In fact, it is far more than a tool. It may even be an imperative. In referencing one of the necessities of preaching, Walter Brueggemann says, “What is required...is the honest voicing of the reality of loss.”¹⁹ In her article, *When Lament Shapes the Sermon*, Sally A. Brown says, “Testifying to the God of Easter requires the language of lament.”²⁰ Luke A. Powery agrees with Sally Brown by affirming, “Lament is important for all homiletical cultures because of the travail of the world in which we live.”²¹ However, lest we think that Brown and Powery are suggesting the stifling of the “sunny dress code” sermon, both preachers subsequently affirm that lament sermons should ultimately

¹⁷ In his book *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), Luke A. Powery makes the case that both lament and celebration are equally important manifestations of the Spirit. In a well-crafted Call to Worship in *Gathering: Resources for Worship Planners* (Pentecost 2 2013, page 25), Elaine Bidgood acknowledges this reality by suggesting worship leaders invite and even invoke the presence of both celebration and lament in worship. See Appendix A for the text of this Call to Worship.

¹⁸ As one mechanism to receive feedback on the use of lament in preaching, questions were asked of members of the ministry context pertaining to experiences of loss (refer to Appendices B and C for the questions and the methods used for their distribution). This comment was offered by a member of the ministry context in the form of a written response, Burlington, Ontario, October 2013.

¹⁹ Brueggemann, 81.

²⁰ Sally A. Brown, “When Lament Shapes the Sermon” in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 28.

²¹ Powery, 93.

point to the good news of the risen Christ. The task, however, is not to diminish or, even worse, ignore the lament.

Thomas Long provides one definition of a sermon that seems applicable to any context, including one of grief and loss. He says, “A Christian sermon is built on the conviction that when we take what is happening in our lives and in our world to a biblical text and honestly and prayerfully listen, a word from God may be heard there.”²² Thus, the Bible’s invitation into the genre of lament calls preachers to make at least some room for open, honest, passionate expressions of loss and grief in sermons. William Morrow claims that “preaching from the tradition of lament provides support to the life of faith by providing words for bringing human troubles before God.”²³ Indeed, Paul Scott Wilson agrees with Morrow’s suggestion that preaching should support the everyday life of faith by utilizing lament when he says, “Arguably every sermon...should lament something.”²⁴

If the loss of 90 families from a church is faced with honesty and openness, or if the painful severing of a life-giving pastoral relationship is given voice, or if the sudden, tragic death of a 12-year-old girl is acknowledged truthfully, the need for lament is apparent. Likewise, when the travail of the world is taken seriously, then the place of lament is obvious. It is to an understanding of lament itself that we turn in the next chapter.

²² Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, 187.

²³ William S. Morrow, “Laments” in *The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 86.

²⁴ Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire*, 127.

CHAPTER 2

THE THEORY AND CONTEXT OF LAMENT

Lament Defined

What is lament? A succinct yet meaningful definition is “a passionate expression of grief.”²⁵ Indeed, almost all examples of lament in the Bible – whether cries of abandonment, of loss, of fear or of the more all-encompassing grief – exude an element of passion. Lament is a form – a way of expressing feeling.²⁶ “Laments are passionate expressions of mourning about death, destruction, and disaster.”²⁷ Lament creates a spiritual place to hold and offer to God the random, sometimes unexplainable cries of mourning. Lamentations are vehicles used to release the inner depths of the soul. Lamentation is a language that can be spoken in times of sorrow, grief and longing for something that used to be. Indeed, “The cry of lamentation is the sound of a human heart breaking, breaking for want of God, and for love of God, and for love of what God loves.”²⁸ Lament, then, is a highly emotive form.

Lament and the Bible

John Buchanan succinctly states, “The Bible knows a lot about loss, lament, and grief.”²⁹ Lament is the most significant and prevalent biblical genre that expresses loss and resultant grief.

²⁵ As another mechanism to receive feedback on the use of lament in preaching over the course of three years, three separate small groups were formed and referred to as “Parish Project Groups.” This definition was offered by a member of one of the Parish Project Groups during a live meeting, Burlington, Ontario, 1 September 2011.

²⁶ The *form* of lament should not be underestimated. In an essay titled “Nervous Laughter: Lament, Death Anxiety, and Humor” in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), Donald Capps reminds us of Walter Brueggemann’s groundbreaking 1977 work whereby Brueggemann suggested the *form* of the lament is itself an intervention that helps to define experiences of loss and grief that many others, including Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her popular *Stages of Grief*, viewed as formless.

²⁷ Charles H. Cosgrove and W. Dow Edgerton, *In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 80.

²⁸ Bartow, 160.

²⁹ John M. Buchanan, “Foreword” in Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), xiv.

Entire books of the Bible, such as Lamentations, speak to the communal experience of grief that arises from catastrophic, public loss.

Other books of the Bible, such as the prophecies of Jeremiah, Job and Habakkuk, feature the laments of individuals. The Psalms contain many laments of both a communal and singular nature that give poetic voice to human suffering and complaint arising from various personal and corporate circumstances.

Lament, though, is not limited to the Hebrew Bible. There are instances “where Jesus’ own voice becomes mingled with the voice of lament.”³⁰ While the explicit presence of lament in the New Testament is relatively small, a large part of Jesus’ ministry was with those who suffered and experienced loss. Patrick Miller states, “Jesus of Nazareth heard and accepted the lament of the people around him.”³¹ Jesus embodies one of the most famous cries of lament in the Christian tradition when, from the cross, he quotes Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Ps 22: 1)? Martin Tel summarizes, “Christ has hallowed this lament for all time.”³² Indeed, “The cry of Rachel and all other cries of the distressed are present in the cry of Jesus.”³³ Charles Bartow extrapolates Jesus’ quotation of lament from the cross by saying, “It is for us that he did so, making our lamentation – all lamentation – and the cause of lamentation his own.”³⁴

Thus, lament is present throughout the biblical witness in a variety of ways. In times of loss, tragedy, upheaval and disorientation, famous prophets and little-known temple worshippers alike utilize the expression. Biblical lament crosses centuries, backgrounds and cultures.

³⁰ Philip Gardner, “A House for Sorrow and a School for Compassion: Recovering Lament in Contemporary Worship,” *Touchstone* 25, no. 1 (January 2007): 22.

³¹ Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 100.

³² Martin Tel, “Necessary Songs,” *The Christian Century*, 8 January 2014, 22.

³³ Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel L. Migliore, *Rachel’s Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 39.

³⁴ Bartow, 162.

Lament, Hope, and Good News

While the history of the biblical canon spans several millennia of the Jewish and Christian faiths, most Christian preachers focus on the gospels as the primary resource for sermons. The gospels ultimately point to the good news and hope of Jesus Christ. Craig Satterlee defines the purpose of the Sunday sermon as being “to inspire, equip and empower the congregation to proclaim the gospel in the world.”³⁵ Notwithstanding the centrality of gospel, however, Christian pastors claim the entire biblical canon as being a wellspring for preaching.

The genre of lament does not always provide the overt expression of good news and hope that many maintain is essential in Christian proclamation. While it is true that most laments contain elements of trust, praise and hope, some do not. For example, Psalm 137 – a corporate lament of those returning from exile – ends in horror, void of any expressed good news.

A central question, then, is the extent to which a sermon based on lament needs to proclaim a word of good news and hope. Put another way, is it ever acceptable to leave listeners experiencing pure lament in the absence of any proclaimed word of hope?

There is some inconsistency in the established literature over the place of hope in lament. Charles Cosgrove and Dow Edgerton point out that, “In content, laments typically move from complaint and expressions of pain to hope and praise.”³⁶ While this may often be true of the *content* of laments, it seems less true of the overall *form* and *intent* of lament as a vehicle of expression. Indeed, John Goldingay reminds us of the context of the Book of Lamentations within the Hebrew Bible: “If Genesis to Kings is tragedy and the Prophets comedy, the Writings occupy the interval. They are attempts to keep faith alive when tragedy was all that could be

³⁵ Craig A. Satterlee, *When God Speaks Through You: How Faith Convictions Shape Preaching and Mission* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2008), 56.

³⁶ Cosgrove and Edgerton, 80.

said by way of story, and when the hope expressed in prophecy did not seem to be coming true.”³⁷ Thus, the Book of Lamentations, often considered among the Writings, likely served the purpose of being the primary vehicle for deepening the faith journey of those lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem *in the absence of hope*. With some historic precedent, then, we could ask whether or not contemporary lament performs a similar role.

In light of the need to be faithful to the genre and how it is expressed in a sermon while balancing the pastoral imperative to proclaim good news, the method and the extent to which hope is offered when preaching lament is an important consideration. It may be that, in the absence of an overt word of hope in the sermon, the liturgy surrounding the sermon needs to be particularly strong in its affirmation of good news. It may be that there *is* a specific word of hope offered in the sermon itself. In any case, this tension remains.

The word of hope is, for Christian preachers, most often referred to and embodied in the “good news.” Definitions and understandings of what constitutes “good news” in sermons abound.

In her book *Unexpected Grace*, Gennifer Brooks summarizes her thoughts by writing, “For Christians, the redemptive act of Jesus Christ recorded in scripture is the epitome of good news.”³⁸ In referring to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the “epitome,” Brooks seems to set up a “good news” hierarchy. However, she also says, “Preaching good news is not limited to offering [them] the person of Jesus Christ. It can be named in all the persons of the Trinity and through images that speak of the grace-full nature of God.”³⁹ By claiming that

³⁷ John Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture*, 2d ed. (Toronto: Clements Publishing, 2004), 134.

³⁸ Brooks, 34.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

Christian good news is bigger than any one biblical text, Paul Scott Wilson supports this broader definition of “good news.”⁴⁰

Frank Thomas acknowledges that “the early New Testament community understood Jesus Christ himself to be the good news.”⁴¹ However, in a similar vein to Wilson, Thomas then presents a broader view of good news as Jesus himself knowing the Hebrew Scriptures, embodying them, living them and ultimately experiencing release from bondage that he, in turn, proclaims and shares with the church – the “celebrative community.”⁴² Thus, for Thomas, good news exists and abounds throughout the New Testament.⁴³

Given the broad and inclusive range of what “good news” entails for Christian preaching, it becomes important to define what “good news” means for a particular preaching context, especially when seeking to use lament. Understandings of “good news” will vary among individual members positioned in the same pastoral context. Furthermore, it is likely that there will be a spectrum of definitions of “good news” from context to context.

Based on an inclusive understanding that good news can come in many forms – forms that are not necessarily subordinate to but equally as valid as the Christ act – members of Port Nelson United Church offered their own varied definitions. One called it “release from a problem or sense of anxiety in life.”⁴⁴ Another said, “Good news for me is simplistic but difficult to live. It is God’s promise that we are not alone.”⁴⁵ Several articulated an understanding of good news as the abiding assurance of God’s presence and care in any

⁴⁰ Paul Scott Wilson, *Broken Words: Reflections on the Craft of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 12.

⁴¹ Frank A. Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching, Revised and updated* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2013), 35.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 36-39.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴⁴ Parish Project Group, interview by author, live meeting, Burlington, Ontario, 5 September 2012.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

circumstance. Good news as the basic yearning for resolutions to problems was expressed by one individual who said, “For some, good news means life would be easier.”⁴⁶

While these statements represent individual views in one ministry context, it is not unrealistic to assume that similar understandings of “good news” could be found in many congregations. The key, as has been mentioned, is for the preacher to define “good news” for the particular preaching context that utilizes lament, thereby not assuming one universal understanding. Then, the preacher can step into the defined (and hopefully real) context of good news with words of lament. Indeed, William Morrow stresses the importance of the link with the pastoral context when considering the relationship between good news and lament when he suggests that “lament is good news because it underscores a pastoral purpose of the congregation.”⁴⁷ In contrast to those instances when hope and good news may seem absent from the biblical laments, Morrow affirms that lament itself can be “good news because it allows for honest mixtures of faith and doubt, of hope and despair in prayer.”⁴⁸

However, this mixing of hope, good news and lament is not limited to prayer. The sermon itself can play an important role in this appropriation. In the next chapter, I explore models of preaching that can provide the structure for homiletical treatments of biblical texts that point to and bespeak lament, hope, and good news. I also explore the practical application of various models in my local ministry context.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Morrow.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

PREACHING LAMENT IN MY CONTEXT

Lament in Preaching: The Background

Notwithstanding its strong and prevalent place in the Bible, lament is greatly under-represented in contemporary liturgical practice, not to mention the homiletical literature and the act of preaching itself. Walter Brueggemann draws the rather stark conclusion that “the lament psalms simply do not exist [in public worship].”⁴⁹ Cosgrove and Edgerton observe, “We rarely preach on lament passages.”⁵⁰ Having examined many historical sermons from a variety of cultures, Paul Scott Wilson maintains, “Lament is not easy to find in much preaching through history.”⁵¹ Writing from the African American perspective that has generally made better use of lament than most other traditions, Luke Powery acknowledges that the use of lament in homiletics is an underdeveloped area,⁵² and bluntly states, “Lament may be on life support in some circles of Christianity.”⁵³ Speaking more generally about lament in the faith community, Robert Dykstra says, “Lament must be numbered among the church’s most endangered practices.”⁵⁴

Lament in Preaching: Contemporary Contextual Use

Virtually all scholars agree that lament is underutilized in the field of homiletics. However, despite its absence from pulpits, a solid foundation for lament’s place in the faith community exists. Given my pastoral context of mutually experienced loss, I attempted to use

⁴⁹ Walter Brueggemann, “The Friday Voice of Faith,” *Reformed Worship* 30 (December 1993): 2.

⁵⁰ Cosgrove and Edgerton, 81.

⁵¹ Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire*, 135.

⁵² Powery, 33.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁵⁴ Robert C. Dykstra, “Rending the Curtain: Lament as an Act of Vulnerable Aggression” in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 63.

lament in preaching over the course of three years. My goal in doing so was two-fold: First, to begin to bridge the gap between lament as a biblical genre and a virtually non-existent sermonic resource, and second, to determine whether sermons preached in the context offered permission for listeners to lament both personal and communal losses.⁵⁵ Following a number of preaching acts, feedback was obtained from listeners to assist in determining the helpfulness of this appropriation.

Questions for Reflection

There were three main goals in obtaining responses from a variety of individuals in the ministry setting:

1. To invite people to remember a significant experience of loss
2. To ask them to name resources that were helpful in working through that loss
3. To inquire about sermons or other worship experiences that may have been among those helpful resources, thus providing permission to lament

The questions that were offered to the ministry setting for comment can be found in Appendix B.

Given the historical lack of attention to lament, the questions used were as inclusive as possible and did not assume any prior theological or literary knowledge about the term “lament.” The primary focus was not about lament per se, but about losses people had experienced that could potentially be cause for lament.

The questions were designed to encourage a progression of thought and feeling on the part of respondents. Mostly, qualitative questions were asked to encourage open-ended

⁵⁵ I am thankful for the insight of John Schmidt on 20 December 2013 that biblical scholars have the benefit of living with scripture deeply in ways that congregational pastors do not and, conversely, congregational pastors have the benefit of living with people in the congregation deeply in ways that biblical scholars do not; this may explain, in part, why scholars find much lament in scripture whereas pastors find little lament in congregations.

responses. Tim Sensing suggests fourteen different types of questions for qualitative research.⁵⁶ From Sensing's menu, I mostly utilized interpretive, behaviour and feeling questions.

To begin, people were encouraged to recall one particular loss they had experienced. Of course, all respondents would have known a variety of losses, but for the purposes of this project, participants were asked to recall and focus upon one event. Then, in order to place the various losses in context, people were asked to classify their particular experience as being either "major" or "minor." Since lament is generally individual or communal, in order to evaluate responses within the context of the genre, people were invited to classify their loss as being personal, corporate, or a combination of both.

The reality of denial following loss is a concern of this project. Therefore, I felt that asking people to reflect upon their own sense of denial might provide some insight into the larger context of communal denial that I discovered shortly after my arrival in the ministry setting. In other words, if individuals were experiencing personal denial, this might have contributed to the congregation's overall ethos of denial. In a similar vein, and remembering my pastoral conversation with Violet, I wanted people to consider how openly they believed they talked about their losses with others.

It was hoped that asking questions about the nature and response to the situations would invite people to think about resources that were helpful (or not helpful) in dealing with their losses and, ultimately, whether any sermons were among those resources. The question, "What helped you make this move" that was asked as a follow-up regarding both denial and speaking openly with others also provided opportunities for people to point to specific resources.

⁵⁶ Sensing's choices as outlined in *Qualitative Research* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 86-88 include Grand Tour Questions, Guided Tour Questions, Descriptive Questions, Task Questions, Hypothetical Questions, Quotation Questions, Ideal Position Questions, Knowledge Questions, Interpretive Questions, Opinion Questions, Feeling Questions, Sensory Questions, and Background/Demographic Questions

Assuming at least some respondents would report that sermons or worship services were among helpful resources, a follow-up question then probed for any aspects of those worship experiences that were “unsettling.” This question was posed for two reasons: First, to give people an opportunity to name their own personal unease resulting from any sermons or services and second, to make space for respondents to identify concerns they may have had with services or sermons themselves. Indeed, there were occasions when members of the ministry context expressed negativity about the use of lament in preaching and the subsequent perception of a lack of good news. It was hoped that this question would portray the researcher as being open to input.

The final question also pertained to identifying resources. This time, however, people were invited to reflect on the helpfulness of the particular loss they had identified as being a resource itself in assisting with subsequent losses. There was a pastoral element to this question. I felt that inquiring about this might assist respondents in bringing some closure to the experience of answering the questions if it was in any way difficult, as well as encouraging folks to reflect on how they might have grown through their particular losses.

Going Public with the Questions

A number of opportunities existed over the span of three years for individuals and groups in the ministry setting to provide feedback on the project. For example, conversations with individuals and small groups took place in both formal and informal settings. As well, an invitation was inserted in the church’s worship bulletin for three consecutive Sundays in late September and October 2013.⁵⁷ This notice outlined several methods by which intentional

⁵⁷ For the bulletin insert, refer to Appendix C

feedback would be received, as well as the questions themselves. During two of the three worship services, I drew verbal attention to the printed notice.

By offering a variety of response methods from which to choose, the goal was that, over the course of several years, potential respondents would see the opportunity to participate as inviting, confidential, respectful and meaningful. It is to some of the responses that I now turn.

Lament in Preaching: Responses

Beyond simply identifying a loss, some people chose to comment further and stress the magnitude of their particular plight. For example, one person added, “My husband passed away four days before Christmas.”⁵⁸ Another recalled how his wife had suddenly collapsed at a theatre performance they were attending together.⁵⁹ Referring to the loss of one who struggled with Alzheimer’s, still another observed that “she died twice – first her mind, then her body.”⁶⁰ Some named the death of a parent, while others reflected upon losing a sibling or the death of a child. Still other respondents chose to focus on losing close family members who were not spouses, siblings or children. Interestingly, two individuals reported on losses that were not deaths – one, the end of a marriage, and the other, the “loss of innocence.”

All circumstances except one were self-classified as being “major” losses. Just three people reported that their situation was a personal loss, while most indicated it was communal. Two people indicated it was both.

Self-perceptions of denial of the losses were mixed. Overall, a few individuals admitted to experiencing some level of denial of their loss, while most claimed not to have denied at all.

⁵⁸ Ministry context, written response to author, Burlington, Ontario, October 2013.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Several were not clear about whether they perceived themselves as experiencing denial; the narratives they offered pointed to elements of both possibilities.

While unintended, the question about the openness with which individuals talked about their losses publicly with others led to responses that were actually laments. One person wrote, “Most people simply did not want to hear about it.”⁶¹ In a similar vein, another reported, “It takes so much out of a person to express such sorrow; I wasn’t sure who would want to hear about my loss as it can make many people uncomfortable to see someone experiencing grief.”⁶²

A variety of resources were named as being helpful during people’s grieving periods. Some people pointed to family and close friends as being among the primary vehicles of help, while others turned to books about grief and loss. Of particular relevance to this project, several individuals specifically mentioned that visits by ministers had been helpful. In one of those cases, the pastor had visited to provide an opportunity to share memories and offer prayer when there was no other planned service.⁶³ Conversely, one woman said, “I would not have felt comfortable using the ministers of the church at the time.”⁶⁴ A few people mentioned music, hymns and prayer.

Responses to the more specific question about worship services or aspects of services (such as sermons, readings or music) that may have addressed and helped with the losses were revealing. A number of people simply responded “no” – there had not been any services they could remember that had been helpful.

Beyond these brief negative responses, others did point to specific worship experiences. Many people identified music and, specifically, certain hymns that evoked memories and

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

brought comfort as being helpful. One respondent reported her own mingling of sorrow and joy by remembering that “singing the triumphal hymns at the Easter service after [her] father died brought tears.”⁶⁵ Another referred to services of Prayer with the Songs of Taizé, which largely utilize reflective music.⁶⁶

Several individuals named the annual All Saints Memorial Service as being, as one person put it, “A time for the entire church to reflect on those who have left their earthly lives.”⁶⁷ A few others stated more generally that any service addressing loss is helpful with experienced grief. Interestingly, just one person cited “Bible readings” as being helpful.

Of course, for the purposes of this project, the most relevant responses were those pertaining to preaching. One person remembered a particular sermon that was preached shortly after the loss of her child. She writes that it “talked about the past tense of hope being the saddest human sound, and how it related to all we had hoped for in [our child].”⁶⁸ Another individual remembered a sermon that helped to give her permission to cry even when it hurts, and that in the crying, we can recognize God.⁶⁹ Upon reviewing the manuscript of this sermon, I discovered that the topic of the sermon was prayer and, at one point, the preacher encouraged listeners to be “persistent in prayer.”⁷⁰ He went on to say, “Be like the psalmist and fling your cries and your laments and your angry shouts to God.”⁷¹

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid. Prayer with the Songs of Taizé is an ecumenical experience of repeated chants, Bible readings and long periods of silence that originated in France in the mid-20th century; it has been a regular feature of the worship life of my context since the 1990s.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Donald Parsons, “When People Pray” (sermon preached at Port Nelson United Church, Burlington, Ontario, 25 July 2004).

⁷¹ Ibid.

Beyond these few references, little else was reported on the helpfulness of sermons. However, in responding to the question about aspects of worship services that may have been unsettling, one person stated, “A sermon you preached on lament upset me; we all mourn our losses and need dignity to carry on; you didn’t put a shadow in that valley of death – no hope.”⁷² This observation caused me to reflect upon the particular sermon and its place in my overall work pertaining to lament and preaching.⁷³

While the responses varied widely, the experiences of preaching sermons utilizing lament and the reactions to them from various listeners resulted in some significant discoveries about preaching lament. I examine these points of learning in the next chapter.

⁷² Ministry context, written response to author, Burlington, Ontario, October 2013. In reference to Psalm 23 at funerals, I often note that there is a necessity for at least some light to be present in order for a shadow to be cast; this person’s comment may have been informed by such a funeral reference.

⁷³ For a complete manuscript of this sermon, refer to Appendix D

CHAPTER 4

LAMENT AND MODELS OF PREACHING

Sermon Forms

The form of a sermon is an important consideration in any preaching act. Maurice Boyd once said, “Most of the struggle that I have in preparing to preach is to find the form...I want to find the particular way that will bring order, coherence and beauty [to the sermon].”⁷⁴ Thomas Long agrees: “A sermon’s form, though often largely unperceived by the hearers, provides shape and energy to the sermon and thus becomes itself a vital force in how a sermon makes meaning.”⁷⁵ Beyond lamenting the absence of lament, several homileticians suggest practical models – forms – for the recovery of lament in preaching. In the established literature, two particular resources stand out:

First, Kathleen Billman and Daniel Migliore state, “Homiletical reflection on the meaning of lamentation might take many different forms: a teaching sermon about the lament psalms; an effort to connect the lamenting psalmist’s circumstances and present-day circumstances in people’s lives; or a dialogical sermon that gives ample space for the articulation of hard questions and deep feelings in the face of personal loss or communal calamity.”⁷⁶ Billman and Migliore also stress the importance of the goal of the integration of liturgy and preaching when they suggest that “it is not the use of texts, hymns, or sermons alone that can make room for the lament tradition in the worshipping congregation.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ R. Maurice Boyd, *The Creative Spirit* [CD] (Toronto: Lester C. Randall Preaching Lecture, Yorkminster Park Baptist Church, 1988).

⁷⁵ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 118.

⁷⁶ Billman and Migliore, 134.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 134.

Second, in her essay *When Lament Shapes the Sermon*, Sally Brown asserts that sermons utilizing lament can take one of four different forms: a hermeneutical framework, a pastoral lament sermon, a critical-prophetic lament sermon, or a theological-interrogatory sermon.⁷⁸ Brown goes on to provide examples of each form.

Billman, Migliore, Brown and others suggest models for preaching that can utilize lament. Over the course of three years within the ministry context of Port Nelson United Church, four particular forms were explored. I now turn to these specific ways of structuring sermons and the resultant learning from their utilization.

Lament and the Narrative Sermon Form

In narrative preaching, the preacher stands as an intermediary between the biblical text and the contemporary experience of the listeners. When considering the genre of lament, Billman and Migliore suggest that the purpose of the homiletical act is to reflect “on the meaning of lamentation.”⁷⁹ Having the actual genre and the preaching act separated by some distance affords at least two benefits.

First, I learned that the preacher can intersperse historical-critical comment on both the biblical text and the genre within the sermon itself. This will often be necessary in the case of lament, given its relative unfamiliarity among many listeners.

Second, because the genre is a form to express feelings of loss that are often deep and personal, I discovered that a narrative sermon on lament can be an easier entry point for hearers into what is already a difficult topic. If the preacher’s most common homiletical form is narrative (as is mine), then remaining with a familiar form when preaching an unfamiliar genre

⁷⁸ Sally A. Brown, “When Lament Shapes the Sermon” in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 29.

⁷⁹ Billman and Migliore, 134.

can provide a certain level of assurance for listeners. Craig Satterlee astutely suggests that, when handling difficult topics and biblical passages, the preacher should deliberately use the same method of selecting scripture for worship as is most often employed in a given context.⁸⁰ This advice could be extended to include sermon forms when treating unfamiliar and challenging topics and genre, such as lament.

Lament as an Embodied Sermon Form

A second approach to preaching and lament is the embodiment of the genre itself. With this form, the sermon becomes a lament, rather than a sermon on lament.

Fred Craddock has said, “Let doxologies be shared doxologically, narratives narratively, polemics polemically, poems poetically, and parables parabolically.”⁸¹ Extending Craddock’s premise, laments could be (and perhaps ought to be) shared as lamentation. The goal, then, becomes offering listeners an opportunity to experience lament in the sermon.

In an exploration of sermons themselves as weeping, Christine Smith says, “I wanted the community to *experience* some of the pain and challenge described in various illustrations and stories rather than simply hearing ‘about’ it. To weep passionately, we must experience and feel.”⁸² Such was my goal in preaching a sermon in the person of a lamenting widow based on Psalm 42.⁸³

The reality is that almost any act of complaining or bemoaning a life circumstance can be a form of lament. People may often lament in contemporary life even if they rarely name it as

⁸⁰ Craig A. Satterlee, *Preaching and Stewardship: Proclaiming God’s Invitation to Grow* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2011), 49.

⁸¹ Fred B. Craddock, *As One without Authority*, 3d ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 163.

⁸² Christine M. Smith, *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 163.

⁸³ For a complete manuscript of this sermon, refer to Appendix D

such. As one member of my ministry context stated during a discussion on lament in general, “People can relate to the *complaining* aspect.”⁸⁴ Indeed, while lament is under-utilized in contemporary worship and virtually non-existent in preaching, many preachers realize that it is actually quite common in life experience.⁸⁵

Thus, to embody lament as a sermon is to enact the form of a good deal of everyday language. This positions the prose and poetry of the sermon not only on the authority of biblical witness, but also on the reality of contemporary experience.

While remaining true to the biblical form, the main disadvantage of embodying the genre of lament as a sermonic form is that it does not afford the opportunity to make historical-critical or narrative comment within the sermon, per se. If the preacher deems it necessary to provide such background, it could be offered as either spoken or written introductory words elsewhere in the worship service.⁸⁶

Lament and the Prophetic Sermon Form

A third way to use lament in preaching is to intentionally articulate experiences of loss, but with the homiletical goal of speaking the possibility that God can create something new. Such is the prophetic sermon. Sally Brown names the “critical-prophetic” approach among her lament sermon forms, which she claims can “accent biblical lament’s tropes of protest, imprecation, and self-examination.”⁸⁷ Given the protest, imprecation and self-examination that is featured so prominently throughout the biblical prophetic writing, Brown’s approach seems a

⁸⁴ Parish Project Group, interview by author, live meeting, Burlington, Ontario, 23 August 2011.

⁸⁵ In “Breaking Point: A Sermon,” in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 148-152, Brian K. Blount offers a word of caution about the fine line between lamenting and “whining.” Blount suggests lament is deeper than superficial whining, particularly around matters of institutional church finances.

⁸⁶ For examples of introductory words to an embodied lament sermon, refer to Appendix E

⁸⁷ Brown, 29.

practical one that can be used when preaching lament. For example, in a sermon based on Jeremiah 4: 11-28, I presented a lament over the decaying of creation while at the same time offering a glimmer of hope for enduring beauty.⁸⁸ In this particular case, the glimmer of hope was mostly in the form of quotations from well-loved hymns about creation.

Leonora Tubbs Tisdale says, “Prophetic proclamation requires of the preacher a heart that breaks with the things that break God’s heart.”⁸⁹ This is the language of lament. Tisdale goes on to list “Invitation to Lament” among her twelve “Forms for Prophetic Preaching.”⁹⁰

Unlike most other biblical laments, those found among the prophetic writings require special treatment in order to honour one of the fundamental tenets of prophetic preaching – that is – the avoidance of naming specific social issues. In *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann stresses that “prophetic preaching does not put people into crisis. Rather, it names and makes palpable the crisis already pulsing among us.”⁹¹ Further, he states, “The prophetic is not, contrary to some conservative views, a matter of prediction. Nor is it, contrary to some liberal views, a nagging or a scolding of righteous indignation about social justice.”⁹² The prophets spoke through the experienced realities of their time, which then, in turn, pointed the people to possibilities for newness. This is quite different than a finger-wagging, scolding rant on contemporary issues.

By contrast, it is important to note one of my discoveries of the inherent difficulties with preaching that utilizes prophetic lament – that is, rarely does a lament text form a story. Unlike

⁸⁸ For a complete manuscript of this sermon, refer to Appendix F

⁸⁹ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 10.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 82; the other forms she presents in pages 63-86 are Invitation to Dialogue, Problem-Resolution-New Possibility, Narrative Structure, Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis, Structure around an Image, Letter Form, Action Structure, Socratic Teaching Sermon, Play on Words, Upsetting the Equilibrium, and Confessional

⁹¹ Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination*, 18.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 132.

Old Testament history or New Testament parable, gospel narrative or epistle, lament seldom offers a plot with characters that are set within a specific situation that ultimately points to a resolution. Thus, prophetic preaching that utilizes lament may need to be more intentional about pointing to specific circumstances and issues than other forms of prophetic preaching in order to keep the attention of listeners. This may seem in conflict with what Brueggemann suggests as being one of the primary aspects of prophetic preaching. Paul Wilson, on the other hand, encourages preachers to ask the question, “What situation in my sermon is worthy of lament?”⁹³ He then lists a number of possible lamentable topics of a prophetic nature, suggesting that lament preaching may need to move beyond the biblical passage to lift up specific circumstances from lived experience.⁹⁴

Wilson is not alone in advocating the use of specific examples when the lament sermonic form is prophetic. Leonora Tubbs Tisdale suggests starting with the familiar – that is, being specific in the preaching – with the goal of moving listeners toward the unfamiliar – the general, prophetic absence of issues.⁹⁵

If a main purpose of the prophetic form is to name and penetrate experienced denial and despair in order to create space for something new to be born, then surely prophetic preaching can utilize lament in this regard.⁹⁶ As has been revealed in the practical situations of Violet, the death of a 12-year-old child, and the lament of a minister about to leave his beloved congregation, denial and despair are central themes and experiences of those with cause to lament. The prophetic sermon form seeks to deepen the reality of this denial and despair in order

⁹³ Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire*, 135.

⁹⁴ In *Setting Words on Fire*, Wilson lists sin, suffering, illness, injustice, violence, sexual abuse, oppression, environmental degradation, hardness of heart and natural disaster as lamentable topics in preaching (128).

⁹⁵ Tisdale, 44.

⁹⁶ Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination*, 38.

to create an equally rich possibility that God can create new experiences of acceptance and assurance which will, ultimately, offer permission to engage in helpful lament. Thus, a prophetic sermon that utilizes lament would, in a sense, hold a “promise in trust” for the future.⁹⁷

Lament amid a Celebratory Sermon Form

A fourth approach to preaching and lament is to utilize the genre within a celebratory form. Upon initial consideration, celebration and lament may seem in conflict with one another. Frank Thomas, building on the prior work of Henry Mitchell, says that celebration is “the culmination of the sermonic design, where a moment is created in which the remembrance of a redemptive past and/or the conviction of a liberated future transforms the events immediately experienced.”⁹⁸ Thomas affirms that “we are called to mouth words of celebration, yet in our hearts we often hold lament and celebration in tension.”⁹⁹ However, Luke Powery reminds us that “real celebration connects with situations of human suffering.”¹⁰⁰ Powery’s belief is that the same Spirit calls forth celebration, suffering and lament, and to diminish *any* of these manifestations of the Spirit is to diminish the working of the Spirit itself.¹⁰¹

Therefore, the presence of lament can, in some circumstances, itself be the celebration for those who bring their abiding realities of experienced loss to the worship context and yearn for them to be named and validated. For the annual Memorial Service upon All Saints Sunday in my context, I preached a sermon using the lament of the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk. In this sermon I wrestle with the interaction of lament and celebration for the significant number of

⁹⁷ In *The Good Funeral*, Thomas G. Long states, “Like all great rituals, funerals hold their promises in trust for us” (217). It seems sermons utilizing lament could be viewed in a similar way – as rituals holding promises in trust even if the lament lingers.

⁹⁸ Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God*, 49.

⁹⁹ Frank A. Thomas, audiotape of sermon review of Michael Brooks, Indianapolis, November 2013.

¹⁰⁰ Powery, 33.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

hearers who had experienced a recent loss. In the end, I resolve this interaction in the person of Jesus who knew both lament and celebration.¹⁰²

Even in the heightened culmination of celebration, permission can be given to lament. Luke Powery suggests that authentic preaching is always “bi-focal: lamenting and celebrating.”¹⁰³ Frank Thomas provides a poignant, practical example of Powery’s assertion when he suggests that when one goes to lay a wreath at a grave, one is both lamenting and celebrating simultaneously.¹⁰⁴ Thus, while lament may not initially seem to fit as part of a celebratory sermon, preachers who integrate these two manifestations of the Spirit authentically name the experienced reality of listeners who are surely present in almost any homiletical context.

Regardless of the sermon form a preacher chooses to engage, there are several other specific considerations for those who make homiletical use of the genre of lament. I now present three theological considerations, as well as four practical tips for preachers going about the weekly task of sermon preparation.

Consideration 1: Preaching Communal Lament

In the case of a homiletical treatment of communal lament, I discovered that it is important to define the community to which the sermon is directed. For example, I intended a lament sermon that was preached on the tenth anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States to be heard by a specific group of listeners in a specific place. However, by virtue of the far-reaching context of the event being commemorated, a common frame of reference and a shared experience of communal loss had already been laid as the

¹⁰² For a complete manuscript of this sermon, refer to Appendix G

¹⁰³ Powery, 94.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas, audiotape review.

foundation. With such widely known corporate lamentable situations, the preacher can almost immediately move into the implications of the event, avoiding the need to provide extensive background. This would be true with a sermon that follows any widespread experience of loss in a community or nation.

While the situation of a widely shared experience averts the need to provide extensive background information, there can be disadvantages to focusing on a communal loss.

First, the significant personal experiences of some individual listeners can become overshadowed by larger concerns. This could lead to feelings of diminishment or even abandonment. Some people may sense that their own personal laments have no place within the wider concern being considered. One individual summarized this concern by saying, “Personal grief can be lost in the midst of corporate grief.”¹⁰⁵

In reference to preaching in general, Barbara Lundblad reminds us that “the personal tends to reach people; the general rarely does.”¹⁰⁶ This is a reality when preaching on any topic, but it seems particularly important when attempting to preach in the context of what are often deep feelings that seek to be expressed in meaningful ways. Indeed, one member of my ministry context affirmed Lundblad’s assertion by saying, “Corporate lament would not help me with grief in the same way as personal lament because I am one step removed.”¹⁰⁷ Sometimes, then, meaning is diminished or even lost when the choice is made to focus on the communal rather than the individual.

Second, while communal losses often affect entire cities or even nations, there may well be more immediate pastoral circumstances of a corporate nature within the specific ministry

¹⁰⁵ Parish Project Group, interview by author, live meeting, Burlington, Ontario, 23 August 2011.

¹⁰⁶ Barbara K. Lundblad, audiotape of sermon review of Michael Brooks, New York, November 2011.

¹⁰⁷ Parish Project Group, interview by author, live meeting, Burlington, Ontario, 23 August 2011.

context that would afford attention in the sermon. For example, just four days prior to the appointed preaching date for the communal lament sermon in my context on the anniversary of September 11, 2001, a middle-aged man in the church died suddenly as the result of a tragic accident. His family is well known in the community, and many were lamenting his untimely death. While the anniversary of September 11, 2001 was a corporate memory that certainly afforded pastoral reason to lament what had been lost, the feelings accompanying the immediate communal loss experienced by our specific community overshadowed what might have been the wider pastoral needs. The local communal loss touched people more deeply than the general and historic corporate loss of the continent. This example highlights the importance of defining the community when preaching communal lament.

Consideration 2: Preaching Individual Lament

In the case of a homiletical treatment of individual lament, it is much more difficult – perhaps even impossible – to define a community of listeners. Individual lament, by its very nature, is the means of expression of a specific individual in a specific time resulting from a specific situation. Often the preacher will be unaware of the circumstances that have caused such a lament to be expressed. There are numerous examples in the Psalms of personal laments that make references to certain times and contexts, but these details are mostly unknown to contemporary readers. Thus, when preaching individual lament, it is helpful if the preacher chooses specific, lamentable experiences on which to focus. These may be drawn from the preacher’s own personal repertoire. Conversely, they may be fictitious. Or, with permission, great care and assurance of anonymity, they may be drawn from the local pastoral care context.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ As an example, the individual lament sermon in Appendix D utilizes specific, lamentable experiences

The most important consideration in framing the setting of an individual lament in a sermon is to realize that listeners who have had a similar experience to the one relayed by the preacher may be deeply touched and helped by hearing something of their own story named in the sermon. That story may even resonate with a biblical situation, evoking a reaction such as the one Barbara Lundblad notes in response to my sermon on Psalm 42: “Somebody in this Holy Book feels like I do, and yet, they’re speaking it to God. Here it is in the Bible. I guess that means God wants me to cry.”¹⁰⁹ Sharing and expressing a contemporary individual lament, clearly based on the biblical witness, can be powerful and helpful for many.

By contrast, others may be deeply disturbed if the situations named trigger painful memories. For example, following the aforementioned sermon on Psalm 42, a woman stated, “The widows were centered out. It was inappropriate to dredge up all those feelings. It hurts enough; why would I come to church to hear this?”¹¹⁰ Reactions such as this one serve to remind the preacher to consider the various ways in which individuals respond to sermons, as described by Craig Satterlee throughout the book, *When God Speaks Through You*. While one sermon may be immensely helpful for some, it may disturb others. It could be, however, that even in being disturbed, one is helped.

Thus, when preaching individual lament, it is important to be sensitive to the parallels between personal experiences and what is openly expressed in the sermon as lament. There is a delicate balance between relaying a familiar, corporate experience to which most can relate but may not feel deeply about and voicing more specific realities by which a smaller number of listeners may be helped. Obviously, the ability of an individual listener to exercise the emotional and spiritual discipline of transferring elements of another’s experience into a helpful piece for

¹⁰⁹ Lundblad, audiotape review.

¹¹⁰ Parish Project Group, interview by author, live meeting, Burlington, Ontario, 1 November 2011.

his or her own journey varies from person to person. Perhaps this is true for any topic of preaching, but it seems particularly applicable to a sermon focusing on individual lament when the experiences expressed are not only deeply personal, but are also embedded within the context of feelings of loss, sadness, denial, and despair.

Consideration 3: Preaching Displaced Lament

A third consideration when making use of the genre of lament in preaching is to realize that, very often, lament exists both in the biblical stories and in the situations in life when we do not expect it to be present. There are life circumstances that could be addressed through lament in preaching, even though, initially, the use of the genre may seem out of place or even inappropriate. I name this reality “displaced lament.”

From a practical homiletical perspective, there may be biblical texts that would not be classified as laments but nonetheless contain an element of lament. William Morrow astutely observes that “sermons drawing on the spirituality of lament do not necessarily have to be based on a text of complaint prayer.”¹¹¹

The most obvious example is found among the Psalms of Trust that, while not lament in the pure sense, are often born out of experiences of lamenting. Beyond this, we encounter individuals in the biblical witness who speak words of lament or, because of the circumstances in which they find themselves, may have reason to lament.

Recall the story in 1 Samuel 3: 1-20. Most sermons on this passage tend to focus on some aspect of the call of Samuel and, by extension, our call as people of God. In contrast,

¹¹¹ Morrow, “Laments.” Many scholars distinguish between “lament” and “complaint.” In the Introduction to *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, Sally A. Brown and Patrick Miller refer to lament as “bemoaning the troubles that one has undergone and that evoke the present prayer,” whereas, for them, complaint is “arguing with a complaining to God about one’s situation and protesting its continuation” (xv); in this very brief article, William Morrow simply equates “complaint prayer” with “lament.”

given the many challenges faced by Eli, I preached a sermon utilizing the form of embodied, individual lament to give expression to these challenges. Thus, while Eli did not actually lament in the recorded biblical passage, my sermon became Eli's possible displaced lament.¹¹²

Using any one of a number of sermon forms, it is possible to lift up the lamentable experiences and feelings of biblical characters even when lament itself is not employed in the text. By extension, it would be possible to use this approach with contemporary listeners, thereby offering them permission to use lament as a valuable tool to express loss and grief. Morrow points to the historic sermons of Martin Luther King Jr. as often responding “to the realities signified by lament, even though they were seldom based on complaint prayers.”¹¹³

Making a deliberate choice to use lament at times when it is not necessarily what would be expected reveals the preacher's sensitivity to what are often under-spoken or unspoken pastoral concerns present in any given service of worship. This “displaced lament” could help to recover the largely neglected genre by opening up further angles from which to preach biblical texts, thereby providing a broader range of homiletical possibilities.

In addition to the three theological considerations explored, my work pointed to four brief “tips” that preachers can keep in mind when preparing sermons that use lament.

Tip 1: It's in the Whole Bible

First, assuming preaching in the Christian tradition is biblical, preachers can acknowledge and respect the prevalence of lament in the Bible. From Genesis to Revelation, there are countless examples of individual and communal laments. Some of them may be quite obvious, as in the cases of the Old Testament prophets and the cries of the psalmist. Other

¹¹² For a complete manuscript of this sermon, refer to Appendix H

¹¹³ Morrow, “Laments.”

laments may be embedded in what seem like “good news” stories. Still others may be displaced – situations where and when people have cause to lament even though their cry may not be expressed in the biblical text itself. Nevertheless, lament is an important part of biblical history, theology and witness – as important, I would argue, as any other genre.

Tip 2: Serve a Balanced Diet

Second, preachers can acknowledge that schedules of suggested biblical readings for use in preaching often do not reflect balance. Sally Brown points out that “lament prayers, individual and corporate, comprise over one-third of the Psalter and are generously represented elsewhere in the canon as well.”¹¹⁴ However, even a casual review of the readings suggested, for example, by the three-year Revised Common Lectionary cycle reveals that lament is under-represented. Furthermore, says Brown, “When [laments] find their way into the weekly cycle of readings, the most extreme expressions of anger are often excised.”¹¹⁵ In the case of the Revised Common Lectionary, the preacher generally has at least four readings from which to choose for any given week. Therefore, even when lament texts are suggested for use, it is arguably easy for preachers to avoid them in sermons. When considering a balanced preaching diet that is reflective of the entire biblical canon, preachers would do well to include lament among the genre for homiletical appropriation, if not regularly, then at least occasionally.

Tip 3: It can be Light amid Darkness

Third, those who preach can be sensitive to the reality that loss and resultant grief are often present at the most difficult times in the lives of people – times that can be chaotic. Even individuals who are generally stable and who cope well with change and disruption can be torn

¹¹⁴ Brown, 27.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 28.

apart by significant loss. Lament, preached sensitively, can provide a form to offer people permission to express their loss and grief when such experience seems to lack any form. Many biblical laments themselves have a form, and the “form of the lament defines the experience of suffering.”¹¹⁶ Giving voice to the lament form in the sermon can offer people a stream of stable light in the midst of wavering darkness.

Tip 4: Expect and Manage Resistance

Fourth, preachers can be aware that naming lament in significant ways in sermons will be uncomfortable for some. It may even be uncomfortable for the one delivering the sermon. Pastors will encounter resistance – even anger. Barbara Lundblad states, “The big point of resistance in preaching any kind of sermon on lament is that someone may not want to hear it.”¹¹⁷ God invites us to be at peace about this, for to preach lament is to offer people permission to voice feelings they may never have expressed before. When a couple invites people to their wedding, they generally expect most of those people to attend. Likewise, if preachers extend invitations to express loss by preaching about and through lament, then they need to expect people to wail, to weep and to rage, and they need to grow comfortable with this. I believe that most of our discomfort with lament and preaching – both as listeners and as preachers – has little to do with human failings, lack of biblical knowledge, insufficient theological training, sloppy preparation or fear. Rather, I suggest our unease flows directly from simply overlooking lament and, thus, not preaching it or listening to it being preached in any significant ways.

The four sermonic forms that were developed and implemented in my ministry context, together with the theological considerations of individual, communal and displaced lament and

¹¹⁶ Capps, 71.

¹¹⁷ Lundblad, audiotape review.

the practical tips for sermonic preparation all provided tools for my attempt to offer listeners permission to lament.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION, SIGNIFICANCE AND NEXT STEPS

Contextual Evaluation

Did those drops of tea that, for Violet, seemed to substitute for human drops of tears extend beyond her own personal experience? Was this reflective of a more widespread denial within the context? It seems one person summarized the very root of the problem when, referring to her own experiences of how others handled her expressions of loss, said, “When you laugh, the world laughs with you; when you cry, you cry alone.”¹¹⁸ This was the clearest example emerging of someone who did not seem to feel permission to lament among family or friends, let alone in the faith community. In reflecting on her own loss, still another person observed, “Most people didn’t want to hear about it.”¹¹⁹ This brought to mind the reaction of the woman who felt the widows in the congregation were centered out during a sermon I preached, asking in conclusion, “Why would I come to church to hear this?”

While these are, admittedly, individual responses, these situations and others collectively confirm the reality of a death-denying culture that struggles to express feelings of loss and grief in meaningful ways. Thomas Lynch reflects on how, increasingly, outward expressions of grief are often seen as inappropriate in his line of work as a funeral director, and many feel such expressions “should be quiet and private, muffled and subdued, hidden behind a curtain in an adjacent room.”¹²⁰

In reading and hearing the various comments over the course of several years, I sensed a certain resignation among respondents. Even though only a few individuals believed they

¹¹⁸ Email to author, Port Nelson United Church congregant, Burlington, Ontario, 2 October 2013.

¹¹⁹ Ministry context, written response to author, Burlington, Ontario, October 2013.

¹²⁰ Lynch, *The Good Funeral*, 68.

experienced some denial of their loss and the vast majority felt they talked openly about their experiences with others, the resignation was in the form of recognizing the death-denying reality of the culture. Those indicating they were willing to openly express their losses felt little room to do so – even in church. Could it be that the denial of the communal losses of identity and values that Violet expressed in our visit were reflective of a wider cultural denial within the ministry context? If this was the case, then perhaps those who experienced individual loss did not feel comfortable sharing their situation in this context.

Another possibility might be that, given the relative magnitude of the communal loss of the congregation in 2007, individuals may have felt that revealing their own individual losses would have compounded the laments in an unhelpful and unproductive way. In any case, it seems clear that, while the majority of people do not admit to a response of personal denial, the very existence of a profound loss within the ministry context that was not openly talked about points to a form of communal denial.

The individuals who did point to sermons as being among helpful resources were able to name specific preaching occasions. In one situation, almost ten years had passed since the loss and the subsequent helpful preaching act, and the person still recalled quotations from that particular sermon. This suggests that, even if it is only for a few individuals, being intentional about homiletically naming loss – being intentional about preaching lament – can have a profound and lasting influence.

As mentioned, a number of people named music and, specifically, hymns as being among the most helpful resources.

Frank Thomas writes about the “performative tradition” in African-American preaching whereby contemporary preachers have learned the craft from others and stand firmly in that

tradition.¹²¹ He goes on to suggest that many black preachers are known for one or two of their best sermons – sermons they have preached many times and in many places.¹²²

While in the African-American preaching tradition a sermon might be repeated as often as a hymn, in my context, this would almost never be the case. The result may be that the memory of hymns is built from repetition within a given worshipping community, whereas sermons are not afforded such a benefit.

Significance

Over the course of three years, I preached several sermons that focused on lament. The question remains: “Has preaching in my context succeeded in providing permission for listeners to lament the losses of life?” Like any qualitative question, it seems virtually impossible to answer this with a simple “yes” or “no.” What I have discovered is that people who experience loss employ a variety of tools to help them in their times of grief. For some, the resources include experiences of worship: prayer, music and sermons. For others, it is the integration of all elements of a particular worship experience that proves to be most helpful.

Next Steps

Perhaps the most helpful way forward is to remember that, in any given setting of ministry, a wide variety of pastoral and spiritual needs are present. I am reminded of the parabolic words of Jesus who, in response to the disciples’ question about the greatest people in the kingdom of heaven, proclaims, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” (Mat 18: 5). In the same chapter, Jesus suggests to them that a shepherd who has a

¹²¹ Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God*, 14.

¹²² Frank A. Thomas (lecture presented as part of the course “Preaching and Celebration” in the Association of Chicago Theological Schools Doctor of Ministry in Preaching program, Chicago, Illinois, 4 July 2013).

hundred sheep and has lost one might do anything possible to locate that one lost sheep. (Mat 18: 10-14). Perhaps, sometimes, the preacher's role is to offer permission to just one lamenting parishioner who arrives searching for a helpful way to express her unimaginable loss. After all, ministry is not often quantifiable.

A Defining Moment

Sometimes it takes an event that affects a large number of people for the process of change to begin in any meaningful way. While the genre of lament is as old as the entire biblical witness Christian preachers continue to rely upon as the basis for sermons, its potential use as a homiletical tool has only recently begun to be explored. Did something happen to spur this interest? I suggest that the events of September 11, 2001 – events known worldwide but perhaps felt most deeply by North Americans who had largely taken the death-denying culture for granted – did, in fact, hasten the recovery of lament.

Sally Brown and Patrick Miller acknowledge that the rediscovery of lament was underway prior to 2001,¹²³ but the events of that tragic September Tuesday left countless communities and individuals searching for ways to express a loss that North Americans had never felt before. In the wake of unprecedented communal despair, thousands of preachers sought to give faithful voice to the travail that everybody experienced, but about which few could make meaning. To varying degrees, lament was preached, even if, in many churches, it had quite literally never been preached before.¹²⁴

¹²³ Brown and Miller, xiv.

¹²⁴ Examples of sermons preached in the days, weeks and months following September 11, 2001 are presented and discussed in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*.

Form follows Function

Leonora Tubbs Tisdale reminds us that, “As in all artistic endeavors, form follows function in sermon preparation.”¹²⁵ In other words, sometimes a particular situation arises that demands preaching perform a certain function. Then, having experienced that function – often for the first time – forms are created to describe the function enacted which, in turn, provide models for future use. Such is, I suggest, the case regarding lament and preaching. The events of September 11, 2001 created an immediate context for the widespread use of lament in worship and preaching. This use – or function – was then placed anew within its proper form of models of lament for preaching. Several resources emerged – almost all of them since 2001 – to publicize these models and to assist with the task of engaging the genre of lament in homiletical acts more widely.

A Lingering Challenge

The foundations have been established, and the tasks of providing at least some forms and models for preaching using lament have re-emerged. What remains is a lack of preachers who are bold enough to risk using the practical application of forms and models of homiletical lament. One highly educated and long-time member of Port Nelson United Church stated quite simply that she could not recall hearing a sermon on a lament passage from the Bible, nor could she recall ever hearing a sermon that utilized lament in any way.¹²⁶ Unfortunately, it seems her statement continues to be the norm rather than the exception.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Tisdale, 63.

¹²⁶ Parish Project Group, interview by author, live meeting, Burlington, Ontario, 23 August 2011

¹²⁷ In *Necessary Songs*, Martin Tel traces some of the history of the use of psalms in worship and concludes, “Today you will rarely hear a triumphant Psalm 68 sung in many churches, much less a lamenting Psalm 79.” (20)

The good news is that it is not too late to begin to change this reality. Several practical sermon models have been explored in this paper. Other considerations when utilizing the genre have also been offered. However, no amount of written theory will ever touch the depths of lost souls or hurting hearts. It remains the preacher's unique purpose and privilege to intervene weekly into the lives of the people with whom she has been blessed to accompany on the faith journey.¹²⁸ It is, in fact, necessary work in order to be in authentic relationship with others. In her introduction to a volume of sermons about God and pain, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "The preacher who will not talk about our collisions with betrayal, dread, or despair is a preacher who does not want to know very much about us. One who will – who will even dare to look for the good news in pain – may do more to heal us than the finest physician."¹²⁹

So, I say to preachers, be bold! Take risks. Dare to offer your people the permission they are already seeking to openly express the losses of life. Do so in preaching – the ministry to which God has called you. Do so more than occasionally.

Had I been attuned to the homiletical possibilities embedded in the rich resource of lament, Christmas Eve 2008 might have taken a different form – a form that could have offered more meaningful expression to what almost everyone felt but nobody voiced. Had I been more sensitive to Violet's unshed tears, lament may have figured more prominently in some of the early sermons in my new ministry context as I sought to offer permission to weep to a grieving people. Indeed, Richard K. Fenn suggests a reciprocal function of genuine lament: "The purpose of the lament is to soften the heart of God and thus to shorten the time of our own distress. If the lament succeeds, however, it is our heart that will be softened, to the point that we can imagine

¹²⁸ I am grateful to John Schmidt for sharing his definition of a sermon as "a weekly intervention in the lives of people."

¹²⁹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 12.

and embrace the suffering of others who have long been far beyond the range of our own knowledge, experience, and compassion.”¹³⁰

Surely, sermons employing lament would have the fostering of this three-way reciprocal relationship among God, the individual and others as their primary goal. In entering such a relationship, permission to lament both individually and communally is offered.

Such is our task and our calling as preachers. Reflecting on a lament sermon, Barbara Lundblad once asked the simple question, “If not in church, where else?”¹³¹ All preachers might ask a similar question: If not us, then who else? Preachers might be the only ones to express the trouble that God has seen. Preachers might even be the ones to offer people permission to utter, amid their lament, the words, “Glory, Hallelujah!”

For “even as they wept, they sang the doxology.”¹³²

¹³⁰ Richard K. Fenn, “4 Ezra’s Lament: The Anatomy of Grief” in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 135.

¹³¹ Lundblad, audiotape review.

¹³² Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, 193.

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APPENDIX A

A Call to Worship inviting lament:

Not everyone will sing this morning.

Not every heart will be glad.

Not every person will remember a reason to rejoice.

We sing when others cannot.

We sing to praise our God in all circumstances.

We sing to worship our God.

And God deserves our praise.

The world and our God need our singing.

How can we keep from singing?

APPENDIX B

Questions Offered to Ministry Context:

PORT NELSON UNITED CHURCH DOCTOR OF MINISTRY RESEARCH

Thank you for considering participating in research regarding your experiences of loss. This is part of my work toward the Doctor of Ministry degree in preaching. Your involvement in this research will assist me greatly! Please be assured that your responses will be considered confidential (i.e. only I will read them). Some responses may be used, anonymously, in my final written thesis. You can respond to any or all of the questions.

If you are willing and able to participate, I invite you complete this survey and **return it to me either in the church office or on a Sunday**. If you require more space for your responses, please use the back of the sheets, or append additional pages.

Thanks again!

-Michael Brooks

The Questions:

1. Share about a situation when you experienced a loss:

- What kind of loss was it?

- Would you classify it as a major loss or a minor loss?

Major ____

Minor ____

Comments:

- Was it a loss that only you experienced (personal) or was it also experienced by others (communal)?

Personal ____

Communal ____

Comments:

APPENDIX B (continued)

2. In your own opinion, did you experience any denial of this loss? If so, tell me about when you stopped denying and started admitting the loss with yourself.
 - What helped you make this move?
3. Think about how openly you believe you talked about your loss with other people. If you initially kept the loss to yourself, tell me about when you moved from admitting the loss to yourself privately to talking about it publicly with others.
 - What helped you make this move?
4. Many losses are accompanied by a grieving period – a time when one is conscious of the loss and its impact on living. Thinking about your loss and the grieving period, what resources were most helpful during your grieving?
5. Thinking again about your loss and grieving period, do you remember a worship service or some aspect of a service (e.g. sermon, reading, music) that addressed and helped with the loss? If so, please describe.
 - Were there any aspects of this worship experience that you found unsettling?
6. Has your experience of and through this loss helped you with other losses? If so, how?

APPENDIX C

Bulletin Insert, September/October 2013:

PORT NELSON UNITED CHURCH DOCTOR OF MINISTRY RESEARCH *Autumn 2013*

Introduction:

As part of my work toward the Doctor of Ministry degree in preaching, I am seeking input and responses from as many people as possible in the church family regarding experiences of loss. More specifically, I am interested to know what resources have been helpful at times of loss, and how worship services and sermons may or may not have been among those resources. Your involvement in this research would be greatly appreciated! There are several ways you can participate. You are invited to select the method that would be the most comfortable way for you to honestly and authentically share your experiences. All of the methods will use the same questions, and in all cases, the responses will be considered confidential. No audio recordings will be made. Some responses may be used, anonymously, in my final written thesis.

You can choose from one of the following interview methods:

A questionnaire that would take between 10 and 20 minutes to complete, either:

- an emailed questionnaire that you would complete on-line, OR:
- a paper questionnaire that you would complete by hand and return

An in-person interview, either:

- a group gathering of up to ten people on **Wednesday, October 2nd either from 4-5.30pm OR from 7-8.30pm** with Michael Brooks as facilitator and Ruth McQuirter as note-taker, OR:
- a one-on-one interview with either Michael Brooks or Ruth McQuirter at a mutually convenient time

If you are willing to participate, or if you have questions or would like more information, please contact Michael Brooks: (email and phone contact) or Ruth McQuirter: (email and phone contact).

Thank you for considering this opportunity!

-Michael Brooks (see reverse...)

APPENDIX C (continued)

For your reference, the following is the list of questions that will be used in the questionnaires and during the interviews:

The Questions:

1. Share about a situation when you experienced a loss:
 - what kind of loss was it?
 - would you classify it as a major loss or a minor loss?
 - was it a loss that only you experienced (personal) or was it also experienced by others (communal)?
2. In your own opinion, did you experience any denial of this loss? If so, tell me about when you stopped denying and started admitting the loss with yourself.
 - what helped you make this move?
3. Think about how openly you believe you talked about your loss with other people. If you initially kept the loss to yourself, tell me about when you moved from admitting the loss to yourself privately to talking about it publicly with others.
 - what helped you make this move?
4. Many losses are accompanied by a grieving period – a time when one is conscious of the loss and its impact on living. Thinking about your loss and the grieving period, what resources were most helpful during your grieving?
5. Thinking again about your loss and grieving period, do you remember a worship service or some aspect of a service (e.g. sermon, reading, music) that addressed and helped with the loss? If so, please describe.
 - Were there any aspects of this worship experience that you found unsettling?
6. Has your experience of and through this loss helped you with other losses? If so, how?

APPENDIX D

“THE INDIVIDUAL’S LAMENT”

A Sermon on Psalm 42

October 30th, 2011

Rev. Michael Brooks

My name is Stella and, last year, my husband, Fred, died. It’s not as though I didn’t know it was coming. I mean, my mind knew. My mind knew that people who are diagnosed with liver cancer mostly don’t live too long. My mind heard the diagnosis and the prognosis. And my mind raced to the internet to find out as much as I possibly could about the two worst words I’d ever heard in our 39 years of marriage: “liver cancer.” My mind was telling me that Fred and I had a battle on our hands. I’d never had any experience at all with battles, let alone wars. My sister’s name is Cathy, and her son left for Afghanistan four weeks ago. She seems to know more about battles and wars than I do.

But I learned as much as I could. My mind said it needed to know more, and more, and more. It was saying, “I need as much ammunition as possible for this battle of a lifetime.”

Fred, on the other hand, had moved past that. He had always been a pacifist. And facing the real prospect of death, his heart overruled his mind. “There is no battle to be fought, let alone a war,” he would tell me. That’s not what it’s about. Fred was so wise. He would always take a step back – both figuratively and literally. I remember whenever we went on vacation he would always seek out the place where he could see the most – the widest vista, the highest cliff. That was his metaphor for living.

Life was a journey. And liver cancer was part of his journey. The mind listened to the heart, in Fred’s case. At least, ever since, together, we experienced loss.

We’d been through a lot in our 39 years. We had tried to have children, and twice, my pregnancy ended. There was a lot of sadness at those times. We both lamented the loss of possibility – of what those initial stirrings of life within me might have grown into. We both asked ourselves, “What’s wrong with us? Why won’t this work out?”

It was after those losses that Fred softened. His macho side finally realized that all of life is birthed from women – whether it is Mother God or mother of his own children. Come to think of it, that probably helped him greatly on his own journey with cancer. And he did remark that it was the women who offered most of the caring presence around him in hospital and hospice.

Well, here I am, a year since all those people streamed through the line at Fred’s funeral, offering to visit me afterward, to have lunch. I guess most of them have moved on to the busyness of their own lives. Sure, to be fair, I’ve heard from a few. Some have been helpful. Others, well, aren’t sure what to say or do. Sometimes I wish people would simply say, “Keep crying, Stella; you have much to lament; Fred died far too young. It is not fair, and there is no good reason.”

APPENDIX D (continued)

My tears have been my food day and night lately, and people keep saying to me, “Where is your God?” (Ps 42:3).

I wonder if they are mocking the God upon whom I have always trusted but, quite frankly, have felt somewhat distant from ever since Fred died. Or I wonder if they are mocking me? Is there something wrong with me? Am I not trusting God the way I should? Am I not praying hard enough? Am I not strong enough in my faith?

Indeed, I find myself crying out, lamenting the faith of my childhood, saying, “Where is your God? Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? (Ps 42:3, 5).

I grew up in the church. I remember those days, as I pour out my soul. I remember how I used to go to worship with the great multitude that nobody can really number. In our church growing up, we had this grand procession to begin the service. I was one of the ones who carried a candle beside this large cross that led the procession to the house of God. Then, when I was older, I got to carry the cross. It was such a happy time.

Where are all those memories now? Where is all the faith that I “put in” when I was younger, that I could sure use now? I say to God, my rock, “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy of death oppresses me?” (Ps 42:9).

I guess I now realize that my heart has more to say than my mind.

I sit, staring at the picture that once sat on top of Fred’s casket. At times, I wonder when I shall come and behold the face of God? (Ps 42:2). There are many silent hours, when the only sound is the gentle breeze rustling up some fallen leaves that lie on the lawn – leaves I quite frankly don’t have the energy or desire to go and gather. Fred always gathered the leaves, every last one.

I am so distraught. My soul is cast down. (Ps 42:5). I even told my sister Cathy the other day on the ‘phone what happened last week. The police stopped me. All I could think about was, “What’s wrong!” Has something happened to someone else? The officer walked up to my car and said, “Your license sticker is out of date.” I looked at him and said, “That’s not my job! It’s...it’s...it’s...Fred’s.” The officer didn’t know what to say. And I suddenly realized all the things that were his job are now mine.

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? (Ps 42:5).

I thought Cathy might be sympathetic, but frankly, she’s caught up in her own stuff. Her son, Shawn, has been gone a month. When he signed up for the reserves we never imagined he’d be packing everything he needed for his six-month tour of duty in Afghanistan in two suitcases. Cathy told me it seems like it was only yesterday that she held him in her arms, that

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she fed him – that he drew his daily sustenance from her own breast. It was only a short time ago that Cathy walked him to school for his first day, read his first report card. Cathy has a special bond with her son. And now, that bond is in the hands of our military presence overseas. She laments the loss of that bond, and the security it provided her. Shawn’s leaving has left his mother feeling exposed, vulnerable, and afraid. What Cathy probably doesn’t realize, though, is she, at least, had the chance to hold her own son. I never did.

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? (Ps 42:5).

It’s October 30th, 2011 today. I, Stella, am sitting here in Port Nelson Church. The service has just finished. They invited me to this service because I lost my mother a few months ago. Things weren’t always good between my mother and I. A lot of it was the somewhat typical mother-daughter tension – her expectations of me, my guilt around feeling I couldn’t always meet them. Yes, these things I remember as I pour out my soul. I used to bring her to church, until it simply became too difficult. It took two hours to get her ready. Sometimes I’d get her all dressed and we would be on the way out the door and, from her wheelchair, she would say to me, “I have to go to the bathroom.” We would end up going back into her room and undressing her. We both knew there really wasn’t a place to go to the bathroom at the church. And so, we missed worship again. I have lamented that.

So here I am today, lamenting mom’s death, Fred’s death, Shawn’s departure, Cathy’s response to me, my children that would never be.

When I came here today, I expected that I would be told, yet again, to celebrate life, to move past what I am feeling, to forgive and forget all the things that trouble me, to stop grieving. I’ve lost track of the number of times I’ve been told these things – when we lost our babies, when Fred died, when my nephew left, when my mother’s life ended.

But then I opened up the worship bulletin, and in the bulletin, I found this little heart. And I thought, “Oh, isn’t that nice. That’s the way we’re being invited to ‘cheer up.’” That’s today’s little “gimmick.” Then I realized that the heart wasn’t for that. I noticed that the heart had a tear in it. And, in that moment of realization, my mind met my heart. I realized that I am still broken. I realized it’s OK to continue to lament. And I realized that God is present in that place of lament.

And then, as I was invited forward to place my heart of lament – to write the names of the people and places and situations in my life that I lament personally on that heart – I heard the choir sing this prayer:

Mother and God, to you we sing:
wide is your womb, warm is your wing.
In you we live, move and are fed
sweet, flowing milk, life-giving bread.
Mother and God, to you we bring

all broken hearts, all broken wings.”¹³³

Well, God, I’m still pretty broken. But as I bring my broken hearts of lament to You, there is something within me that says, “Stella, someday, you shall again praise God, your help.” (Ps 42:11).

APPENDIX E

Examples of introductory words to lament when utilizing an embodied sermonic form:

Example 1:

Lament is a literary form – a way of expressing feeling. There are many examples of lament in the Bible. There are corporate laments, such as the Book of Lamentations, which concerns the fall of a city. Other laments are of a personal nature, such as what we find in Psalm 42. This Psalm expresses the speaker’s lament over being absent from the place of worship. The psalmist cries out in regret about living in a foreign, even hostile land – regret that intensifies when reflecting upon the pilgrimages to Jerusalem that used to take place. The speaker asks the question several times, “Why are you cast down, soul?” But the speaker also has just enough faith to remember to hope in God, and to say with some confidence, “I shall again praise God, my help and my God.”

Today, let us sit in the place of this psalmist who laments being absent from the things she used to be present to. (Read Psalm 42).

Example 2:

This morning’s Bible reading comes from the prophet Jeremiah. Prophets shared visions of what might happen when people ignore and turn away from God. In this morning’s reading, Jeremiah reminds the people of Judah and of Jerusalem of their sins against God, and what could happen as a result. Portraying an angry God, Jeremiah offers a bleak picture of desolation. He does this in the form of a lament that wails and rages, protests and interrogates.

Let us listen to Jeremiah’s prophetic lament, and let us be open for even a whisper of hope. (Read Jeremiah 4: 11-28).

¹³³ Miriam Therese Winter, “Mother and God” in *Voices United: The Hymn and Worship Book of The United Church of Canada*, ed. John Ambrose et al. (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1996), 280.

APPENDIX F

“I LOOKED, AND...”
A Sermon on Jeremiah 4: 11-28
September 15th, 2013
Rev. Michael Brooks

Sing:

For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies.
For the love which from our birth over and around us lies.
God of all, to you, we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.¹³⁴

*I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;
and to the heavens, and they had no light. (Jer 4:23)*

Sing:

This is my Father’s world, and to my listening ears
all nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres.
This is my Father’s world: I rest me in the thought –
of rocks and trees, of skies and seas, his hand the wonders wrought.¹³⁵

*I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
and all the hills moved to and fro. (Jer 4:24)*

Sing:

This is my Father’s world: the birds their carols raise;
The morning light, the lily white, declare their Maker’s praise.
This is my Father’s world:
He shines in all that’s fair;
In the rustling grass I hear him pass,
He speaks to me everywhere.¹³⁶

*I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,
and all the birds of the air had fled.
I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger. (Jer 4:25-26)*

Sing:

For each perfect gift sublime to our race so freely given,
graces human and divine, flowers of earth and buds of heaven,
God of all, to you we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Folliot Sandford Pierpoint, “For the Beauty of the Earth” in *Voices United: The Hymn and Worship Book of The United Church of Canada*, ed. John Ambrose et al. (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1996), 226.

¹³⁵ Maltbie Davenport Babcock, “This Is My Father’s World” in *The Hymn Book of The Anglican Church of Canada and The United Church of Canada*, ed. Edgar S. Bull et al. (Toronto: Cooper & Beatty Limited, 1971), 82.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Pierpoint, 226.

APPENDIX F (continued)

For thus says the LORD: The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end. Because of this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above grow black; For I have spoken, I have purposed. I have not relented nor will I turn back. (Jer 4:27-28)

Sing:

God of all, to you we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.¹³⁸

Beauty and glory. Morning light and lily white. Rocks and trees, skies and seas.

If only it were still so everywhere.

But it seems there is a hot wind coming forth – not a wind to enjoy, but something stronger than that. It's a wind of warning.

I looked at the calendar, and lo, it said September 10th, and I heard heat and humidity warnings being issued, and records being set for temperatures.

I canoed on Lake Huron, and lo, the water is even lower, and lower, and lower.

I smelled the air last night, and lo, it isn't as fresh as I remember it being.

I looked at the horizon toward Toronto, and lo, the haze is ever more prevalent.

Oh, we lament the gradual winnowing away of creation. Yet, we deny that it will ever reach the extremity of Jeremiah's prophecy. Jeremiah, you see, envisions that things return to how they were before God created the beauty of the earth and the glory of the skies.

We deny it, even though it may well be our worst fear. We cannot imagine looking on the earth and seeing a void wasteland, or looking to the sky and seeing no light! We deny it. And our denial leads to despair. Disaster seems to overtake disaster. And we try to cry out, "How long must I see the world drift away?" But why bother crying out? What can be done?

There is much to lament about creation. And perhaps even more, we lament that it seems too big for us. We don't know how to respond, or we think that our individual, small responses won't make a difference.

But there is something much more personal than our lament about creation. There is something that touches us even more deeply than the loss of the health of the earth.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

APPENDIX F (continued)

And that is our lament over the loss of the relationships. For we do not just live on the land; we live on the land together. In our increasing disconnection from our Father's world, we are increasingly disconnected from one another.

I looked at my smartphone, and lo, it was just a list of names and numbers; there were no human faces; I missed them as they passed me by on the street. I didn't *miss* them. I just missed them.

I looked at the beautiful scenery to my right, driving along the shore; then I looked to my left, and the children in the van beside me, well, they were looking straight ahead at the screens on the backs of the seats in front of them. The remaining beauty of the earth and glory of the skies was passing them by.

Gosh, I looked at my own child today, and she didn't really know how to look at me with warmth; a screen doesn't require a look of warmth in return. I guess she just hasn't learned the difference between a screen and a human face.

In the gains of the dominance around us, so much has been lost. And we deny it.

Jeremiah's warnings, of course, have not come true to the extent he laments. The earth is still beautiful in many ways. And while all nature may not sing, a good part of it still does. God is still glorified in our music. And above the lament of the earth, God still invites us into the song of life.

There were dark times, no doubt. Jeremiah wrote these words about 2,500 years ago. Jerusalem was seized again and destroyed in 587 BCE. But, even then, there was still light in the heavens. Even then, the earth wasn't completely void.

Oh, some say the prophecy is God's punishment for wrongdoing. Others wag a finger at specific causes: Big business polluting. Five cars in the driveway. Pipelines carrying oil everywhere.

But what Jeremiah is really doing is he is lamenting the loss he knew, and the potential for more loss. And we are awakened to our own denial of the loss.

Thank God that, even on days when we catch a glimpse of a void earth and a darkened sky, God is still fullness and light. And God still acts decisively in the world.

I looked, and beneath the darkening sky, upon the decaying earth, I found one small glimmer of joy. It was the size of a small coin that had been lost.

I look, and I realize that the God of the tiny seed is also the God who can re-connect us – who can help us find ourselves again. She is the same God who – in growing one small seed, in watering one small plant, in lighting one more step forward, in finding one lost coin, in

APPENDIX F (continued)

welcoming one lost child – She is the same God who points the way to love. (*Read Luke 15: 3, 8-9*)

APPENDIX G

“A CELEBRATION OF LIFE?”

A Sermon on Habakkuk 1: 1-4; 2: 1-3 and Ephesians 1: 15-19

All Saints Sunday, November 3rd, 2013

Rev. Michael Brooks

Some news headlines are not big stories, but are unforgettable nonetheless. I remember this one: “Sunny Dress Code for Funeral,” the page screamed. The story revealed that a 12-year-old girl had died. She had eaten an ice cream cone in the food court at Mapleview Mall here in Burlington. Within minutes, she went into shock and was rushed to hospital. She succumbed to what doctors predicted was an undiagnosed allergy. In the days following the girl’s tragic and untimely death, her mother was quoted as saying her daughter wouldn’t want any mourning, and that she would want everyone to “put the ‘fun’ in funeral.” The mother went on to say that “music from her favourite recording artists – Justin Bieber and One Direction – would play in the background, and mourners must abide by a *sunny* dress code.” Her funeral was to take place in a Christian church. It was to be a “celebration of life.”¹³⁹

And isn’t that what we’re here for today? Aren’t we here to celebrate life? Isn’t this the great “Festival of All Saints?” And aren’t festivals supposed to be happy occasions – celebrations?

We’ve sung about it: “For All the Saints, Alleluia!” Churches around the world sing about it today: “From earth’s wide bounds, from ocean’s farthest coast, through gates of pearl streams in the countless host, singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Alleluia!”¹⁴⁰ We’ve celebrated life in the baptism of little Kayleanna. We’ve read about it in Paul’s letter to the saints in Ephesus. Paul had heard about the faith of the Ephesians and their love toward all the saints – all God’s people. It is a letter of celebration. We’ve arrived in our sunny dresses. We’ll display the flowers, wear the smile, and cut the cake. It’s a celebration of life, right?

Then why isn’t every single heart here leaping with joy today?! It’s time to celebrate! But why not? Because our heart keeps a different calendar than our mind and our daybook and our smartphone. Our hearts tend to keep the calendar of grief and loss. We may have donned our celebratory, sunny dress, but inside, we’re wearing the dark sackcloth of lament. You see our “celebration” of all saints is our attempt at resolving the grief over the losses we feel. The calendar says “November 1st,” or a Sunday close by, and, regardless of where we are at in our grief, the Festival begins.

It would be easier to celebrate the saints of old, wouldn’t it? It would be easier to simply take a field trip to some museum and admire the relics of the past – the saints in plaster of paris and marble – and celebrate them. It would be easier to walk through some far-off cemetery where we do not recognize one single name and simply celebrate those lives – abstract, distant,

¹³⁹ Molly Hayes, “Sunny Dress Code,” *The Hamilton Spectator*, March 18, 2013, A5.

¹⁴⁰ William Walsham How, “For All the Saints” in *Voices United: The Hymn and Worship Book of The United Church of Canada*, ed. John Ambrose et al (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1996), 705.

APPENDIX G (continued)

unknown to us. It's always easier to celebrate a life that has ended when that life didn't touch us too deeply in the first place. It's easy for us to read the story of the 12-year-old girl. Most of us were nowhere near the mall on that day.

But today, our loss and our grief is much more up close and personal. Today, amid celebration, we still lament the loss of the lives that have ended in our community and in our families, among us, this year. And as we look at that list of 34 names printed, the losses linger closely. It doesn't matter if it was the loss of a 95-year-old dear friend, or the loss of a 45-year-old dear child, it's close and personal and known. The names are big enough for all of us to see them from a distance, written clearly on the tablets of our own hearts, never to be forgotten. You see, our hearts keep the calendar of grief and loss.

Sure, the flowers and the music and the calendar all tell us it's time to move on – our grief is resolved. But for many here, we're struggling to see the vision of what today is supposed to be. That's the situation we find ourselves in today, right now. We've gathered to celebrate because, well, that's what we're told by the culture we should be doing. But really, if we are truthful, some part of us, at some level, is still grieving the loss and the despair.

And so, it may be that all we can feel resolution about today is to know that we bring the names of each and every loss we have known together. We bring them and we write them on tablets large enough that others around us can see and know what is written on our own hearts.

Thank God that, at the very least, the songs of lament that are deep in each and every individual heart can come together to sing a common song. Thank God that, deep in each and every individual heart is a common goal to seek out a vision of healing, of peace, of renewal.

That's the situation we bring today. That's really all some of us are able to bring – to simply bring those names and write them on tablets large enough so, hopefully, someone else might see them and care.

We write the individual lament of our heart on the tablets, seeking a vision for the appointed time – for God's time – a time that is more significant than the time of the calendar or even of the human heart. For it does not lie. It will surely come. It will not delay.

There have been others who have struggled with losing what they had known. One of them lamented this struggle and this loss, while at the same time, having the faith to stand and keep watch for the vision of God to come. His name was the prophet Habakkuk. And this was his lament and his assurance (read Habakkuk 1: 1-4 and 2: 1-3).

Oh wait! There was one more. Didn't a man named Jesus know the depth of weeping, wailing, complaining and lamenting? And didn't Jesus know the height of celebration, joy, new life, healing, and hope? It seems the One who moved from cross to empty tomb, from Good Friday to Easter, would have known this. And he still knows each and every one of you today.

APPENDIX H

“ELI: LAMENT DISPLACED”

A Sermon on 1st Samuel 3: 1-20

January 15th, 2012

Rev. Michael Brooks

Old Eli the priest is tired. Perhaps it's been a busy time in the temple. Perhaps he's still recovering from leading all those special Festival services. The first few weeks of January can be like that for worship leaders.

But, it seems Eli's feelings go deeper than the reality of being tired. Life, for Eli, is changing, and not necessarily for the better. He has lived, for a time, being disappointed in his two sons who were scoundrels, with no regard for God or for their own duties in the temple (1 Sam 2:12). They were embarrassing for Eli. They slept around. They misused and abused the offerings that people brought to the temple. God was not happy with them, and God let Eli know. The sons would be punished. Eli would be the only one to live into old age, but would suffer – to “weep out his eyes, and grieve his heart.” (1 Sam 2:33). Surely, Eli lamented the disappointment of his two sons, and his failure to instill faithfulness in his own flesh and blood.

Eli had other causes for lament. His eyesight was growing dim. Then Samuel finally recognizes God's call and, well, Eli might be lamenting the fact that it had long been his ministry. He had been, and still was the chief priest in the temple, but now this young boy Samuel was catching God's attention. Eli had served well, but it was time for new leadership. Oh, he surely lamented his loss of place and of purpose, his loss of role. It's tough for ministers to sit in the pew.

It's true, Eli's wisdom and experience eventually does help Samuel recognize God's call. But surely Eli has a lot to lament in the process. And not only does he have a lot to lament, but Samuel has mostly overshadowed him and become the subject of the story. Perhaps Eli feels he will be marginalized, perhaps even forgotten.

Surely we can relate to Eli's lament. Perhaps our own loss of eyesight, or hearing, or ability has happened gradually over time, but, looking back, we lament what we used to be able to do, how we used to be able to see, to hear, to get around. Oh, how we'd love to don a pair of hockey skates and help out the Leafs, that they might have some chance of winning a Stanley Cup before we're gone. But truthfully, wouldn't life be great if all we had to lament was the fate of the Leafs?

Perhaps we lament the behaviour of our children – perhaps not to the extent that Eli might have, but those who have not lived up to expectations, those who mis-use what they have. Perhaps we've tried to share with them the privilege we've known. They've had good education. They grew up in a nice neighbourhood. They wore nice clothing. But it hasn't panned out as we had hoped.

APPENDIX H (continued)

Perhaps we lament that others, the younger ones, are now the focus. There is the reality of Norman who has worked for over 30 years for a marketing company. He is nearing retirement and realizes increasingly that the younger ones would prefer he get out because they know the latest, the best, the fastest, the most efficient ways. The workplace has been completely converted to open concept. Norm no longer has his own private space, just a 1-foot by 2-foot locker in which to hang his coat. He's supposed to be interacting with people all day long – grabbing a Starbucks and moving about from table to table. Oh, he laments the loss of his office and his desk and the door he could close. Oh, he laments how things have changed.

Perhaps we're lamenting our inability to keep up with technology – of having to rely on others to help us out. We realized our lament when our grandchildren opened their Christmas gifts and had to tell us what it was they were opening, let alone how to use it.

And not only might we relate to Eli's reality. But we also might relate to the fact that Eli's lament is displaced. The story is not really told from his perspective. And the story is rarely heard from his perspective. He is a secondary character who likely was once primary. Lament can be displaced.

I've been exploring some places and uses of lament in recent months. Last Sunday, September 11th, we as a community, in our service, lamented the place in which we now dwell communally – all the things that have changed since so-called 9/11. Then, last October 30th, we lifted up many things that individuals lament in life, as those who had lost loved ones in the past year gathered for worship. So often, this lament is born out of loss, out of tragedy, out of grief. Today, we recognize that lament can also take place apart from any obvious tragedy or loss.

You might be wondering, why on earth bother with any of this? Why not choose something more positive on which to focus, on which to preach? It's a downer. Why? Because, quite simply, the reality is, there is no way around it. Lament, and the need for lament, is a reality. It can give voice to many of the inevitable experiences of life.

Lament is a form – a container to hold feelings, a way to express ourselves. It is a biblical form of expression. Several books of the Bible are mostly lament, including, obviously, the Book of Lamentations, prophecies such as Jeremiah and Habakkuk, and a significant number of Psalms.

But beyond the obvious presence of lament in the Bible, we can ask if the form – the genre – of lament can be used as a means of expression more generally. Are there people who lament, but who are not the obvious subject of the story? Can lament be displaced?

I suggest that this is indeed the case. The reality is that, most often, the stories of the ones who have cause to lament are rarely told. They are, like Eli, secondary characters. They are the ones off in the corners, because we tend to suppress what is uncomfortable – the “downers.”

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Someone in the church family recently shared her memory of an Easter Sunday service. This person had lost her mother a few weeks prior. And here she was, in the Easter service, surrounded by smiling faces, bright-coloured flowers and glorious music. She had wanted to come to the service to be surrounded by the love of her church family. But once she sat down in the back corner pew, she felt like going home. There was no place for her. There was no place for her lament. It seemed so displaced. Perhaps she should have come on Good Friday, when at least people pretend not to be overly joyful.

But then, during one of those rousing Easter hymns, she happened to look over to the other side of the church. And standing there, holding a hymnbook, singing joyfully, was a man she knew had lost his daughter earlier that year. And the woman said to herself, “If he can sing those Easter hymns at this time, well, so can I.” They proved to be comforting and healing. But more, the experience opened the door for her own lament, and enabled her to share it after the service with many others. Hearing about the hope of the risen and rising Christ gave her space to express her lament.

And so if the church family, from time to time, cannot make a place for lament, then where else is such a place to be found? It was an article in *The United Church Observer* last spring that spurred my interest in this whole topic of preaching and lament. The article explored contemporary funeral practices, and the trend towards naming them “celebrations of life.” Life is indeed a gift to be celebrated. But so often, the ending of life results in change, in loss. And, perhaps, lament is God’s gift to help express that. Perhaps, lament is the means by which we can work toward healing, to letting God create a place where, eventually, hope can be re-born.

After all, it’s in the Bible. The biblical witness contains the full range of emotional and spiritual expression. Sprinkled throughout the Bible are the laments of those who have experienced severe change and deep loss. And included in that witness are the Eli’s – those who have much to lament, but who may well feel there is no place for their lament – that it isn’t really part of the story, that it is displaced.

The full range of human spiritual and emotional expression of those who have gone before us in faith reminds us of the presence of a loving, laughing, lamenting God who has made us in Her image. And this loving, laughing, lamenting God has made us in His image, that we might be freed to live out and express the full range of our humanity – a humanity that laughs at life’s humour, a humanity that weeps at life’s sadness, a humanity that laments life’s changes and losses.

But it’s not just God who is close at hand when we lament. No. There are even times when Jesus himself got involved with lament. There is even a time in this season of Epiphany. The wise ones have brought their gifts, and then they leave. And an angel appears to Joseph in a dream to warn him to avoid the wrath of Herod. And so Joseph and Mary and the Christ child flee to Egypt. Meanwhile, Herod recognizes he has been tricked. In his rage, he orders all boys under two in and around Bethlehem to be killed.

APPENDIX H (continued)

And as with so many losses, there is much to lament. It's right in the story: "Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel (one of the mothers) weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled – she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'" (Matt 2:17-18). She, and so many others, lamented.

Jesus, the Christ, is born into a world that needs to lament. And in this season of Epiphany – in this season of basking in God's light and love, we remember that Christ, the Word, became human, became flesh, and dwells among us, full of all God's grace and truth.