



June 2, 2020

Lament -- After All, God Can Take It

By the Rev. J. Randolph Alexander, Jr.

We Christians are not particularly good at something our ancient Jewish forebears practiced so well – the naming and praying of our laments, our deep sorrows, and our regrets. The Psalmists knew how to do this. In fact, some of the Psalms are largely about lament. They speak of the community's sense of God having abandoned them; they name their fears and suffering; and they implore God's help. Here are a few examples of many:

"For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh. The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. Turn, O Lord! How long? Have compassion on your servants! Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil." (Psalm 90, verses 9,10,13-15).

"O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears; and given them tears to drink in full measure. You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves. Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved." (Psalm 80, verses 4-7).

I rely on St. Paul's exhortation in Philippians 4:4 as much as anyone to "Rejoice, and again I will say rejoice!" But I wonder if, in all of that encouragement and rejoicing, we have forgotten the invitation to offer all that we are *REALLY* feeling to God, knowing that God can take it. This is part of the message, and perhaps the *grace*, of the Psalms and hymns of lament. Some others are Psalms 44, 60, and 74.

Maybe we need to learn more about lament during this time. Maybe we need to try offering to God our fears, our frustrations, our anger, maybe even our anger towards God. Maybe we will find some relief and refreshment and grace in that honesty. And maybe, just maybe, our relationship with God will become more real and more central to who we are. After all, God can take it.

Monday, June 1, was A National Day of Mourning and Lament in recognition of the more than 100,000 American lives that have been lost to the coronavirus. It is a time to remember, to honor, to mourn, and to

cry out to God. We might add to that national lament mourning for what has been called our nation's original sin, racism.

Our lament and mourning grows for what happened on the streets of Minneapolis in the senseless murder of George Floyd by a police officer, and the chorus swells further as we see senseless destruction of businesses and neighborhoods by rioters and looters. We might well say, "How long, O Lord?" When will we ever learn? Do not give up on us, O God! Come speedily to our aid! Teach us to mourn our sins and to accept the new life You offer!

I offer you a piece of music from Karl Jenkins' Mass called "The Armed Man: A Mass for Peace." I first encountered this music several years ago when preaching at the funeral of a young man who had been in the youth group in my first parish. I found it soulful, honest, and profound. While I am not sure the composer has labeled it as a lament, I hear it powerfully as such. Jenkins wrote it in commemoration of peace for the Bosnian War, and this section, the *Benedictus*, is perhaps the heart of the piece. It features, in Latin, the words we know so well: *Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini. Hosanna!* "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna!"

I invite you to give yourself the gift of listening to this music. Move with it, pray with it, let it wash over you. Note how, even in the midst of profound emotion, we hear the words, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," and even "Hosanna," and then it returns to the serene and haunting quiet.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zc1Zoz-NUro>