

Lamenting the Loss of Laments

Psalm 39

Sermon by Richard A. Kauffman

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TO THE LEADER: TO JEDUTHUN. A PSALM OF DAVID.

1 I said, "I will guard my ways
that I may not sin with my tongue;
I will keep a muzzle on my mouth
as long as the wicked are in my presence."

2 I was silent and still;
I held my peace to no avail;
my distress grew worse,

3 my heart became hot within me.
While I mused, the fire burned;
then I spoke with my tongue:

4 "LORD, let me know my end,
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting my life is.

5 You have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight.
Surely everyone stands as a mere breath.
Selah

6 Surely everyone goes about like a shadow.
Surely for nothing they are in turmoil;
they heap up, and do not know who will gather.

7 "And now, O Lord, what do I wait for?
My hope is in you.

8 Deliver me from all my transgressions.
Do not make me the scorn of the fool.

9 I am silent; I do not open my mouth,
for it is you who have done it.

10 Remove your stroke from me;
I am worn down by the blows of your hand.

11 "You chastise mortals
in punishment for sin,
consuming like a moth what is dear to them;
surely everyone is a mere breath.
Selah

12 "Hear my prayer, O LORD,
and give ear to my cry;
do not hold your peace at my tears.
For I am your passing guest,
an alien, like all my forebears.

13 Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile
again,
before I depart and am no more."

--NRSV

*Key word in Hebrew appears twice in this Psalm: Hebel/hevel, means vapor, mist, or breath; in some contexts, can mean futility. This word appears 38 times in Ecclesiastes that in some translations uses the misleading word vanity.

Twice in my life I've had to face my mortality: At 15 I was in a serious car accident in which I could well have been killed. Then, at the ripe age of 50 I had open heart surgery. After this last incident I had a need to talk about my mortality, but I had difficulty finding people who were

willing to have conversations with me about death. Men of my age were especially resistant to it.

Then I learned about a retreat devoted to discussing the writings on death by Henri Nouwen, to be held at the Hermitage north of here in Michigan. I went to that retreat, and it turned out to be just what I needed.

One of the participants—not a leader—was a very wise, young hospice worker. Every time she opened her mouth, wisdom flowed out. She may have naturally been wise; or she may have come from a wise family. It's the old nature-nurture debate, take your pick. But I figured that being around people all the time who were dying, knew they were dying, and weren't playing any more games about life and death might also have made her wise.

Psalm 39, our text for the morning, is a lament. In essence, the Psalmist is complaining to God that life is way too short, and he's not very happy about it. That's one way to deal with our mortality: lament it. The other way, not mutually exclusive, is to make the most of the life we have.

Some things to note about this Psalm: Notice the movement from silence to speech, back to silence, and then speech again. The first silence, vs 1-2, is particularly intriguing: the Psalmist seems to fear opening his trap lest he say something he would regret. Maybe he was afraid he would offend God by his honest thoughts. But his feelings well up within him and he can't remain silent anymore.

When he opens his mouth and confronts God, his speech is almost Job-like in its intensity and passion. He has something on his mind, and he has to let it out. His realism about the brevity of life has echoes of the book of Ecclesiastes. In fact, Ellen Davis, a respected OT scholar, speculates that the whole book of Ecclesiastes is an exposition of Ps 39:4-6.

A key word in this Psalm in the Hebrew is *hebel/hevel*. It can mean breath, mist, or vapor. It suggests something fleeting, insubstantial, ephemeral, without much substance. This word is used twice here, right before the 2 Selahs, and is translated as **mere breath**.

Hebel is also the key word in the book of Ecclesiastes, by the way, where it appears 38 times. In some translations it is misleadingly translated as *vanity*. Every time you see vanity in Ecclesiastes, replace it with breath, mist or vapor. Life is like a puff of smoke, which vanishes momentarily.

Back to Psalm 39: Lest there be any doubt that the Psalmist's subject matter is death, he uses numerous words, phrases, and metaphors in this passage that stand for death or mortality:

- my end,
- the measure of my days (God, how long will I live?),
- fleeting,
- a few handbreaths,

- nothing in your sight,
- like a moth,
- passing guest, an alien,
- and, of course, the two instances of mere breath.

When the Psalmist asks about the measure of his days, he's really asking, How long will I live? How much more time do I have here on earth? Psalm 90 actually has a formula for the longevity of life: "The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong" (Ps. 90:10a)—the three-score and ten, plus 10 if we're lucky.

Life expectancy in U.S. is in this 70-80 year range—77.8 years before COVID. It has gone down since then, especially for people of color. And there are many places in the world where life expectancy is much less than the American average.

My father lived to 91. Both of his parents died at relatively young ages, especially his mother. I asked him several times if he expected to live that long. Each time he said no. Then I'd tease him about exceeding the biblical span of 70 years plus ten bonus years. He'd just grin at that.

St. Benedict said, "Remember every day, you will die." We don't know when; but we know we will die, although sometimes we're inclined to think we're going to get out of this world alive.

Many older churches have cemeteries within sight of their church building. When you go to those churches and see those cemeteries you are reminded of the saints who have gone before you; and you're given a chance to contemplate your own demise. I lament the loss of that visual lesson in many newer churches that don't have their own cemetery. Maybe a memorial garden will restore the chance here at Berkey to be reminded of the saints who have gone before and anticipate the time when we will join them.

I don't want to just leave you with thoughts about death, however important that is. There's another take-away here having to do with laments in the Psalms.

I assume many of you know that the two main types of Psalms are laments and hymns of praise or thanksgiving. We seem to like the hymns of praise more than those of lament. Laments are seldom used in lectionary readings, perhaps because many of them make us feel uncomfortable in worship. But there are many more laments in Psalms than hymns of praise. This is especially true of the first half of Psalms.

But here are two important things to note: One, Psalms as a whole seems to move from lament to praise; there's a preponderance of laments in the first half of the book, and a preponderance of praise hymns in the latter part.

And two, most of the lament Psalms themselves move from lament to praise. Although it's not true of Ps 39 or Ps 88, there is an inflection point in the other laments where lament turns into

praise and thanksgiving. It's as though expressing a lament to God opens up a place for praise and thanksgiving.

Walter Brueggemann is probably the most consequential biblical theologian and OT scholar of the last generation. He has some significant observations on lamenting the loss of laments in Christian faith.

He notes that our covenant relationship with God is two-sided; as a covenant partner, we need to speak up, even to God, to let God know how we're really feeling. It's the only way to have an authentic relationship with God.

When we block off a part of ourselves in our relationship with others, the relationship ends up becoming more shallow and inauthentic. Think how we sometimes avoid controversial topics with family members or friends and neighbors—say theology or politics. Or we avoid conflict with a spouse or other family member. Cutting off a significant part of ourselves diminishes our relationship with significant others.

The same goes for our relationship with God. Keeping our pain, anger and regret from God leads to a more shallow relationship with God.

It's OK to tell God we're hurting or angry or sad. It's even ok to let God know we have a beef with God. It's OK to ask God to step up and do God's work of recreating and healing God's creation.

We don't always get what we ask for, but asking God to do get rid of the source of our pain, suffering and sorrow can have the effect of helping come to terms with reality as it is. We can change, even if the situation doesn't.

Another point about laments, according to Brueggemann, is that many of them are about justice. They lament injustice and cry for justice. Avoiding laments in the Bible, especially the Psalms, dulls and diminishes the church's justice ministry.

During the first year of COVID I kept telling myself that I can endure this. After all, although I crave interaction with others, I'm an introvert. Besides, I have an active thought life and I like to read, bike, and listen to music, all things that I could do even during COVID.

After I got vaccinated and things started to open up, I had another thought: it seemed as though I had lost a whole year to COVID; and at my age, I don't have many more years to give up. Some resentment swelled up in me.

How selfish was that perspective!

- I didn't get COVID.
- No one in my extended family got it.

- In fact, no one close to me got seriously ill or died from COVID.
- Furthermore, I didn't have to be on the frontline of the pandemic. I could safely stay at home.
- And depending on mostly retirement sources of income meant I wasn't disadvantaged economically by it.

I'm aware, though, there's an accumulation of grief and suffering and trauma from this past year and a half. Think of all the people who died whose loved ones couldn't observe a proper funeral or memorial service to communally and publicly deal with their losses. There's a backlog of grief, pent-up grief, trauma, even. We have two options: to deal with it; or not. One way of dealing with it is to deliberately and self-consciously lament our losses and pain. Now, more than ever, we need laments.

Here's a suggestion for us as a congregation: I suggest we intentionally enter into a period of lamenting our losses from the pandemic, and sharing our stories about how we coped with COVID—or didn't cope.

What about it: what would you have to share about your COVID experience? What would you want to lament? What do you have to get off your chest?

Rest assured: God can handle our laments. What's holding us back? What will it take to move us, like the Psalmist, from silence to speech?