

Is Nothing Lamentable?

One Way to Pray With Angry Feelings

In the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* catechism on pages 856-7 the principal kinds of prayer are listed and described: adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, intercession and petition. But what about lamentation? A lament mourns a loss or calamity. Is life so rosy for the *BCP* writers or for Episcopalians that they see nothing lamentable in the world? Why has this type of prayer, so prominent in the psalms, been neglected? It has a part in a healthy and well balanced prayer life, for individuals and communities. There is so much injustice in the world, and so much sin, sickness and sorrow, that of course it is lamentable.

Many people think that feeling the emotion of anger is a sin, although it isn't. Others wonder how to pray in or with or about anger or despair. One way to deal with anger in prayer is to use a lamentation format. Sometimes people are relieved to learn that this has extensive biblical precedent and authority.

There are many things to lament, and you might want to write a lament following the pattern in the Psalter or in the book of Lamentations in the Hebrew Bible. Biblical laments complain to God about a problem and beg for relief. They hold God accountable. The speaker may be an individual, or may represent a community. For examples of laments see psalms 3, 6, 7, 13, 22, 35, 57, 71, and 90.

Ancient Israelites knew laments from the sacred poetry of their Near Eastern neighbors. A lament typically begins by addressing the god. While Babylonian laments often expanded this section with praise and descriptions of the one addressed, Biblical laments often shorten this to, "My God" (see Psalm 22:1). Next comes a description of the suffering suppliant(s), as in Psalm 88:3-5, detailing how they are affected, and sometimes protesting their innocence. Then comes a description of the wickedness of the enemies responsible, and vengeance may be called for.

The lamenter assumes that God is not acting in an arbitrary fashion but is ultimately in control of events. But why have serious problems been allowed to arise and persist? Is God asleep on the job? When is justice going to get done? The next section typically addresses God's negligence. God may be asked, "How much longer?" or "What are you up to?" Examples are Psalms 22:1-2, 6:3, and 13:1-2.

Finally, there is usually a petition and vow, perhaps, "Rescue me and I'll praise you." The biblical book of Lamentations omits praise, maybe because the people were too devastated by war and deportation. Hope of relief and expectation of deliverance are at least implicit in most laments. Sometimes God inspires the lamenter, even in the midst of lamentation, to some action ameliorating or moving to correct or avoid the problematic

situation, if not for themselves, then for others. In such cases the focused feelings of anger and pain and outrage, honestly directed at God, have not only cleared the air, but have energized the person or people praying to action suitable to their gifts and circumstances. This is no criticism of others who do not have the same energy or gifts or circumstances or calling.

In my experience lamentations can be very useful both in one's private devotions and in the public liturgy, whether or not one follows the traditional pattern or structure. The many subjects I have written and prayed lamentations about include the actions (and inactions) of our federal government, the state of liturgical sexism in the Episcopal Church, and the placid acceptance of personal and institutional racism in America.

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