

Call to Worship: Psalm 13

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I take counsel in my soul

and have sorrow in my heart all the day?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God;

light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,

lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him,"

lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

But I have trusted in your steadfast love;

my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the Lord,

because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Opening Song: "Precious Lord, Take My Hand"

Precious Lord, Take My Hand 102

I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand. Isaiah 41:13

1. Pre - cious Lord, take my hand, Lead me on, help me stand. I am
2. When my way grows drear, Pre - cious Lord, lin - ger near - When my
3. When the dark - ness ap - pears And the night draws near, And the

tired, I am weak, I ' am worn. Thro' the storm, thro' the night, Lead me
life is al - most gone. Hear my cry, hear my call, Hold my
day is past and gone, At the riv - er I stand; Guide my

on to the light. Take my hand, pre - cious Lord; lead me home.
hand lest I fall. Take my hand, pre - cious Lord; lead me home.
feet, hold my hand. Take my hand, pre - cious Lord; lead me home.

WORDS: Thomas A. Dorsey, 1938

MUSIC: George N. Allen, 1812-1877; arr. by Thomas A. Dorsey, 1938

PRECIOUS LORD

6.6.9.D.

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First Reading: Nehemiah 1

The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.

Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."

As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said, "O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.' They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man."

Now I was cupbearer to the king.

Second Reading: Excerpts from Matthew 2: 1-18 (1-3a, 8, 9b, 11-13, 13b, 16-18)

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;

And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."

the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.

And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

"A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted,
because they are no more."

12/27/20 Sermon: Lament & Blessing

Stephen R. Clark

Huntingdon Valley Presbyterian Church

"Precious Lord, take my hand, Lead me on, help me stand. I am tired, I am weak, I am worn."

I'm guessing most of us can relate to this sentiment.

This is a song of lament.

Our Director of Traditional Music, Bernie McGorrey, pointed me to the story behind the writing of this song.

Thomas Andrew Dorsey was a black jazz and gospel musician born in Georgia in 1899. In 1923, he and his wife, Nettie, lived on the south side of Chicago. He left her alone, about to give birth, to go sing at an engagement in St Louis as the featured soloist. While there, he received a telegram that stated bluntly, YOUR WIFE JUST DIED.

He rushed back to Chicago to learn that she'd died in childbirth. The night he got back, his baby boy died as well.

He wrote, "I buried Nettie and our little boy together, in the same casket. Then I fell apart. For days I closeted myself. I felt that God had done me an injustice. I didn't want to serve Him anymore or write gospel songs."

As part of his mourning process, he eventually wrote "Precious Lord." A song that has been recorded by Elvis Presley, Mahalia Jackson, Beyonce, and many others. It is said to have been Martin Luther King's favorite song.

Dorsey was the first African American elected to the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame and the Gospel Music Association's Living Hall of Fame.

The second verse declares, "When my way grows drear, Precious Lord linger near, When my light is almost gone, Hear my cry, Hear my call, Hold my hand, Lest I fall, Take my hand Precious Lord, lead me on."

This is the cry of a broken heart desperately seeking God. It is lament.

For as often as I've encountered the word in articles I've read this year, I think "lament" should be the word of the year. It fits, even though I'm not sure it's something most of us are really familiar with. But we should be!

The Bible is full of lament, including the New Testament. Many, if not most, of the Psalms are laments. The books of the prophets, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, are loaded with lament. And there's one entire book of lament, called appropriately, Lamentations.

In the New Testament, one of the more notable laments by Jesus shows up in Luke 13 and Matthew 23, and quotes from Psalm 118. In Matthew, Jesus exclaims, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

And the one I just read that is part of the full Christmas story, a part we often skip over, bewailing the murder of the innocents in Matthew 2 and quoting Jeremiah 31:15: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more." This is a hard, bitter lament.

If you've been following our blog, *Gleanings*, on our church website, you may have caught that both Sue Belinsky and I wrote COVID-19-related posts referring to Psalm 13 where David cries out, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?"

Psalm 13 is a good model for a prayer of lament.

So what is lament? Michael Card, singer, songwriter, and author, says, "We were created to live with God in a garden, yet we wake every morning in the desert of a fallen world."

He goes on saying, "Think of lament as an essential ingredient of honest faith. It's the deep sense that something is wrong, whether with yourself or the world."

Why is this important? Because, Card concludes, "Until we learn to lament, we have nothing to say to most of the world."

The dictionary defines lament as "a passionate expression of grief or sorrow." Suggested synonyms include weeping, wailing, moaning, sobbing.

Perhaps this brings to mind Romans 8:22 that reads in the King James Version, "For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now." This is a lament.

This verse points to another word we should look at, travail. It means to "engage in painful or laborious effort."

Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before his death, travailed in prayer to the point of sweating blood.

For me, one image that comes to mind is, what we called in my church back home, the altar services. At the end of the Sunday evening sermon, the pastor invited everyone to come to the altar for a time of corporate prayer. Women were on one side, the men on the other. They kneeled at the altar, along the front row of seats, or just on the floor in whatever space they could find. And then they prayed. Out loud and with intensity and sincerity. A common focus of prayer was for friends and family members who did not know Jesus, who were lost.

Very simply, they travailed in prayers of lament.

Lament is a response to something painful, an injustice, a broken heart, illness, death, that pulls from the depths of our being sorrow, confusion, anger, neediness, helplessness. It is a process, prompted by the Holy Spirit, of laying our lives before the Lord, of yielding any illusion of control over our circumstances, of being helpless and transparent. It resets our spirits and refocuses us on God's sovereignty. It leads us to the throne of Grace where we look up with tears and say, "Papa, I need you."

We lament to clear the way for healing and restoration. Lament is vital and necessary to a healthy spiritual life.

Jesus promised in Matthew 5:4, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." But before blessing, there must be mourning, as David declares in Psalm 30:5, "[First] Weeping may tarry for the night, but [then] joy comes with the morning." This order is reinforced by David's son, Solomon, in Ecclesiastes 3:1 and 4, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...a time [first] to weep, and [then] a time to laugh; a time [first] to mourn, and [then] a time to dance..."

Our tendency, however, is to either skip or severely minimize the mourning and move as quickly as possible to the laughing and dancing parts.

A good example of how we tend to avoid lament comes from a story Rebekah Bramer shared about her daughter, Annie Laurie. Annie Laurie was playing outside barefoot this past summer. Needless to say, as is typical with kids, her feet got pretty dirty. She also suffered a minor injury, a small cut on her foot.

She came into the house and asked her mom to put a band-aid on the cut. Rebekah, as any wise mother would, said that first they needed to wash Annie's feet and clean the wound. Then they could put on a band-aid. Annie Laurie said, "No! Just put a band-aid on it." Her focus was getting back outside as quickly as possible to resume her fun. Taking the time to clean and dress the wound properly, while necessary, was not fun. It was a bother.

Her mom understood that without taking the time to clean the wound it could become infected, and this small problem could become a large issue.

Lament, in a sense, is the process of cleaning our wounds and applying spiritual antiseptic. But even more than that, it's an opportunity to take stock of what's happening. To assess our role. To examine what might need to change in our lives and hearts.

Years ago, after going through an intensely painful experience, all I wanted was to feel better. To end the pain and move on. But my very wise therapist said, "No, you need to sit in your pain for awhile." She explained that for true healing and growth to occur I needed to pay attention to the pain, understand how I was hurting and why, and be very honest as to my own culpability in the situation. Yes, I'd been "done wrong" for sure, but, she explained, I wasn't totally innocent either. I needed to work through a process of lament, acknowledge my anger and frustration, place myself more fully in God's hands, and let go of any thought of retaliation before I could fully move on in blessing and health.

This tendency to jump directly over the pain to joy, by the way, has a theological label: Triumphalism. It means that we tend to focus on the Christian life being one of glory while downplaying or avoiding that it also entails suffering. It tends to miss that glory is born from suffering. It's not either or, but rather both and.

What I've also learned, and is thoroughly revealed in God's word, is that lament isn't a once and done thing. Which should be obvious since I think most of understand that as a fellowship of sinners, we mess up daily.

Smack dab in the middle of the book of Lamentations, we come to chapter 3 verses 22 and 23 that declare, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." His mercies are new every morning because we need them every morning after we have lamented through the night over our failings of the previous day.

Last year, we went through a period of fasting and prayer as we considered our current situation as a church. Instead of growing, we were shrinking. Instead of focusing outward into the community, we had become focused inward on our own comfort. Instead of having hearts broken for the lost around us, we have been somewhat indifferent toward our community.

To counter this, we decided to pursue a relationship with the EPC's church revitalization effort called the GO Project. Dr. Ken Priddy, who has been with us a few times, is the head of that organization. Through years of experience, he has developed a paradigm shifting process to help churches recapture their first love. To help us regain a proper focus and desire to reach out, to share the gospel, to foster healthy growth.

To drive this effort here at HVPC, Session appointed a six-member team called the GO Project Vision Team. Members are myself, Pastor Dan, Rebekah Bramer, Noel Wolfe, Christie Bruce, and Jon Haines.

As we have begun diving into the GO Project process, trying to discern how God wants us to join him in ministry here in Huntingdon Valley, we perceived that we were being called to lament. That we, as individuals and as a church, need to lament our failings that have led us to our need to call in the GO Project people.

To help us do this, we have developed a document, a study guide on the topic of Lament. Copies are available in the back of the sanctuary and online as a downloadable PDF. [Anyone watching online who wants a printed copy, email me or call the church office and I'll send you one.]

What we would ask is that you, on your own or with a couple of friends, work through the study guide. Prayerfully answer the questions and then add into your normal spiritual disciplines a regular time of lament. We would also like to see our small groups, committees, and ministry teams take the time to work through the study guide together.

Once you've gone through the study, share your experience. Send Pastor Dan or me an email. Perhaps we can include your experience in a blog post or in the bulletin. Perhaps you could stand up here and share your testimony of lament with us. At any rate, we do want to know how the Holy Spirit reshapes you as you intentionally enter into worshipful lament.

Okay, that's the commercial message. Let's get back to our regularly scheduled program and keep looking at lament and its various components and expressions.

After reading several books on lament and looking at lament in the Bible, I've discerned these four overlapping categories or levels or triggers of lament:

Environmental Lament - This is lamenting over what insurance companies call "acts of God," even though that's not always accurate. Our current pandemic would fall here. The recent fires out west or the hurricanes down south and devastating earthquakes around the globe are examples. These are those tragic events and challenges over which we have no control that are imposed on us by the vagaries of a fallen nature.

Cultural Lament - This is lament that addresses the wrongs we see around us in our society. It is grieving over injustice, racism, abortion, gun violence, poverty, political malfeasance, national idolatry, and so much more. It calls to account our world, our nation, the community we live in for its sins.

Corporate Lament - This is lament that comes closer to home. It would entail the collective lament of this church, or say, of any group or organization. Wouldn't it be great to see the members of the House or Senate on their knees lamenting over their failures and misdeeds?

Personal Lament - And now we get to our own hearts. This is lament over our sinfulness. The wrongs we've done to others, to ourselves. And lament for the wrongs done to us by others. It includes lament for personal failure, for damaged relationships, for our culpability in the sins of our communities, our church, and our culture. And even for our failures to properly respond to those in need suffering from environmental disasters.

We can see most of these triggers of lament at play in the first chapter of Nehemiah.

The Jews had been in exile for seventy years in Babylon because they were conquered by the Babylonians. Later the Babylonians were overthrown by Cyrus who releases the Jews to return to a destroyed Jerusalem. While the Jews had been taken captive as a form of punishment from God, that kingdoms regularly conquered other kingdoms was a cultural component of that time and place.

The corporate lament piece is interesting in that Nehemiah laments on behalf of the nation of Israel. In verse 6 he confesses "the sins of the people of Israel" to God on their behalf. Later in the book as described in chapter 9, the people do take up the lament on their own. But the impetus for that eventual unified lament is seeded here by Nehemiah.

Then he steps up and takes responsibility for his part in the failings of Israel, saying, "Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments."

In verse 11, he wraps it up, again with both corporate and personal elements, saying, "O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name."

All in all it's a remarkable example of Lament. In these few verses, Nehemiah...

- Acknowledges and honors the faithfulness of God (v. 5)
- Seeks humbly the attention of God (v. 6a)
- Confesses the sins of the people (v. 6b - 7)
- Reminds God of his promises to his people (v. 8-9)
- Reminds God who his people are (v. 10)
- Requests the acceptance of the prayer of his people (v. 11)
- Asks for mercy and an answer to the prayer of his people (v. 12)

This is a good model for a prayer of lament. Another good model, as I mentioned, is Psalm 13. For seven years, David has been on the run from Saul and his death threats. In this Psalm, he lays out before God his pain and frustration.

First, David addresses God directly and provides the overarching theme of his lament. This is a sort of mini invocation:

“How long, O Lord?”

Next David lays out the specifics of his complaint, or the nature of his lament. He explains why he is lamenting

“Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?”

Now David moves into petition, a plea, seeking an answer from God:

“Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, ‘I have prevailed over him,’ lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.”

David declares his trust in God, reminding God of his faithfulness:

“But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.”

David concludes on a note of praise, a benediction of adoration:

“I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.”

Nehemiah 1 and Psalm 13 are only two examples of lament that can serve as models for us as we enter into lament. The key, though, to any lament, is to honestly lay out your hurt before the Lord and place yourself fully in his care.

Lament is an essential spiritual discipline. It is only through lament that we can find complete healing. And it is lament that drives us more fully into the will of God and energizes us with the power of the Holy Spirit. Before blessing comes, there must be lament.

But there will be blessing!

We will be closing out our service by singing a powerful song titled "The Blessing."

The song is rooted in several scriptures, such as Numbers 6:24-26 that reads, "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace."

And Deuteronomy 7:9, "Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations..."

And Psalm 121:8, "The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore."

And Colossians 1:17, "And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

And Romans 8:31, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?"

The verses are punctuated with a refrain repeating the word, "Amen." It's a Hebrew word that means, *it is so, so be it, certainly, truly*. Think of it as a seal of certainty on what has been stated.

It is knowing that the blessings of God, the promises of God are certain, that he is with us and for us, that we can be free to fully embrace the process of lament. To enter into deep sorrow that will yield great joy.

At the end of this very crazy year, let us lean into lament. Take our heartbreak, frustrations, sorrows, anger, and more, and give it all over to God. Allow lament to lead us to the throne of Grace where we can look up with tears and say, "Papa, I need you."

Let us examine ourselves and ask the Holy Spirit to truly reveal what needs to be healed and what needs to be changed in us. What we need to let go of and what we need to embrace. What we need to confess and what we need to declare.

Let us trust in the endless love of God and the overwhelming grace of God, knowing that in all things, at all times, he is for us, he is for us, he is for us. And because of this, lament is a safe and necessary thing we must do.

Let's pray

[PRAYER] A Prayer of Lament

O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear our prayer.

We are tired. We are worn. We are weary.

How long O Lord? How long?

How long must we endure the ravages of this pandemic? We cry for mercy. Remember us and those we have lost over these past months. Our hearts break for those who have suffered and are suffering. We grieve with those in pain.

Give rest to those who are laboring to bring healing and comfort to the afflicted. Give speed to the distribution of the vaccines. Give relief to us all. Deliver us from this evil.

How long must we witness injustice in our society? How many more George Floyds, Breonna Taylors, Elijah McCains, Casey Goodsons, Andre Hills, and so many others? How many more of our black brothers and sisters must die senselessly?

Give peace to those families left behind. Raise up justice on behalf of those lost. Convict us for our silence. Deliver us from our indifference.

How long must we witness the death and exploitation of innocents? How many more unborn must die for the convenience of our society? How many more children must be lured into being trafficked and abused?

Give wisdom to our lawmakers as they seek to change abortion laws. Stir the hearts of those considering abortion and draw them to others who can provide them with better alternatives. Give success to law enforcement as they seek to rescue young men and women who have been entrapped and bring to justice those who are abusing them.

Lord, bring relief to the lonely, the depressed, the angry, the hurt, the helpless, the forlorn, the downtrodden. Lift up those who have been cast down. Minister mercy to those who have been victimized. Provide escape and freedom for those in bondage, whatever form that bondage takes.

How long O Lord will we remain complacent, ignoring the lost and focusing instead on our own needs, our own comfort? How much longer will we ignore the needs of those around us in our community? How much longer will we withhold the Good News of your salvation from those who are lost?

Break through our lack of urgency for the lost. Break our hearts as your heart breaks for those who need you. Open our eyes to see as you see. Open our hearts to love as you love.

We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the full counsel of your word.

Forgive us for being impatient. For speaking ungraciously. For seeking our own interests above others. For being short-tempered. For thinking more highly of ourselves than we should. For withholding mercy from others. Forgive us for failing to live up to your image in us. Cleanse us, O Lord, from all unrighteousness.

Remember your promise that though our sins be as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are as red as crimson, they will become like wool. If we learn to do right. If we seek justice. If we correct the oppressor. If we defend the fatherless. If we plead the case of the widow. If we are willing and obedient. If we bend our wills to your will. If we repent and seek your face. If we will turn to you repentant and humble, you will relent and rescue us from all our troubles.

Forgive us, redeem us, empower us to serve you better. To serve you more energetically. To always be driven to bring you glory in all we do and are.

O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name. Grant us mercy. Restore us, O Lord.

Our Creator, loving Father in heaven, we are your humble servants and give you glory and honor. Hear our prayer.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Closing Song: "The Blessing"

The Lord bless you	May his presence
And keep you	Go before you
Make his face shine upon	And behind you
you	And beside you
And be gracious to you	All around you
The Lord turn his	And within you
Face toward you	He is with you
And give you peace	He is with you
Amen	In the morning
Amen	In the evening
Amen	In your coming
	And your going
May his favor	In your weeping
Be upon you	And rejoicing
And a thousand generations	He is for you
And your family	He is for you
And your children	
And their children	He is for you
And their children	He is for you