

Theology of lament and hope

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Preface

When the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic began to be felt in Canada in March of 2020, we in some way or other adjusted ourselves into emergency mode. We went on alert, anticipating updates on new restrictive measures for places of work and worship, commerce and recreation, updating the notifications settings on our devices to include public health news, rules and guidance. The adjustments were sudden. I was with colleagues in a national church meeting of around 50 people that began on March 15. At the opening eucharist, we somewhat apologetically suggested that participants might possibly wish to skip the common cup at eucharist if they had concerns. Two days later the Anglican dioceses in Ontario declared a halt to in-person worship. Another two days and my non-essential-service workplace closed its doors and my colleagues and I busied ourselves setting up our home ‘office’ work spaces, taking Zoom tutorials, and stocking up on grocery staples, reading for a long-haul of who-knows-how-long.

The experience was a shock to the system. The virus itself was – and continues to be – frightening in its unpredictable effects, death rate, and ease of transmission. But the early predictors of a perhaps mere (as it seems now) addition of a couple of weeks to the normal school March Break lent, for those whose incomes remained stable, a near holiday flavour to being off work, off school, hunkering down at home for a bit, learning to bake, and digging out those old craft projects we now had time to complete. For those in insecure economic and housing situations, though, or those with mental health challenges, the early experiences did not have those buffers of comfort food and the promises of

time as a gift. And no matter the busyness many of us put ourselves to, the early stages brought a whiplash experience, as eventually the multi-dimensional patterns of normal social and work and study life flatlined.

I confess to having prided myself in my capacity to adjust and to do so with ease. I enjoy working from home (occasionally), and relished more quiet time to shorten my stack of intend-to-read books. And I know how to do without a lot of luxuries like restaurants and hairstylists. Cue the kick-in of adrenaline, with a touch of guilt - it wasn't like this was an earthquake calamity type of disaster, but something in me was in a highly disciplined emergency alert mode.

That discipline carried over into my spiritual life. I rebooted a somewhat dry daily prayer practice, and started a fresh new journal for writing notes of gratitude for the gifts of each day. I took my camera on long solitary walks and exercised a visual attentiveness to the work of finding beauty in tiny and ordinary things. And it wasn't hard to find the beauty and the gifts in each day, despite the strangeness. In fact, there was an ease to spiritual attentiveness and delight in the ordinary.

Perhaps the ease was in part born from early illusions of privilege: surely Canada won't be like Italy or Iran, and all of this will be over in a matter of weeks. Or maybe a couple of months. We can do this. But the more the time crept on, and it was no longer an adventure, the more I felt atune with others around me in sensing great loss.

Pandemic Time is a mixture of stagnation and fast paced race, moving on at a pace completely ignorant of our needs to dominate and control it, and each step brings with it more losses, and the cumulative effect of so much uncertainty and grief. Its currency is an exchange of confusion and tentative hope. And to get to a place of more solid, faithful, hope, we need to be honest with the confusion and frustration.

With each personal loss I've found myself wrestling with the guilt of one who has some pain but knows that others are truly suffering worse. With each prayer for the suffering of the world and the grief of those whose loved ones have died, and for those under the siege of domestic violence, I found myself awash in grief for them. As the Black Lives Matter protests gained in strength and now suffers from reactionary violence on top of the original racist injustices and violence, I've found myself awash in a cosmic level mixture of despair, anger, and frustration. And as political shenanigans and nastiness has grown to tragic dimensions in our neighbour to the south (with marginal but real spillover here), I developed an addiction to outrage that cried out to be fed by CNN newsfeeds. So much complexity, so many powerful, conflicting, difficult struggles.

And it goes on. And on. And on.

*How long, O Lord?
will you not answer?
I cried to you in my distress...*

This resource is part reflection on the theology of lament, part encouragement to pray the psalms of lament, and part invitation to explore in your own words and images the spiritual practice of lament as valuable part of Christian faith. It's also part workbook and stimulus for journal-writing (hence the partial blank pages). Ultimately, the whole thing is a prayer, one that begins here, in all this strangeness, and leads, ultimately, to a deeply grounded hope and praise of the Holy One who walks with us.

Introducing lament: a necessary spiritual friend

Lament is the cry of suffering, the frustrated gasp and moan that seeks consolation and explanation for the inexplicable and the inconsolable. It is raw and deeply 'in' the experience of pain. In the biblical tradition, it's more than the experience of sorrow, but is a process of what we might call, today, 'working through' pain. It requires expression but defies that very requirement by its messiness and its urgency.

Lament is a gift that arises from our deep encounter with suffering. We feel pains from growth, trauma, and loss in our own lives and in empathy with those close to us. We are surrounded by, and see, the inexplicable suffering in the world and the devastation brought by injustice and greed. And as our walk with Jesus deepens through life, he draws us close and turns us around to see the suffering of the world with him, through God's eyes. The body of Christ – the church – turns to the world with the eyes of God beholding the beauty of God's creation and its suffering.

St. Paul speaks of the whole of creation crying in pain – as a woman in labour – for the children of God to be revealed. These children are us: we who are reconciled with God through Christ, who also reconciles us with each other within creation. The groaning of creation is a lament that bursts forth into an expression of deep and grounded hope. Lament and hope live side by side in that journey of reconciliation. Even when I know deeply the hope that God brings, that love is ultimately the victor, and that in God's time all will be well, I still go through experiences of pain, isolation, loneliness, betrayal, abandonment, abuse. And the same God who accompanies us in that pain sticks with us and hears us with love when we express what these feelings are.

God doesn't bring hope as though it were a perfectly wrapped gift that we're only allowed to unwrap after we dry our tears and 'get over it.' No. God, who is the Source of all love and hope and faith, has an embrace

that is big enough to enfold us in our pain and in our ranting, raging, despairing, fearful, tearful protest against what is happening to us. More than that, God actually desires our honesty.

Christianity has in some places been shaped in ways that have tamed the wilder elements of our own powerful faith tradition. Particularly under colonial expansion and the growth of economic empires, the social order, customs, and mores evolved to serve the powers that maintain a certain status quo. However it all came about, the fact is that some Christian practice tends to avoid the messier parts of Scripture: the anger of Jesus in the marketplace and his deep grief at the death of his friend Lazarus; the lamentations of the people of Israel after the destruction of Jerusalem. We may know the story, but how much do we pay attention to the visceral nature of the emotions involved? It is likely that we too quickly intellectualize Lamentations, or enclose Jesus' emotional and spiritual anguish in a box to be opened only when we want assurance that he was, actually, human.

The source of Christian hope can be located within the cry of lament of Jesus on the cross: my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?! In the crux of lament and promise can be found a hope that is deeper and more spiritually nutritious than anything a purveyor of shiny polite optimism can peddle.

In times of loss, lament is both necessary and faithful.

We are in a time of loss:

- the loss of health and of life, as sickness and death are around us, nearby us, or immediate to us;
- the loss of freedom for much of our choice, in simple and mundane actions, and the deeply meaningful ones;
- the loss of aspects of our power and agency;
- the loss of employment, steady rhythms in our days and weeks, and relative security;
- the loss of physical closeness with others, in our close relationships, in worship, pastoral connection, singing together, holding one another in grief and sadness;
- and our own very specific personal losses.

In pandemic, we're faced with isolation, loneliness, and for some a massive whiplash of inactivity while for others there is only unrelenting hard work in uncomfortable and risky situations. We are jolted from the 'normal' in which we know some things, at least, to a place of entirely more unknowns than most comfortable Canadians have known. Loss of

employment, of income, of previously secure and reassuring supports... all of this is unsettling for some and crisis for many. And for those on the margins of power, for Indigenous communities, for all living in poverty and those with no homes, for those in violent domestic contexts, and for the elderly and physically vulnerable, crisis is immediate and life-and-death.

This is a time to lament.

But to complicate things, even as we feel acutely our personal and community losses there is not much in the dominant culture that helps us to name the present moment as one of complicated *grief*, and little there to help us move through loss and grief into true hope. There is much good news of community resilience and generosity and kindness in the face of common experiences of disaster. But there is still a massive, spiritual gap.

What is biblical lament?

What has been missing, for quite a few generations in North American culture, is the sort of depth of lament that we encounter in the Bible. Our society is uncomfortable with suffering and death, generally. We paraphrase into soft metaphors what it is to die, we sanitize funerals, and put up massive distractions to turn eyes away from the suffering of the marginalized and victims of injustice. In our society, the depth and razor-sharp pain expressed by psalmists can seem downright embarrassing.

Why do you stand so far off, O Lord, and hide yourself in time of trouble? (Ps 10)

How long, O Lord?

Will you forget me for ever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

*How long shall I have perplexity in my mind,
and grief in my heart, day after day?*

How long shall my enemy triumph over me? (Ps 13)

Why have you forgotten me

and why do I go so heavily

while the enemy oppresses me? (Ps 42)

Awake, O Lord! why are you sleeping?

Arise! Do not reject us for ever.

Why have you hidden your face

and forgotten our affliction and oppression? (Ps 44)

Oh, we might say, that was fine for those less-evolved people at that time to rail against God. The Psalms were written pre-Gospel, and they didn't know the blessed assurance of Jesus who takes away all pain, after all. If they had known God the way we later folks know God, they wouldn't have uttered these heretical-sounding affronts to God's majesty and omnipotence, right?

"*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" In the Gospels of Matthew and of Mark, these are the last words of Jesus. This is lament with no resolution. The words are the opening line of Psalm 22, perhaps one of the most powerful Psalms of lament. It is raw and honest and speaks to those depths of suffering in human experience that tear the soul.

Lament cries out at God for help, and lament cries out *at* God in anger, frustration, from the depths of those places where we truly do *not* feel the nearness of God. Perhaps it's the shouting, in the anger of extreme pain, at God that Christians find disturbing or embarrassing. After all, that's rather inappropriate, isn't it? It wasn't to Jesus.

Remember that the Psalms were the prayer book and hymn book of the temple and synagogue. The Torah and the Prophets were to be read and studied intently; the Psalms were sung and prayed. The language of prayer is the language of the heart, one might say. On the cross, Jesus' heart was ripped open, exposing the cries of the psalmists that he had ingested in his own spiritual disciplines according to Jewish practice. In the Gospel of Luke, it is another psalm of lament that Jesus turns to, as the final word of abandon and trust: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." (Ps 31)

The Psalms of lament move back and forth between the expression of pain and the assurance of God's presence and ultimate vanquishing of the causes of the pain. They do so in rapid turns of a verse or two or three, which can feel odd – in fact, they constitute a logical contradiction, but anyone who has experienced the paradoxical complexities of childbirth can relate to. Or, when holding a beloved one through critical illness or caring for a dying family member, one might live in a place where pain, anticipatory grief, and the graces of love and tender care are present in the same breath. Here is the first portion of Psalm 22:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me
and are so far from my cry and from the words of my distress?
O my God, I cry in the daytime, but you do not answer;
by night as well, but I find no rest.

*Yet you are the Holy One,
enthroned upon the praises of Israel.
Our ancestors put their trust in you;*

*they trusted, and you delivered them.
They cried out to you and were delivered;
they trusted in you and were not put to shame.*

But as for me, I am a worm and not human,
scorned by all and despised by the people.
All who see me laugh me to scorn;
they curl their lips and wag their heads, saying,
“You trusted in the Lord; let the Lord deliver you;
let God rescue you, if God delights in you.”

*Yet you are the one who took me out of the womb,
and kept me safe upon my mother’s breast.*

Intimacy and transcendence meet in the honesty we find in the Psalms. From the pains of isolation, physical illness, violence, death, and shame rise up the sort of cry that can only be aimed towards God, because to aim lower would be inconsequential.

The Psalms let loose contradiction because they contain paradox. They both cling to the teachings of the Torah and the Prophets and they confront and provoke the very heart of faith by questioning God. *The paradox is that it is precisely the faithfulness, the love, mercy, and justice of the God revealed to Israel that makes possible inflamed and desperate provocation of God.* In my suffering, I am living a contradiction: if God desires not my suffering but promises to save, where is that God, right now?!

What I have encountered is a limit point and my protests to God tumble forward *because* I can trust that God hears me with compassion and faithfulness. Even as I complain of God’s distance, my reaching out in complaint is itself possible *because* of my trust in God’s faithfulness. In these Psalms, Israel moves from articulation of hurt and anger, to submission of them to God, and finally to relinquishment. Functionally and experientially, the verbal articulation and the faithful submission to God are prerequisites. Only when there is such relinquishment can there be praise and acts of generosity.”¹ Fundamentally, as Walter Brueggemann puts it, the Psalms “make the shrill insistence that:

1. Things are not right in the present arrangement.
2. They need not stay this way and can be changed.
3. The speaker will not accept them in this way for the present arrangement is intolerable.
4. It is God’s obligation to change things.”²

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995, 110.

² Brueggemann, 105.

The main point is the first: life is not right. It is now noticed and voiced that life is not as it was promised to be. The utterance of this awareness is an exceedingly dangerous moment at the throne.... Lament occurs when the dysfunction reaches an unacceptable level, when the injustice is intolerable and change is insisted upon.³

Psalms of lament oscillate amongst plea, lament, affirmation of God's faithfulness, lament, prayer for help, remembrance of God's loving and powerful deeds in the past, more lament, ending with a prayer of thanksgiving or declaration of trust in God's faithfulness.

The late Roman Catholic liturgical and biblical theologian Carroll Stuhlmueller described how this structure is a gift:

*A structure that leads beyond abandonment to thanksgiving offers consolation, but the stark contrast intensifies each emotion. No literary structure ever masks the stark, naked realism in the Psalms: the shame suffered by an innocent person and the callous shamelessness of those inflicting it...*⁴

The value of tradition is exemplified in the lament. It offers a structure for what is the most unstructured, disorderly experience – sickness and violence. Already a sick or persecuted person perceives, however dimly, a plan and purpose. God wastes no moment of human existence. In fact, when someone is unjustly reduced to shame and helplessness, as in the case of the psalmist, God is empowering that person with dignity and extending the invitation to share in the salvation of others.⁵

...The silent aloofness of God ends. The psalmist feels in the depths of craving loneliness a divine touch, ever so personal at such a secret place of one's life. God's presence is life sustaining.⁶

Why do we need lament?

“What difference does it make to have faith that permits and requires this form of prayer? My answer is that it shifts the calculus and redresses the distribution of power between the two parties, so that the petitionary party is taken seriously and the God who is addressed is newly engaged in the crisis in a way that puts God at risk. As the lesser, petitionary party (the psalm speaker) is legitimated, so the unmitigated supremacy of the greater party (God) is questioned, and God is made available to the petitioner. The basis for the conclusion that the petitioner is taken seriously

³ Ibid.

⁴ Carroll Stuhlmueller, CP. *The Spirituality of the Psalms*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002, 110.

⁵ Stuhlmueller, 109-110.

⁶ Stuhlmueller, 110.

and legitimately granted power in the relation is that the speech of the petitioner is heard, valued, and transmitted as serious speech. Cultically, we may assume that such speech is taken seriously by God.⁷⁷

If we affirm and celebrate that God is the creator of all, and that God's desire for us is intimate relationship with us, full honesty before God is not only ok, it is a requirement.

If we affirm and celebrate that God is loving and trustworthy, and that God's hope for us is fullness of life, sharing our doubt with God is not only safe, it can be the beginning of a new way of beginning to listen to God – by listening to our deepest fears and doubts.

If we affirm and celebrate that God is compassionate and is mercy itself, and that we are called and equipped too to be compassionate and merciful with others, expressing the feelings that we only can do to the most faithful of companions is not only honest with God, but can help us in our compassion with others.

God opens our lips to be honest.

This sort of honesty may feel incompatible with Christian faith: it cannot be true that God has abandoned me, but it feels true, in my experience of utter devastation and loneliness. Lament is awkward and messy. It was so for the Psalmists, and it is even more so for Christians who follow a crucified Christ. In the devastation of the cross, Jesus himself raised up anguish, questioning, and resignation – a shattering honesty.

There is something in the patterns of lament that opens us to a deeper grasp of the nature of reconciliation, one that is deeply theological and not merely about the psychological healthy expression of pain. Brueggemann, again:

Rather, the lament makes an assertion about God: that this dangerous, available God matters in every dimension of life. Where God's dangerous availability is lost because we failed to carry on our part of the difficult conversation, where God's vulnerability and passion are removed from our speech, we are consigned to anxiety and despair, and the world as we now have it becomes absolutized.⁸

Lament is a gift in the life of the church that is called to be living ambassadors of God's reconciling love. I spoke above in ways that identified reconciliation – by God, with God, and with each other, through Christ – as the core of what it is to be the church, the body of Christ. In Canada, we have grown a new sense of the importance of the ministries of

⁷ Walter Bruggemann, 101.

⁸ Brueggemann, 108.

reconciliation, especially in work of remorse, reparation and working for justice and right relationship with Indigenous peoples. Reconciliation is something given to us to do, but isn't *just* something that we do; it is who we *are*. Have we truly grasped that the church is, and is to manifest in our core identity, that we are the community of the reconciled? And that, as Paul frames our core 'mandate', we are to be 'ambassadors' of that reconciliation in the world? To be Christian is to be in a community on a journey of reconciliation. The more deeply we can grasp this corporeal-spiritual reality, the more deeply our actions in the name of reconciliation can be nurtured to grow from a place of God's intentions for justice and right relationship, and resist being shaped only by own perceptions of what is the missional good. What does this have to do with lament?

Theologian Emmanuel Katongole speaks of this critical importance of lament in this journey of reconciliation, especially in relation to hope.

... the journey of reconciliation is grounded in *lament*. For even as one keeps in mind the gift of new creation, one is constantly confronted by the realities of what's going on here and now – realities of violence, conflict, poverty, divisions, and so on. The discipline and strange gift of lament allows one to stand on the ground of pain without giving in to despair. Moreover, the discipline of lament compels one to investigate the deep social, political, and economic structures that shape histories of violence, injustice, poverty, and divisions around the world. Without such sustained critical analysis, talk of reconciliation becomes simply a panacea, a way of healing the wound of 'my people lightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace.' (Jer 6:14) "...reconciliation is about hope in the world. The gift of new creation means that even in places of deep brokenness God's reconciling work is ongoing. Even in the midst of the world's pain, God continues to plant seeds of hope and to give birth of the new creation."⁹

Emmanuel Katongole's principal context of ministry and the reference point for his writing on lament is the post-genocide Rwanda and other places of extreme conflict and violence in Africa.

His affirmations come from a depth of lament in himself. That lament, he writes, is about turning to God "in the midst of the ruins" which can become a way of "dwelling amid" those ruins. It is both a gift and a discipline, "at once something that one does but also the gift through which the shattered foundations of our social and human existence" can be brought together.

Similarly, to Katongole, hope itself requires discipline, something he describes even as the *anguished* discipline of turning to God. It may be

⁹ Emmanuel Katongole: *Born from Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa*. 2017.

logical to understand lament as the expression of anguish, but hope? Hope and lament live in inextricable, interwoven intimacy, as interdependent ways of turning to God in the place of suffering.

For him, the journey of reconciliation involves five main elements:

1. Memory: remember the sacred drama (that God has been reconciling the world to Godself)
2. Lament: “is about learning to see clearly, name rightly, and keep one’s feet on the ground of pain without surrendering either to despair or to easy consolation. To lament is to learn to tell the truth of the brokenness in and around us. ... Lament is what helps the Christian live in the sluggish between.”
3. Hope: “Hope is what helps keep lament from turning into despair... it is hope that grounds the Christian journey in the firm conviction that even in the midst of the world’s darkest history, God continues to sow seeds of a ‘new thing’ (Is 43:19). Thus, hope is the commitment to live not simply with the realism of what is possible now, but with the madness of dreams drawn from a future yet to be seen.”
4. Advocacy – “hope is not an abstract reality. For as Augustine says, hope has two daughters: anger and courage”
5. Intimacy... “it is a deeply personal journey.”¹⁰

When we lose lament, we lose a critical aspect of what it is to be honest before God. That loss diminishes our imagination of the nature of the relationship that we can have with God. That relationship is covenantal: with Israel, and through the reconciling actions of God in Christ. Biblical covenants are not contracts. They originate with God’s promise and invitation, into which God calls and equips us towards our own free acceptance-response by grace. A critical element of that relationship is its honesty – a certain paradoxical parity, even. If God only requires our obedience and submission, but not the openness of our hearts in all aspects of our lives, the resulting living can become something less than the abundance and flourishing that God desires. Brueggemann uses a sharp metaphor to push home the necessity of full honesty before God:

One loss that results from the absence of lament is the loss of genuine covenant interaction, since the second party to the covenant (the petitioner) has become voiceless or has a voice that is permitted to speak only praise and doxology. Where lament is absent, covenant comes into being only as a

¹⁰ Katongole, 11-12.

*celebration of joy and well-being. Or in political categories, the greater party is surrounded by subjects who are always 'yes-men and women' from whom 'never is heard a discouraging word.' Since such a celebrative, consenting silence does not square with reality, covenant minus lament is finally a practice of denial, cover-up, and pretense, which sanctions social control.*¹¹

How we approach relationship with God shapes how we approach the social order. A relationship that is built upon such covenantal trust in order to nurture right relationship (reconciliation) can be bold about naming what is wrong in the relationship. That the 'throne' of God can be approached with all manner of righteous complaint and lament is a spiritual reality that justifies even deeper the ethics of protest in the social sphere against all injustice and misery, and emboldens our honesty in analysis of the causes of the suffering of all creation.

Offering lament today

The losses being experienced during the present pandemic (COVID-19, 2020) are many and multi-layered in their complexities. There is personal illness, death, and vulnerability, losses of freedom of movement, and most viscerally, the isolation and restrictions from physical touch. Our congregations have lost, as communities, their gatherings-in-person for worshipful singing, praying together, and making eucharist. Clergy and lay leaders have had to work hard to adjust, to fill gaps left by the inability to gather, to reach out through any and all, it seems, forms of communications technologies. It has been for many a very full and busy time as we try to connect despite, or *over* the losses. Have we walked deeply enough *into* the losses, though?

Psalms of lament can help us into and through our losses, by the ways in which they compel our honesty before God. Pray them by reading slowly, resting with the words, allowing them to permeate your imagination and resonate with your feelings.¹² The Psalm Prayers of *The Book of Alternative Services* provide an way of wrapping up the prayer that is the psalm itself, and help to refocus us in gospel hope. Pay attention to the movements of the psalms – like the movements of a symphony, they all work together within the whole – best not to just take a few lines out of a psalm, but meditate on the whole together. It is in the interplay between expressions of despair and longing, assurance and memory of God's faithfulness that the whole of the 'music' can be heard.

¹¹ Brueggemann, 104.

¹² Prayer booklets have been produced to accompany this article, each a collection: *Psalms of Lament and Hope*; *Psalms of Pleading and Assurance*; and *Psalms of God's Faithfulness*. See www.anglican.ca/psalms for these booklets.

Enter even more deeply into the healing patterns of the psalms of lament by writing your own and encouraging others in your community to do so. A small group in a congregation may benefit from walking through a process that names their grief and confusion at the loss of community worship and gatherings of song and sacrament. Choir members might be invited to express what they miss from their practice times as well as Sundays together. Whatever the particular losses and diverse personal ways in which these are experienced, the process of naming can be a gift for the individual as well as for the whole community.

The following provides a guide for the crafting of psalms of lament. It can serve to guide a group's discussions and prayer together, or be encouraged as a form of personal devotion.

Writing Lament

Follow a basic structure:

1. Invocation
2. Address
3. Lament
4. Petition
5. Remembrance of God's goodness
6. Praise: expression of gratitude

The structure can repeat certain elements, but it is important that each part of the structure be there, and that the opening and the closing remain in their forms of invocation (calling upon God) and praise (expressions of hope, confidence and trust in God). This provides a framework that holds the complete movement, with all the parts that need to be held together in the process. Remember, it's not only about the complaint of deep feeling (the lament part in the centre), it's about how this honest expression is *held within* the assurance that we can approach God, who hears us, knows us, and upon whom we can call for help.

*Quotations are from John Witvliet, Calvin Institute of Worship,
<https://network.crcna.org/worship/time-weep-voicing-lament-through-psalms>.*

1: Invocation – we call upon God

- What we are writing is prayer. And the writing process itself is prayer. This opening, the invocation, reminds us of the presence of God with us, and it does that both in the praying and very much so in the writing itself.
- God invites us into intimate relationship: we call upon God, trusting in that.

- Invocation is “a startling confession that even in times of crisis, we approach a personal and accessible God. In lament, we do not recoil from the tension that this presents.”

*“O Lord, my God, my Saviour,
by day and night I cry to you.
Let my prayer enter into your presence;
incline your ear to my lamentation.”* (Ps 88)

*My God, I cry out to you, please be near me now...
To you, God of my soul, I pour out my soul today...
Holy God, here I am, all alone, with no one to talk to. Be with me, and
listen to me...*

2: Address – we speak about God, to God

- We name God in the ways and with the biblical or traditional images that speak most powerfully to us in this moment, reminding ourselves that God, Lord of the Universe, is very much a personal God, accessible to us.
- “We pray to Yahweh, the rock, the fortress, the hiding place, the bird with encompassing wings. These metaphors are not just theological constructs, but means of directly addressing God. As we pray them, these metaphors shape and reshape how we conceive of God. They hone our image of God with the very tools that God gave us: the biblical texts.”
- Some of the strongest images for God that we can call upon in times of distress are from well-beloved hymns: mighty fortress; God of the sparrow; God who gives to life its goodness; Lord of all hopefulness...

*You are the God who works wonders
and have declared your power among the peoples.* (Ps 77)

You are the strength of your people, a safe refuge for your anointed. (Ps 28)

*(You are) my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe
for you are my crag and my stronghold* (Ps 31)

*You are God, my mother, my father, my friend...
Holy God, my safe harbour...
Mighty Eagle, with great outstretched wings...*

3: Bold and direct lament – we name what’s wrong

- What is my pain, right now? What am I experiencing as loss? What are the realities that are frightening and painful? What do I really, in the depths of my soul want God to mend, and in what ways am I disappointed in God? Does God feel distant to me? What is my distress? What do I really feel about God in this moment?
- This is the part of your psalm that can – and should – go on and on. Pour out the soul of your pain and fear. Let it be stream of consciousness if that works for you, or let it be a only a few words and scribbles of question marks and drawings or images that you can’t even bring to words. If all you have is a moan or a scream, do that, and put that in your writing as ink blots or scratchings.
- “We bring our most intense theological questions right into the sanctuary. In so doing, we learn from the psalms the value of direct discourse. Our pale subjunctives and indirect speech (“We would want to ask you why this might be happening”) is transformed to bold and honest address (“How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever?”). Such honesty in its own way comforts the bereaved and expresses solidarity with the wronged. Their questions and protestations are not illegitimate in the life of prayer. Prayer may well feature question marks alongside exclamation points. Honest worship expresses genuine doubt as well as assurance. The psalms teach us that doubt can be expressed as an act of faith, that prayer may include not just pleas for God’s help, but even complaints to God concerning injustice and ever-present evil.”

Why do you stand so far off, O Lord, and hide yourself in time of trouble? (Ps 10)

How long, O Lord?

Will you forget me for ever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

*How long shall I have perplexity in my mind,
and grief in my heart, day after day?*

How long shall my enemy triumph over me? (Ps 13)

*O my God, I cry in the daytime, but you do not answer;
by night as well, but I find no rest. (Ps 22)*

*I am poured out like water; all my bones are out of joint;
my heart within my breast is melting wax.
My mouth is dried out like a potsherd;
my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
and you have laid me in the dust of the grave. (Ps 22)*

I am exhausted. The kids are frustrated with home schooling and being cooped up, my partner lost their job, and I am utterly worn out. I'm scared, Lord. I sometimes feel like I can't breathe. I know it's stupid but I worry I'm getting fat and lazy, but I'm working so hard. And I know I shouldn't be worried about little things, but everything is getting to me. When will this end?

I don't even know how I'm feeling, Lord. I'm so dry emotionally that I feel I'm walking in a haze. Every time I watch or read the news I'm so full of anger at all the political crap and so full of sadness at the deaths that I just want to go numb. I can't even talk to you anymore.

My mother is in a long term care home and I can't hold her or give her that one true joy in her week when I bring the kids to visit. It hurts so much, God. Why are you letting this happen? I thought you wanted us to love each other and care for our elders! Everything is so out of my control and I don't know who to trust – doesn't seem like anybody can help, even YOU. What is going on? Where are you!?

4: Prayer of petition – we ask God for help

- This, too, is a matter of bold and direct expression. I need something from God, I hope something from God. After pulling open the fears and pain in my soul by expressing my lament, I have a deep sense of having reached a place of limit – I've cried out to God, knowing that there is no other help for all that I'm going through.
- “Heal us, free us, save us... our lament, our petition, and our eventual praise of God fit together like hand and glove. The very attributes for which we praise God are those we invoke in times of need.”

*Rise up, O Lord; lift up your hand, O God;
do not forget the afflicted. (Ps 10)*

*I call upon you, O God, for you will answer me;
incline your ear to me and hear my words.*

*Show me your marvellous loving-kindness,
O Saviour of those who take refuge at your side
from those who rise up against them.
Keep me as the apple of your eye;
hide me under the shadow of your wings,
from the wicked who assault me,
from my deadly enemies who surround me. (Ps 17)*

Help me, Lord God. I need more strength than I have on my own. Let me know you are with me because I need that assurance. Give me strength to get out of bed. Give me patience in home schooling. Keep us safe. I worry so much: bring me peace, and let me find just even a moment of quiet and peace and joy this day.

I am so overwhelmed with my fears and fatigue that I don't know what to ask for, but you, God of all, know what I need. You know what my family needs. You know better than I do. Help me to trust that you are with us, that you are bigger than all this anxiety in the air around us. Give us the trust we need to then reach out to help others. Thank you.

5: Remembrance of God's goodness – we call to mind the grace we have experienced in life

- Memory is powerful. It may be hard to cast the mind back to more pleasant days now, because the contrast with the present can provoke sadness. But if we cast our minds back further, and more broadly into the family story that we inhabit, we can touch with our imaginations the joys of the disciples when they recognised the risen Christ, or the children of Israel when they got to the other side of the Red Sea. Remembering God's faithfulness and the ways that God has been with us in big Red Sea and Resurrection moments as recounted in Scripture can open our memories to the personal Red Sea and Resurrection moments we have had with loved ones over our lives. Anamnesis – the form of memory that brings the reality of God's actions in the past to be truly present today – is the ground of hope. It reorients our memory of God's presence right in to today and toward the future.
- “Expressions of hope, confidence, and trust, however muted they might be by the present situation. Lament is eschatological prayer. It always looks to the future. It may not be possible to sing praise in times of crisis. Yet the community anticipates

praise, even as they yearn for the resolution of the crisis. Praise is the fully expected outcome of crisis and despair.”

*I called upon the Lord in my distress
and cried out to my God for help.
You heard my voice from your heavenly dwelling;
to your ears came my cry of anguish.
The earth reeled and rocked;
the roots of the mountains shook; they reeled because of your anger.
... You parted the heavens and came down with a storm cloud under
your feet.
You mounted on cherubim and flew;
you swooped on the wings of the wind.
You wrapped darkness about you;
you made dark waters and thick clouds your pavilion. (Ps 18)*

*I waited patiently upon the Lord
who stooped to me and heard my cry.
God lifted me out of the desolate pit, out of the mire and clay,
and set my feet on a high cliff and made my footing sure.
God put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God;
many shall see, and stand in awe,
and put their trust in the Lord.
Happy are they who trust in the Lord!
they do not resort to evil spirits or turn to false gods.
Great things are they that you have done, O Lord my God!
how great your wonders and your plans for us!
There is none who can be compared with you.
... You are the Lord; do not withhold your compassion from me;
let your love and your faithfulness keep me safe for ever. (Ps 40)*

*I remember now, O God, how scared I was when the labour pains began,
and how there were moments when I felt I would die from the pain, but
then this beautiful creature was in my arms and the wonder and love
that overwhelmed me was greater than anything before, and I knew you
were there. I knew you'd been through it all with me and were smiling.
You were with us then, and you are with us now, even though I cannot
hold my now adult child who is far from me: you are with us, and you
will always be.*

6: *Praise and expression of trust: we give thanks*

- However we say it or sing it, with our own words or with words from a hymn or words from a prayer book, in the pouring out of a rush of words or with a simple unspoken raising of hands, praise is a simple thank you to God.
- At the end of our lament process, having been through the expression of pain, through the memory of God's goodness, ending with gratitude may come quietly or even with some resistance. It may only be able to be an acknowledgement of God's presence. Or it could be ebullient.
- Take some time to think of what you can be genuinely grateful right now. It may not be obviously something that it seems God has done, but just seem to be circumstances or luck. But to say thank you to God is to acknowledge that God is God, is present with us, and wants us to live with such abundance that we can be grateful in all things.

*Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me, bless God's holy name.*

...

*As parents care for their children,
so do you, O Lord, care for those who fear you.
For you yourself know whereof we are made;
you remember that we are but dust.
Our days are like the grass;
we flourish like a flower of the field;
when the wind goes over it, it is gone,
and its place shall know it no more.
But your merciful goodness endures for ever on those who fear you,
and your righteousness on children's children;
on those who keep the covenant
and remember the commandments and do them.
The Lord is enthroned in heaven,
and has dominion over all.
Bless the Lord, you angels,
you mighty ones who do the bidding of God,
and hearken to the voice of the word of the Lord.
Bless the Lord, all you hosts,
you ministers who do the will of God.
Bless the Lord, all you works of the Lord, in all places of the dominion of
the Lord;
bless the Lord, O my soul. (Ps 103)*

*For the beauty of the earth,
For the beauty of the skies,
For the love which from our birth
Over and around us lies,
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our grateful hymn of praise.*

*For the beauty of each hour
Of the day and of the night,
Hill and vale, and tree and flower,
Sun and moon and stars of light,
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our grateful hymn of praise.*

*For the joy of human love,
Brother, sister, parent, child,
Friends on earth, and friends above,
Pleasures pure and undefiled,
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our grateful hymn of praise.*

(Hymn, words by Folliott Pierpoint)

God, thank you for listening to me. I look around, out my window, and know that there's something in the blue of the sky that is reassuring and that you are there. I don't know how to thank you for helping me, for letting me rage and rant and cry and still being there. Every time I reach for my cozy blanket that I've been crying into, I'll remember that you are God, and you are Love, and that you are here with us. Amen.