

Counting What is Lost

Part 2 of Seeking God's Wisdom in the Bible

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Sunday, June 14, 2020

Psalm 137

This psalm is pretty intense, and those last few verses are more than a little disturbing. You've probably figured out that this psalm is not meant to lift us up or comfort us, at least not in a traditional way.

Some of you might be thinking, what on earth does this psalm have to do with seeking God's wisdom? Great question! Let's dig in.

For a few weeks we've had an online class about the psalms, and we were guided in studying them by following an organization of them by Old Testament Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann. He posits the psalms being in roughly one of three categories: orientation, disorientation, and new or re-orientation.

By orientation, Brueggemann means that the psalmist (because these were all written by human beings, and a number of them by King David) is celebrating the orderly and wonderful work of God. Many of these relate to the works of creation, or how God has acted to save God's people. A psalm of orientation basically says, "Things are great, thanks God!"

In contrast, psalms of *disorientation* are written from the perspective that things are really, drastically wrong, and what are you going to do about , perhaps with a bit of "We know you're on this one, God" thrown in. And our Hebrew poets do not hold back from telling God exactly how screwed and messed up either their own lives, or that of their communities are. The third type of psalm are the ones written after things that were bad have gotten fixed – hence the name new or reorientation, usually a psalm of thanksgiving.

But these psalms of disorientation – we might also use the word lamentation – are the ones that help us know what God is really about, and what kind of language, thoughts, and feelings are acceptable to relate to God.

Here's another example from Psalm 74:

O God, why do you cast us off forever?

Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?...

How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?

Is the enemy to revile your name forever?

Why do you hold back your hand;

why do you keep your hand in your bosom?

The biblical wisdom of the psalms is this: it's ok to talk about loss and being bereft; it's ok to question God about why things are going so badly.; its ok to be sad and mad and even express feelings of vengeance at times.

Of this psalm, Brueggemann writes:

“On reflection, it may be the voice of seasoned religion which knows profoundly what it costs to beat off despair. More than simply knowing the cost, the speaker is prepared to pay!”

What about us today? Are we willing to count our losses – not to depress ourselves, or fixate on them, but instead to name them in the cold light of day so that we can express them in a way that invites us to begin separating from their power over us.

In the survey that we conducted to gauge where everyone is these days, it became clear that we are all feeling the loss of being together in one room. One person wrote that her favorite thing about church is singing hymns together and fellowshiping afterwards. Others have commented to me and Judy Mayhew how much they miss seeing their friends at church. I miss seeing all of you too!

The protests surrounding the killing of George Floyd have added another layer for some of us. We see the pain this caused, and the trauma that it has triggered within the African American communities. More generally, we are seeing the loss of naivete among folks who have not thought about these issues deeply, in thinking we are “beyond” these issues.

At the end of the Psalm class, I invited everyone the opportunity to write a psalm for themselves, and this psalm was written by one in the class:

Oh Lord, everything is crashing down.
Life is hopeless and I am helpless.

I want Your strength.

Suffering and death are real and close,
And You are far away.

I need Your strength.

You are in charge
But I am expected to be strong.

I need Your strength.

You have been my strength
When I needed You.

Again, I need Your strength.

You are my rock and
I praise your name!

I HAVE Your strength.

Jane Bourne

Honest, isn't it?

The final part of the psalm is particularly challenging – it expresses rage in a violent way with a theme of vengeance, and ends with the image of little ones being hit against rocks.

Of course, this is not something we would encourage or condone, and as far as we know, this did not happen. The honesty of the Hebrews to turn over this feeling of vengeance to God is a sign that they know that such judgments are God's, and not theirs.

What we are experiencing in these disorienting ways is a lot. And if we are to learn from the Hebrews and their experience of God, one lesson is this: it is ok to name and count our losses, even as we wait for better times.

I'd like to conclude with this poem by Walter Brueggemann:

Let the Dance Begin

We now miss out on so much

the graduation of a granddaughter,
the wedding of a niece,
the Final Four,
the beginning of Baseball,
the great Easter liturgy
the day by day interaction of the street.

The virus has imposed a huge silence among us.

It is a silence that evokes loneliness,

and domestic violence,

and job loss,

and the end of life in the bars, and on the beach and on the street.

We wait; we may wait in despair, or at least in deep disappointment.

But we may also wait differently:

we wait in confident faith;

we wait in eager longing;

we wait on the Lord.

We wait for the future and against despair,

because we know that you, the God of life, will defeat the force of death.

We know that the Friday execution could not defeat the life lived by Jesus

nor the life lived by his faithful people.

As we wait, we practice our next moves for the coming dance;

it is only a little while. . ."yet a little while";

we will *walk* the long march of obedience;

we will *run* the race of discipleship;

we will *soar* like eagles into God's good future of neighborliness.

We know you will overcome the silence

because the silence. . .no more than the darkness. . .

can overcome the Lord of life. Amen.

