

Sermon – Lament, Despair and Hope in Creation Care

Amy Ross, March 2021

The season of Lent is the 40 days leading to Good Friday and Easter, when Christians traditionally mourn the suffering that comes before the redemption of the cross. Dave Bookless who is a UK based theologian wrote recently for the movement of Christians involved in creation care around the world, calling us to lament this Lent for all the biodiversity that has been lost. He says:

“Praise and worship without lament are dishonest when they fail to reflect disharmony in any of our relationships. Biblical worship, in the Psalms, includes cries of lament, complaint and mourning.

- We should lament at the figures of COVID-19 infections and deaths, particularly amongst vulnerable and minority groups, and reflect on how human abuse of tropical forests and wildlife unleashed this pandemic upon us.
- We should lament as we watch stunning nature documentaries but then hear that 70% of wildlife populations have disappeared since 1970. Images of Orangutans fleeing burning forests, Polar Bears on melting ice floes, and Albatrosses and Turtles starved to death by ingesting plastic waste, should drive us to our knees before God, who created them all ‘very good’.
- We should lament at unprecedented climate-related fires in California and Australia, hurricanes and typhoons in the Caribbean and the Philippines, droughts and floods in India and Africa, failed harvests in Russia and China, and the tens of millions of climate refugees seeking safer homes.

Lament is not simply feeling upset or guilty. It is the cry of those who know they are part of the problem, to an almighty, all-loving God who alone can change our hearts. It is a groaning from our deepest core at the scale of problems we cannot solve. In Romans 8, lament links to a triple ‘groaning’: the whole creation groans ‘as in the pains of childbirth’ (v.22), we, as believers, ‘groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption’ (v.23), and God’s Holy Spirit ‘intercedes for us through wordless groans’ (v.26).”¹

¹ Dave Bookless, The Pollinator, 1 March 2021, WEA/Lausanne Creation Care Network, <https://us5.campaign-archive.com/?u=7aa92609548d8052a11eb082d&id=2a3faebee4>

I have learned that a recognised model of lament prayer is found in Psalm 22, which was read earlier. This format includes the following 5 components, which are found in many versions of lament prayers:

- Address - “My God, My God...(22:1a)”
- Complaint - “Why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?” (22:1b)
- Confession of trust – “Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them.” (22:3-4)
- Petition – “Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.” (22:11)
- Vow of praise – “From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me. I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.” (22:21a-22)²

Lament contrasts trust and doubt, despair and praise in extreme tension. While it risks accusing God of letting bad things happen, it at least gives God the credit for being in control of everything and trusts God enough to believe our cries will be heard. In fact, it assumes the intimacy of a bold and direct relationship with God.

So I am going to finish with an exercise that allows us to express our frustration and anger, our confusion, to God about the hurts that the earth is enduring. It springs from the feeling of entrapment in the pervading system that perpetuates environmental abuses, and our own inability to exercise the discipline, sacrifice and radical lifestyles that would allow us to truly care for creation.

Be aware that this lament is only one part of the whole story. Sometimes, it is all we can see, and it is definitely legitimate, but it is still only one part. Relationships between God, People and Land may be broken, but biblically there remains the possibility of restoration. The Bible teaches that God loves the earth, that God is committed to the creation on an ongoing basis (In Colossians 1, we see that ‘in Christ all things hang together’, also John 1 referring to ‘the Word’ who was Christ, involved in Creation), that humans

² *Rachel’s Cry: Prayer of Lament and the Rebirth of Hope*, Billman & Migliore (1997) p.27

have a role to play (e.g. Leviticus, Deuteronomy – *if you obey me, says God, I will bless the land*), and that there is a promise of renewal (Revelation).

We have seen big changes inside and outside the global Christian church over the last 10 years, including a growing awareness of the importance of these issues and our role in addressing them. But as we stand in the time of the now but not yet, let's give voice to the struggle faced by the planet, and therefore by ourselves in compassion and solidarity. I invite you to pray this lament with me. It is a poetic exercise trying to represent the voice of creation, which is sustained by Christ on an ongoing basis and in direct relationship with God independent of human beings. It follows the spirit of the Psalm 19 where we read 'the heavens declare the glory of God'. Isaiah 55 where 'the mountains and hills will burst into song', Romans 8 where 'creation is groaning', and Luke 19:40, which says if Jesus disciples remained silent 'even the stones would cry out'.

Lament of Creation: Why Have You Forsaken Me?

Adapted version of Psalm 22 (ESVUK), by Amy Ross, 2017

22 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me, from the sounds of my groaning?

²O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,
and by night, but I find no rest.

³Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises^[a] of Israel.

⁴In you my ecosystem has always trusted;
for millennia it trusted, and you delivered it.

⁵To you my elements cried and were rescued;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

⁶But I am a collection of living and non-living forms, not a human,
scorned by humankind and despised by the people.

⁷All who see me mock me;
they make mouths at me; they wag their heads;

⁸"It trusts in the LORD; let him deliver it;
let him rescue it, for it delights in him!"

⁹Yet you are the One who took me from the womb of the universe;

you made me trust you when your Spirit hovered above
the waters

¹⁰ On you was I cast from the dawn of time,
and from the shapeless void you have been my God.

¹¹ Be not far from me,
for trouble is near,
and there is none to help.

¹² Many beasts encompass me;
strong machines of destruction surround me;

¹³ they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravenous and roaring lion.

¹⁴ I am suffocated by concrete,
and all my geological plates are out of joint;
my polar ices are like wax;
they are melting into the seas;

¹⁵ my aquifers have dried up like puddles in the sun,
and my seas overspill their borders;
you leave me depleted unto death.

¹⁶ For humans' emissions encompass me;
a population of evildoers encircles me;
they have stripped my mountains and soils¹—

¹⁷ I can count all my remaining trees—
they stare and gloat over me;

¹⁸ they divide my minerals among them,
and for my clean waters they cast lots.

¹⁹ But you, O LORD, do not be far off!
O you my help, come quickly to my aid!

²⁰ Deliver my plant species from decimation,
my precious nutrients from the monster of monoculture!

²¹ Save my birdsong from the mouth of the city developer!
You have rescued^c me from the lifelessness of desertification!

²² I will tell of your name to my fellow planets;
in the midst of the solar system I will praise you:

²³ You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him,
and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

²⁴ For the Lord has not despised or abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted,

The Lord's face has not been hidden from me,
but I have been heard, when I cried out.

²⁵ From you comes my praise in the congregation of the heavens;
my vows I will perform before those who fear God.

²⁶ The afflicted creatures d shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek God shall praise the LORD!
May your hearts live for ever!

²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the CREATOR,
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before you.

²⁸ For kingship belongs to the LORD,
who rules over the nations.

²⁹ All the prosperous of the universe shall eat and worship;
before God shall bow all who turn into dust,
even the one who could not keep themselves alive.

³⁰ Posterity shall serve God;
it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation;

³¹ they shall come and proclaim God's righteousness to a people yet unborn,
that God has done it.