

Let It All Out
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 3/16/25

This Wednesday afternoon, as happens on Wednesday afternoons with some frequency, the PCCH staff adjourned our formal weekly staff meeting in the Reception Room and ended up hanging out in the main office for a while. While we loitered there, troubleshooting tech issues and making copies, our office and media coordinator Mary Frommer looked up from her computer and said, “Happy five years since lockdown.” With everything else going on at work and in the world, I hadn’t quite clocked that this week marked the five year anniversary of the first stay at home orders of the pandemic – though research suggests that our bodies keep time on these kinds of anniversaries, even when our conscious minds do not. Maybe you too felt a sense of heaviness you couldn’t quite account for this week. Anyway, soon those of us gathered in the office were sharing stories of where we were, how we felt, what we learned during that time.

Kate Magid told a story about one Sunday morning when, in her role as a magistrate judge, she was on her way to officiate a socially-distanced outdoor wedding. Her route between home and the wedding venue took her down Germantown Avenue, right past the church doors, right around the time when church would ordinarily happen. But of course there was no church, not together anyway, not in the building. And so Kate found herself crying in the car, longing to be physically gathered with her church family, longing to be in the pew, singing hymns and saying prayers, longing to be in here instead of out there, simply driving by. My guess is that many of us had our own moments like this in the early days of the pandemic, moments where the acute pain of loss rose to the surface and bubbled over in unfiltered emotion.

The author of our psalms for today finds himself in a similar position of being separated from the worship he is accustomed to participating in. He longs to be in the holy city of Jerusalem, connected with his faith community, leading other pilgrims in a festival procession toward the temple, the house of God. Instead he is somewhere else, pressed in against not by fellow worshipers in a joyful throng but by oppressive enemies who taunt him and challenge the faithfulness of his God. This leads him to deep sadness, which he expresses in poetic conversation, dialoguing with his own thoughts and feelings and with the Holy One.

The tone of that conversation ping pongs back and forth throughout the psalms, alternating between resolve, despair and hope. Sometimes the psalmist questions his own emotions: why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? And at other times he questions God: why have you forgotten me? in psalm 42 intensifies to why have you forsaken me, why have you abandoned me? in psalm 43. Sometimes the psalmist is urging himself on, giving himself instructions: Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God! And other times he is urging God on, giving God instructions: Vindicate me, O God! Deliver me from the deceitful and the unjust! And sometimes the psalmist is just complaining about those around him: why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me? As the psalmist sits in the pit of despair, he wrestles with his own grief, with his sense of the injustice of the world, with his enemies, with his God.

Psalms 42 and 43 form a sustained lament. Did you know that the Psalter has more poems of lament than of any other genre? Depending on how you count, about 58 of the 150 psalms are laments, a formal genre in which the writer lists out her grievances before God and tells God to do something about it. Laments give voice to anger, fear, frustration and sorrow. And they give us words to plead with God, to be angry at God, to question God, even to tell God what to do. God, where are you? Why aren’t you showing up? Why have you left me out here on my own? Why aren’t you acting like the powerful, redeeming, active God you promise to be? Get it together!

The church isn’t always as comfortable with lament as the psalmists seem to have been. Maybe we’re afraid to be angry at God – maybe we think that because God is good all the time we have to praise God all the time. Or maybe for Presbyterians it has to do with our understanding of Providence – some sense that everything in our lives has been preordained by God, or that everything happens for a reason, so it’s not really worth it to complain. But even if we believed everything happens for a reason – and I don’t, particularly – but even if we believed that, there would still be room to share our full, authentic selves with the God who created us intricately and knows us intimately. The other day my brother texted me a picture of a billboard that said, “I know everything happens for a reason, but what the _____?” The lament psalms give us words for that “what the [expletive]” feeling.

Which means that perhaps the lament psalms are just what we need right now. I know many of us are feeling a sense of disorientation trying to keep up with the news and make sense of the way rapidly changing government policies may affect us and our communities. Many of you have shared with me your feelings of anger, at what seems to be disregard for the wellbeing of the aging and vulnerable among us as programs such as Medicaid and Social Security come under threat. Some of you have shared deep anguish, as relationships with loved ones come apart at the seams due to intractable political divides. Some of you have shared your grief as friends or family lose careers in government or jobs that rely on government funding. And then there's all the normal stuff of life: caring for sick family members and waiting for test results and undergoing treatment. I know some of us feel a sense of anxiety or despair so all-encompassing that we struggle to sleep at night.

The American Psychological Association defines despair as "the emotion or feeling of hopelessness, that is, that things are profoundly wrong and will not change for the better." An article in *Psychology Today* gives a more poetic definition: "To live with despair means to wake up every morning with a heaviness pressing down on your chest and a feeling of exhaustion no matter how many hours you slept." Despair can paralyze us.

The same article offers five coping strategies: first, take your despair for a walk – get outside, and move your body if you can. It's harder to feel like everything is hopeless when we're out in the spring sunshine, watching the crocuses pop up out of the grass and waving hello to our neighbors. Second, honor your despair. Name it and claim it. Saying it out loud takes away some of its power. Which brings us to the third strategy: seek fellowship. Despair is fueled by isolation. Connecting with others who share our experiences and understand what we're going through builds strong communities of support that are good for everyone involved. May I suggest church as a venue for this kind of community?

Fourth: avoid toxic positivity. When we're sad or angry, toxic positivity pressures us to "stay positive:" oh, don't worry, everything will work itself out; just fix your attitude. But toxic positivity can make us feel ashamed of our emotions and thereby prevent us from sharing in a way that could bring connection and healing. As a wise retired pastor and therapist used to remind me regularly, the only way to manage your emotions is to let yourself feel them. And the final strategy, connected to all the rest: give your sorrow words. Try to articulate what you're feeling. This is what art and poetry are for, finding words and images that help us clarify what we're experiencing.

And this is what the psalms of lament are for. They help us articulate our anger, fear, anxiety, hatred and sadness. And they also draw us into connection with our God – a God who is not afraid of our emotions. A God who can take our rage, directed at other humans or Godself. A God who loves us, who promises to hear and answer us, a God who promises to help us through, even when we're not sure where God is or what God is doing.

And so I want to give us a few minutes to practice lamenting, here in the quiet of the sanctuary, here in the shared assurance of God's presence with us. What weighs heavy on your heart? What is making you angry or causing you despair? Take a moment and tell God about it, and ask God to do something about it. If nothing particularly comes to mind, you might reread Psalms 42 and 43, to enter the psalmist's lament. Let's take a few minutes together.

How are you feeling now that you've done that? Was it cathartic? Could you have kept going for another 20 minutes? Most lament psalms start with anger or sadness or complaining but end in praise – most, though it's important to say not all. But most do. There seems to be something about the process of lamenting that brings us to a different place. Perhaps giving ourselves permission to feel our feelings leads us to a sense of peace. It could be that going to God with everything that troubles us gives us perspective, reminds us that God has been with us in the past, so we can trust God to be with us in the future. Our prayers may not be answered, but we've connected to the God we trust to respond. Lamenting can help shake us unstuck from despair, so that we can move forward to face our challenges and live God's call to love our neighbors.

"Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God."