



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
Asheville, North Carolina  
29 March 2020  
Sermon: "Lament or Lullaby?"  
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block

Romans 8:35-39  
Psalm 130

**Psalm 130 (NRSV)**

<sup>1</sup>Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.  
<sup>2</sup> Lord, hear my voice!  
Let your ears be attentive  
to the voice of my supplications!  
<sup>3</sup>If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,  
Lord, who could stand?  
<sup>4</sup>But there is forgiveness with you,  
so that you may be revered.  
<sup>5</sup>I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,  
and in God's word I hope;  
<sup>6</sup>my soul waits for the Lord,  
more than those who watch for the morning,  
more than those who watch for the morning.  
<sup>7</sup>O Israel, hope in the LORD!  
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,  
and with God is great power to redeem.  
<sup>8</sup>It is God who will redeem Israel  
from all its iniquities.

**Psalm 130 (RVR 1995)**

De lo profundo, Dios, a ti clamo.  
<sup>2</sup> Señor, oye mi voz;  
estén atentos tus oídos  
a la voz de mi súplica.  
<sup>3</sup> ¡Jah, si miras los pecados,  
¿quién, Señor, podrá mantenerse?  
<sup>4</sup> Pero en ti hay perdón,  
para que seas re-ver-en-ciado.  
<sup>5</sup> Esperé yo en Dios;  
esperó mi alma,  
en su palabra he esperado.  
<sup>6</sup> Mi alma espera en Dios  
más que los centinelas a la mañana,  
más que los vigilantes a la mañana.  
<sup>7</sup> Espere Israel en Dios,  
porque en Dios hay misericordia  
y abundante redención con Dios.  
<sup>8</sup> Dios redimirá a Israel  
de todos sus pecados.

**Psalm 130 (KJV)**

Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD.  
<sup>2</sup> Lord, hear my voice: let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications.  
<sup>3</sup> If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?  
<sup>4</sup> But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.  
<sup>5</sup> I wait for the LORD, my soul doth wait, and in God's word do I hope.  
<sup>6</sup> My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the morning.  
<sup>7</sup> Let Israel hope in the LORD: for with the LORD there is mercy, and with God is plenteous redemption.  
<sup>8</sup> And God shall redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

**Psalm 130 (The Message)**

<sup>1,2</sup> Help, GOD—the bottom has fallen out of my life! Hear my cry for help!  
Listen hard! Open your ears!  
Listen to my cries for mercy.  
<sup>3,4</sup> If you, GOD, kept records on wrongdoings, who would stand a chance?  
As it turns out, forgiveness is your habit, and that's why you're worshiped.  
<sup>5,6</sup> I pray to GOD—my life a prayer—and wait for what God will say and do.  
My life's on the line before God, my Lord, waiting and watching till morning, waiting and watching till morning.  
<sup>7,8</sup> O Israel, wait and watch for GOD—with GOD's arrival comes love, with GOD's arrival comes generous redemption. No doubt about it—God will redeem Israel [ransom] Israel from captivity to sin.

“I need to put strings on my guitar” That’s what I told my partner, Matt last Thursday. “I need to put strings on my guitar.”

We had just a few hours left before Buncombe County would begin enforcing its new “Stay home, Stay safe” policy, causing all of our county’s non-essential businesses to close, (in an effort, of course, to do our part to help flatten the curve and save precious lives).

I am not quite sure why I wanted those strings on my old guitar so badly. It certainly did not seem like an essential last-minute run. I’m not a polished guitarist and I hadn’t practiced in some time, but something about the thought of being quarantined without an instrument for ‘who knows how long’ frightened me.

The Musician’s Workshop was packed. I guess others were thinking the same way. There I stood, six feet apart in line behind a broken mandolin, a dusty saxophone, a brand new bass. Everyone was there to restring, tune-up or purchase an instrument that would help carry them through this lonesome and uncertain time. Maybe you were among those shoppers.

When we arrived back at home with the guitar, we closed the door tightly and washed our hands. “Play something,” Matt said. I picked up my freshly-tuned guitar, but my fingers picked the song. I hoped that they would choose something fun to get us dancing or laughing, but the weight of the world felt heavy on my fingertips. Instead they strummed a melody that always breaks my heart.

*(Strum chords and hum verse 1 of “En Mi Viejo San Juan”)*

This song is one that I have heard played throughout my entire life. It has been sung by family members on living room couches, before bedtime, at reunions – weddings and funerals. I’ve even sung it from the pulpit once. It’s a Spanish-language song about being far from Puerto Rico. And it’s a paradox of sorts: the music can gently rock you to sleep (like a lullaby) and the lyrics can bring you to tears.

I had wanted so badly to be distracted by these new strings, but what I realized was that what my soul really needed, was to tap into my troubles and strum a song of *Lament*.

*What are you lamenting, these long drawn out days?  
What do you find yourself singing to soothe your soul?  
What are needing when you cry out to God?*

This season has certainly been a series of unfamiliar, somber melodies. And it’s also been a time where we have leaned on songs and psalms that ground us. It has been a chapter of letting go, of holding back, of finding new, creative ways to come close.

After this week, here in Buncombe County,  
many stores are closed,  
and countless employees let go,

health care professionals are working overtime,  
school and college classes are definitely virtual through mid-May,  
those experiencing homelessness are in desperate need of a safe place to quarantine,  
we aren't worshipping in our sanctuary for the first time,  
we aren't able to be there in person for one another,  
we are learning to communicate safely on social media platforms in order to hang out,  
have meetings, even hold memorial services,  
and we are all doing our best to hunker down and keep our distance.

Like strangers in our own land, we are clumsily learning a new rhythm of life. Now, more than ever, we are acutely aware of our limitations and vulnerabilities, the shortcomings of our social programs, the fullness or emptiness of our homes. We are more aware of the preciousness of human touch, the fragility of life, the difficulty of waiting, the uncertainty about what the future holds.

It's Lenten wilderness walking – like we've never experienced. And it's hard. I imagine our questions and cries to God this week have been many: *How long, O Lord? How long?* We might be finding ourselves belting songs of praise now transposed into minor keys. And our voices might unexpectedly need to release a heart-wrenching song of *Lament*.

***Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice!***  
***Help, GOD—the bottom has fallen out of my life!***  
***Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD.***  
***De lo profundo, Dios, a ti clamo.***

Lament songs are sacred songs. Multilayered melodies that hold space for loss and longing, for anger and honesty, for connection and glimmers of hope. Laments are not new to us - far from it. They are in our Biblical DNA, spilling out across our holy texts – prayers, songs and cries of faithful ones forced into exile, experiencing trauma after trauma, desperately searching for signs of God's presence in the wilderness.

Our Biblical ancestors clung to these Lament songs to stay alive, and they passed down this sacred music through the generations in hopes that no matter the circumstance, we would never keep from singing.

Psalm 130 is a particularly poignant Lament song. It begins with a cry from the depths of one's soul. With only eight verses, the psalmist does not shy away from being raw and real. We don't know exactly what it is that has brought her such profound pain. *Perhaps she cannot bear another day – living under oppressive rule, far from the life she knew? Or perhaps it is something simpler – maybe she feels remorse for something she has done, or she does not know if she can continue on with an illness that just won't heal?* All we know is that the psalmist is at the end of her rope. Her pain is so intense that she wonders if she is being punished for something she has done. She begs for forgiveness and peace – the sort that only God can bring.

These feelings of regret and pain stretch into the moment that we are facing now as a global

family. This pandemic has shed a harsh light on our broken systems and false senses of security. We are peeling back the layers to reveal our political corruption and human selfishness, our longtime love for money over people, our failure to plan ahead, our unwillingness to work together to care for a planet that has been crying out for so long. We are coming face-to-face with a complicated reality that only God can help us heal.

*What is your soul longing for?  
Where do you hurt the most these days?  
What certainties can you cling to in a time of great uncertainty?*

We don't know how long the psalmist has been singing this song.  
We don't know how long the psalmist has been waiting for an answer.  
All we know is that the psalmist does not stop singing.

*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,  
and in God's word I hope;  
my soul waits for the Lord  
more than those who watch for the morning,  
more than those who watch for the morning.*

In our grief averse culture, lament songs give us permission to speak hard truths, about ourselves, about the world, about what we need and hunger for.

Lament is different than despair. When we despair, we lose sight of God, even the possibility of God. Our song goes quiet and we close ourselves off. When we lament, we remain open – even just a little bit. Our voices, hoarse and weary, join the faithful chorus calling out to God, to remember us and re-member us, to remind us – somehow, someway – that we are not alone, no matter the struggles we face.

This week, in the midst of such wilderness walking, I wonder if you have caught glimpses of God's presence...

There have been countless Zoom calls with people of faith, who are committed to continuing the work of the church no matter what;  
there have been friends across the country connecting over facetime, showing off newborn babies and playing charades;  
virtual Bible studies and book groups;  
doctors coming out of retirement to respond to the needs of our time;  
advocates demanding justice for detainees, the poor, the most at risk;  
people sharing messages of hope and gratitude – even songs – on social media;  
business owners shifting production – to make masks and gowns;  
parents taking walks with their children in the middle of the day;  
flowers blooming and bees buzzing – signs of Spring all around us.  
These reminders big and small gently tend to our wounds, and sing alongside our Lament songs.

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The song that my fingers wanted to strum, is a Lament song that is not meant to be sung alone. It has harmony and some call and response. I hope that you can help me sing it. It is called, *En mi Viejo San Juan* (In My Old San Juan). The Spanish lyrics speak about homesickness, about a desire to return to the place of one's birth, while facing the harsh reality that it might never be possible. Surely we can resonate with this desire to return to what's familiar, and this grief of not knowing when and how.

The chorus goes "Adios" (which means "Goodbye" or literally "To God") and the community responds with "Adios, Adios." (*Let's try that...Adios...Adios, Adios*). I can't hear you, but I am going to trust that you are there, that the Spirit will connect us with this song passed down through generations in my family. It is both a lament and lullaby, a space to name pain and sooth the soul. Don't worry if you can't understand the words, let the music speak to you in whatever you need:

*(Sung and played on the guitar)*

*En mi viejo San Juan cuántos sueños forjé  
en mis años de infancia  
mi primera ilusión y mis cuitas de amor  
son recuerdos del alma  
una tarde me fui hacia extraña nacion  
pues lo quiso el destino  
pero mi corazón, se quedó frente al mar  
en mi viejo San Juan*

*Adiós, adiós, adiós Borinquen querido tierra de mi amor  
adiós, adiós, adiós mi diosa del mar mi reina del palmar  
me voy pero un día volveré  
a buscar mi querer a soñar otra vez  
en mi viejo San Juan*

*Pero el tiempo paso y el destino burló  
mi terrible nostalgia  
y no pude volver al San Juan que yo amé  
pedacito de patria  
mi cabello blanqueo y mi vida se va  
ya la muerte me llama  
y no quiero morir alejado de ti  
Puerto Rico del Alma*

*Adiós, adiós, adiós Borinquen querido tierra de mi amor  
adiós, adiós, adiós mi diosa del mar mi reina del palmar  
me voy pero un día volveré  
a buscar mi querer a soñar otra vez  
en mi viejo San Juan*

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Friends, in this difficult Lenten season, remember this:  
our ancestors passed down songs of Lament for us to sing, and share, and make our own.  
They taught that to cry out to God is not sign of weakness, but a bold act of faith.

When we lament, we trust that there is a God who listens.  
When we lament, we join our voices with a community in search of healing and direction.  
When we lament, we hold onto that glimmer of hope that we are not alone in the wilderness.

May we feel God's presence in every empty room,  
And may we sing out louder than ever before.

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