

LEARNING LAMENT SESSION 3: (RE)LEARNING LAMENT BY THE PSALMS & SUNDAY WORSHIP

Materials: People should have a Badarak book and a Handout of Psalm 13

Introduction

We talked about how society and people get sick when Lament is absent in our first session, that our society encourages us to stuff down, deny, avoid pain instead of dealing with it, but that if we don't transform our pain we transmit it. In the last session we took a more detailed look at how Lament encourages us and others to express and acknowledge our pain. The book of Lamentations in Hebrew is titled "how" from the first line "how lonely (we are in exile)." "How" typifies the main expression/question of Lament, which names the suffering and helps release its hold on us. We contrasted this with the worldly question of dealing with pain "why," as in 'why did this happen,' which often avoids the reality of pain, is unanswerable, and does little to help us through penetrate the mystery of suffering. Today we will look very practically at what does a lament look like, and what parts does it have. We will look to the Psalms generally and the Psalms in our Badarak particularly as our weekly spiritual textbook on how to get through suffering and pain with peace and grace; to (re)learn to lament.

In doing this we return to a principal of how to live the spiritual life in Armenian Church and all traditional churches, *lex orandi lex credendi lex vivendi*; How we worship is how we believe and how we live. If you have a question about your faith in the Armenian Church you go to our worship, which is the living tradition of Christ and the Bible. And if you look at what parts of the Bible our worship is comprised of and referenced, what will you find. WHAT IS THE MOST REFERENCED BOOK OF THE BIBLE IN OUR BADARAK? By far, the psalms. All of our oldest services of the hours were nothing more than chanting the psalms, broke down into parts so that throughout the month you could read and chant the whole thing. Our Badarak, our supreme means of corporate prayer and communion with God, directly and indirectly quotes the Psalms more than any other book. We have 5 full Psalms in the course of our Badarak (131, 26, 100, 43, 93) and 6 more partial Psalms (19,24,28,113,34,130). The great percentage of our hymns are based off the form and content of the Psalms, but Christianized.

How we worship is what we believe and how we live, and our worship is basically made up of Psalms. So it is very important for us to know a little bit more about this poetic, musical form of prayer which forms our worship, our belief and is to form our lives, perhaps more than any other source of God's word.

Topical Breakdown of the Psalms

What are the Psalms generally about? Well let's break them into general categories. HOW MANY PSALMS ARE THERE? 150. It is accepted that there are 3 different kinds of psalms.

Psalms of Praise-WHERE CAN YOU FIND THAT IN YOUR SUNDAY WORSHIP? Last sung song. Psalm 34 Orhnetsits uzter (p.55). The second last song sung as we descend back down from the altar. Psalm 113 *Yeghitsi* (p.53) Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time forth for evermore. Praise psalms make up 28% of all psalms.

Psalms of Thanksgiving & Trust-WHERE DO YOU FIND THAT IN SUNDAY WORSHIP? In the middle, all of communion especially. The hymns we sing are Christian versions of the Psalms, *Ltsak* (p.50) "we have been filled with your good things O Lord, you who always feed us send down your spiritual blessings." *Kohanamk* (p.51) which is titled literally, "'We give thanks' to you who feeds us, save us, give us life.' And of course I give a direct quote from the psalms before we sing these two Christian psalms when I raise the chalice and quote from Psalm 28 Getso Ter uzzhoghvoortus ko (p.50) . Thanksgiving psalms make up 18% of all psalms.

Psalms of Lament WHERE DO YOU FIND THAT IN SUNDAY WORSHIP? Well we found praise in the end, thanksgiving & trust in the middle, maybe it would fit very nice to find Lament in the beginning. Indeed Psalm 43, is the first sung part by the deacons and priest as we ascend the high altar. I encourage you to absolutely take a closer look at this Psalm, it perfectly fits the ritual and spiritual movement of Badarak (or maybe review the words a little more now). But to now just to say that with this Psalm of Lament we are supposed to start Badarak by putting our real selves before God. God I am oppressed, depressed, people are rejoicing in my pain, why have you forgotten me...yet my hope is in God and he will lift me up.

A Way, An Example In Badarak of How to Be Whole Before God

So you can see there is a way, a process in Badarak which should reflect a process in all of our prayer and life. We must come as we are before God, as low and vulnerable creatures, before God can raise us up into his presence. The way we do that is by Lament, expressing, confessing together the ways we suffer and our smallness before God. Lament is what we begin our worship with, and is the type of prayer which shows up again in again in our liturgy, before it is intermingled with thanksgiving and then praise. Lament, by the way, makes up 40% of the content of all the psalms.

That's right, 40%, nearly half of God's book on how to worship and pray is made up of Laments, how to authentically speak to God in and through your suffering and pain. I wonder is this half of your conversation and prayer with God and yourself? I wonder, since most people aren't here from the beginning of Badarak, do we just skip over this first, essential part

of God healing our pain, which is of course acknowledging we have it, sharing it with God and perhaps others? Is this maybe why our worship is less than half of what it could be?

Ok so we broke down all the psalms and said that Laments are by far the most prevalent and therefore important. Now let's quickly look at the topics covered within laments, to see if these 3000 year old poems are just archaic and irrelevant or something very relevant to life today.

Topics within Lament Psalms-Relevant to Today

- We are mortal, with bodies that are prone to weakness (38:10; 71:9, 18; 142:3), disease (6:2-5), and pain (38:17).
- As believers we experience disappointments in life (13:2) and the darkness of depression (38:6, 8, 10; 88:3-7).
- We have people in our lives who by no fault of our own have become our enemies (69:3; 109:4-5); they lie about us (5:9), take us to court (7, 17), scheme to cause us trouble (28:3) or shame us (4:2), and try to take advantage of us at our weakest moments (71:9-11).
- We have lifelong friends who abandon us at our time of greatest need (88:8), who turn on us (55:12-14, 20-21), and who return trouble for the good that we have done for them (109:4-5).
- And sometimes even God confuses us: a God who all too often seems absent and unresponsive when we most need him (13; 88:13-14; 90), who does not intervene in the world or in our lives as we expect (10; 42:9-10; 60), or is far slower to act than we would hope (74:11; 80; 85), and, on occasion, we are even left wondering about God's faithfulness (44, 77, 88, 89).

All of these struggles, and more, are at the heart of lament. Nothing is out of bounds, nothing held back, nothing taboo. These psalms teach us that there is nothing a believer may not say to God in lament as long as the lament matches the honesty of our praise. They are always relevant because they are honest, the Psalms does not exclude, deny, or cover up the hardships present in the lives of believers.

The Psalms start off in the right place because they start off in honesty before God. But this is only a start. Now I want to take you through the different parts, the shape of lament that we will see modeled in a short Psalm and will begin to see in many places in Scripture and worship. Seeing the way of Lament we can then use it to model how we speak to God through our pain.

Contours of Lament (Look At Handout Ps 13)

Though this is not science, this is art and spiritual art at that, there are 5 basic movements of a lament addressed to God in the Psalms and in the Armenian Church tradition. Like we said with Jesus' answer to the Disciples when asked "How Do We Pray," he gave them a prayer and a way to prayer, I want to give you a Psalm of Lament but also show you the way Lament so you can trace its contours in other laments and also offer your own laments in your own words. Let's just first read Psalm 13 aloud and try to ignore the category words on the right. Read Psalm. NOW PERHAPS DIFFERENT PEOPLE WHO WANTS TO READ EACH COMPONENT OF LAMENT.

Address-You can look at this about who is making the call and who is answering. Who are we calling in a Lament, God. And though this may seem so simple it is not mentioning (and it is just 2 words in this Psalm) these two words mean everything. O Lord. You are addressing this only One who totally knows you, who can handle the naked truth about your life, can handle your pain and confusion and do something about it! Let's face it, most people, Christians included, can't even get off the ground with a Lament, because the first step is acknowledging that you aren't the master of your success or your failure, that you did nothing to make your life, it is on loan, that you aren't the boss of your own life and all the other things that are behind simply addressing God as Lord. But this is the first step. Note that many other Psalms address God more lavishly; "King of Kings, robed in majesty, how majestic is your name in all the Earth." But this Psalm is great too because, I don't know about you, but when I am in crisis and pain, I don't wax poetic I just address God directly, please God help me.

Complaint-How long? This of course isn't just a question, this is a statement of complain...how long means too long. Complaints in the Psalms and in life, if they are honest go in three different directions, and many Psalms have these 3 complaints mixed into one. First, the psalmist expresses the problem he/she personally faces, How long will I have this "pain in my soul" and "sorrow in my heart." This person is worn out from what is afflicted them. As with many Psalms the pain is anonymous so that we can put our own in. Is it emotional, spiritual or physical pain or all three. We all know that it is severe, that is all day long and that it is too long! Second the psalmist is complaining about trouble coming from others, "how long shall my enemy be exalted over me." This may be literally your enemy, the Turks or N. Korea, but much more often it is your close enemies; the one who has undermined or betrayed you, the one you love who is fighting against you, the enemy of your own weakness, sin, addiction, depression, these enemies. And finally the third source of complaint here is God. "How long will you forget me God, how long will you hide your face from me?" This can be a bit shocking and many of us feel that this kind of complaint is somewhat blasphemous. God is all good and perfect, if there is a complaint it must be my fault not God's. Yes, but God has allowed the world to go on this way, he doesn't create evil and suffering, but he tolerates it and he bids us tolerate it for a higher purpose. So we can complain. In fact, God wants us to take our complaints to him. WHAT IS THE SUNDAY OF LENT COMING UP ABOUT TAKING YOUR COMPLAINT TO GOD?

Yes the parable of the unjust judge. Retell. God wants to hear our complaints, because there is a certain intimacy in hearing complaints directly, it means you care enough and are vulnerable enough to bring hurts to someone. (Tell story of complaints from PC).

Request-These are often woven in with complaints. IN THIS PSALM WHAT IS THE REQUEST? "Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!" Pay attention to me Lord. What happens when you ignore what your husband or wife is saying? You have a very angry husband or wife. What happens if you ignore your child? They ask you something 10 times, then they start doing something bad to get your attention. (Tell story of pledge stewardship and Diocese). Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death. This also may or may not be literally. You may actually be on your final breaths, and someday we all will be, may the words of these psalms be on our lips. But more likely, the contrast here is between real abundant life, lived with joy, peace and smelling the roses , instead of the way we often 'live' our life like we are the living dead, dull routine, not noticing God or world around us, little sense of joy or fulfillment.

Motivation-For a lot of people who read the psalms, me included, this part here is as hard to do as the complaint. Not only are we supposed to complain to God about our suffering, but we also are invited to "twist God's arm," so to speak, into acting on our behalf. HOW IS THE PSALMIST TWISTING GOD'S ARM HERE? Basically we are using that age-old wisdom that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. "God if you don't help me, a good church going Christian, face my illness with grace and love, all those people around me that don't believe in you, will throw it in our face." "God, you called me into this priesthood thing, help me through it, because if I don't make it, your enemies will rejoice at another fallen pastor." Now of course our motivation only works to the extent that anyone can tell we are a Christian in the first place. God will not be motivated to act on our behalf as Christians, if no one call the difference between us as Christians or non-Christians! There is other arm twisting in the psalms and in our church tradition, one of the most famous we have talked about before, which runs through our entire sacrament tradition is calling God to his unfailing promise, *ansoot bann*. God you promised to give rest to all who come to you, and since you can't lie, please make this happen.

Confidence- So we call on God's unfailing promises, but we also have confidence in them, which brings us to the final movement of Lament in the Psalms, which is confidence. This is a return to the faith in God that we started with. It puts into proper context and justifies the complaint and arm-twisting that seems to be crossing boundaries because from beginning to end it is done in faith and humility. It is sort of saying, God I have fully expressed my concerns, I held nothing back, you know what I was thinking and feeling anyway, but now I know. And I also know, believe that I must relinquish the situation into God's hands and sing of my confidence in God. I know what God has done in the past and so I know that I can trust God with my future, even if I do not understand the present.

Conclusion

Today we saw that there is a movement in our Sunday Worship as there is a movement within the Psalms which ultimately comprise the basis for all Christian worship. That movement begins with being totally open and honest with God, not just expressing what we think God wants to hear and wants us to be, but starting with how we are. And if we are honest with ourselves as pilgrims in this life which has many trials, tribulations and causes for pain, we need to start with some of the darker stuff we usually hold within to our own peril. We respect God and are intimate enough with him to make complaints and suggestions, but always sandwiched by the acknowledgement of who God is and how he promises deliverance and abundant life to those who abide with him through trial and pain.

So I hope you have again taken another look at the language you use before God, and if it is missing authenticity, if it is missing some of the harder stuff to talk about, we aren't fooling anyone but ourselves. God knows so give it to Him. Because it is not those who lack faith who lament but those recognized for strong faith who bring their most honest and passionate feelings to God. God invites his people to speak the truth of their lives, their pain, and their confusion to the One who can do something about it (Pemberton p.32).” God wants us to bring not only our praise and thanksgiving, but also our pain and confusion, our whole selves before him so that our lives will be raised up in offering to Him; this is the only purpose of worship, of faith, of our very lives.

**Some content above adapted from Hurting with God: Learning to lament with the Psalms. By Glenn Pemberton.*