LEARNING LAMENT SESSION 5:
HOW LAMENT BRINGS US CLOSE TO GOD IN WORSHIP

Lament Brings Us Closer to God in Worship
So I had a hard time bringing this sermon series to an end, I could have gone in a lot of directions. I didn’t even get a chance to Gregory of Narek and his lamentations, and I thought we might get into talking about Lament and the Armenian Genocide. But what I think is most important for all of us is to finish this final session on Lament with something very practical. And there is nothing more practical for an Armenian Orthodox Christian than learning Lament through our weekly worship service and closest encounter with our Lord through the Divine Liturgy. Today we are going to apply what we have learned about Lament to Psalm 43 in the beginning of Badarak and the hymn Ter Voghormea at the end, and see how praying these laments each week is key to encountering and growing with God in worship.

Psalm 43
For review, going back to session 3, we said that a main building block of our Sunday worship are the Psalms and that a full 40% of psalms are psalms of lament, seeking God in dark times. In our Badarak, we say a psalm of lament at a key time in the beginning of our Badarak please turn to [p. 7] to have a look at psalm 43, which we mentioned but did not actually read line for line. All movement has meaning in ritual, and this is a key movement of Badarak, from below the altar to ascending the altar, essentially coming closer to the presence of God. And always the key to coming closer to God, or closer to anyone for that matter, is being yourself. Psalm 43 allows us to bring our true selves before God in worship, and lament always speaks the truth, warts and all to God. Let’s read it. “You God are the giver of my strength; why have you forgotten me? Why do I go sadly while my enemy oppresses me?” This is where you and I fill in the blanks. In what way do I feel forgotten by God? What enemy is oppressing me? Of course start with the closest enemy, yourself and your brokenness, your dark side that isn’t your best you, but what else.? “Why are you grieved, O my soul and why do you trouble me?” What is making me sad and pulling me down this week? If you aren’t bringing it to God, he can’t help you. “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.”

Lament reminds us, and Psalm 43 reminds us that a prerequisite of healthy worship and healthy living is standing honestly and truthfully before God and each other. Have you heard the phrase we are as sick as our secrets? It means that keeping a secret form anyone, and we all do this in at least small ways, from your spouse, from your boss, colleague, child, from God, is almost always a sign of an inner shame to tell the truth, or a fear that the person you tell will judge you or look badly on you, or of simply not being close enough to another person to risk being vulnerable before them. Often we try to keep secrets from God and form ourselves for the same reasons. We think God will
judge us, that we need to be a certain way before God, and most often, again, we are afraid of getting too close. But Psalm 43, and St. Greogry of Narek’s Prayer to the Holy Spirit which follows [p.7] are all about opening us up before God, laments that tell the truth about our sin, our pain, our struggle, taking off our masks, opening our hearts so that God can visit us in the course of worship.

**Badarak is an Encounter With God-Lament Readies Us to Meet God**

Because actually encountering God is the one and only goal of every Badarak you attend. Please hear that clearly. The one and only goal of Badarak is having a meeting with God, which of course prepares you for future meetings. **NOW, IF BADARAK IS A MEETING WITH GOD WHAT IS THE CLOSEST WE GET TO GOD IN THE DIVINE LITURGY?** Communion is the closest we get to God, it is actually taking Christ within us and thereby us being taken into fellowship with Christ.

So if we sing a psalm of Lament as the first sept to come clean before God to ascend into God’s presence in the beginning of church, it would make perfect sense if we also sang a song of lament as we got even closer to God through Holy Communion. **WHAT IS THE LAMENT THAT WE SING TOGETHER AS WE APPROACH GOD IN HOLY COMMUNION?** Ter Voghormea. Sure, we say the confession, which is of course penitential and something akin to lament, but the strongest laments, like the psalms, come in poetry and song. Why? Because our pain and suffering are often beyond normal words, music takes us beyond the literal, as does the language of poetry. It penetrates to the heart, helps us feel not just think our pains. So our main lament, Ter Voghormea, is a deceptively simple hymn. Let’s look closer at it today [p.45], with what we’ve learned about lament, so that every time we hear/sing this hymn we might tap into its full power to bring us closer in communion with Christ.

First to quickly review. Though this isn’t pure science and the steps don’t always go in order, we said that generally there are 5 parts to any good lament that the psalms follow, Ter Voghormea follows and that you should follow when you want to set your suffering and pain before God and have him help you through it. These are Address, Complaint, Request, Motivation and Confidence.

**Ter Voghormea-Pre-Communion Lament**

*Lord have mercy. Lord have mercy. Lord have mercy. Lord have mercy.*

**Address (explain): How do we address God in Ter Voghormea.** Lord. Simple but says a lot. Lord shows who is in charge, we aren’t in control of our lives God is. But also Lord in Armenian, Ter, still has the sense of care-taker, protector, keeper. When we say Ter we are addressing God as the exalted maker of the universe, but at the same time the God who somehow cares individually for each of us as a protector and keeper. Like we said before, we have Hymns/Psalms which address God more lavishly; “Ter tagavoreats vayelchutyoon zgetsav The King of Kings is robed with majesty, (psalm 93), But Ter Voghormea is great too because, when we are in crisis and pain, there is no time for formalities we just address God directly, please God help me. Ter Voghormea. It says so much with so little that repeating it 4 times is the entire 1st and 4th verse of the hymn. And that’s
nothing, as you may know there are several Armenian Church services where the priest repeats Ter Voghormea 40 or 50 times in a row.

**How else do we address God in this most basic lament of our Badarak?** Yes, All Holy Trinity. This, as we studied last lent is an address to God which is bubbling over with spiritual meaning. It moves God and prayer from one dimension into three dimensions. God is not a distant king out there, God is the action of love itself God as father, son and holy spirit, the father who provides for us, a son who journeys alongside us, and the holy spirit which now wishes to dwell within us. So in addressing God as Trinity, we are addressing the one who made us and knows our thoughts before we say them, the one who came to this world and suffered pains of this world beyond what we can imagine, and the one who can breathe his spirit and strength into you, now today March 18 at 11 AM to help you handle your pain and confusion and learn do something about it!

So to get off the ground with Lament, and for your Ter Voghormea to be effective, the first step is getting on your knees (literally or within your heart) and acknowledging that you aren’t your own and that our God who is love today continues his work of redeeming suffering for a higher calling.

**O all-holy Trinity, grant peace to the world. And healing to the sick, the Kingdom to those at rest.**

**Request (explain):** What are the requests here? Have Mercy. Grant peace to the world. Healing to the sick. Kingdom to those at rest (new life to those dead). These cover all the big needs and problems in life. Peace. Yes, peace between countries, but much more often peace within your family, in your marriage, with your children. Peace within yourself, to stop fighting and hurting yourself with bad priorities, stop acting with your ego, stop self-hate and shame, stop worrying and anxiety. These all take away peace and life. Healing. Eternal life.

**Complaint (explain):** And of course the complaints are implicit in the requests. We ask for peace because there has been and probably always will be war in the world, division in the family, the church. We ask for healing because sickness is always with us no matter how far medicine advances. We ask that death not be final, and that we be given the gift of life after death.

**Jesus, Savior, have mercy on us. By means of this holy and immortal and life-giving sacrifice. Receive, Lord, and have mercy.**

**Motivation (explain):** This is again implicit, but you can find a little ‘arm-twisting’ of God if you just turn the page to next page 46. This is the priest praying for all (and I hope you pray this too) “Be with me always according to your unfailing promise that, ‘Whoever eats my body and drinks my Blood dwells in me and I in him.’ You did so, you who love mankind. Uphold the words of your divine and irrevocable commandments.” This “taking God to task” includes the phrase that I mentioned shows up in nearly every single sacrament of the Armenian Church, “according to your unfailing promise, ansoot khostmants.” Jesus you yourself promised in a direct quote, captured in all four gospels during your last supper that “Whoever eats my body and drinks my Blood dwells in
me and I in him.” God you are not a liar, so I know you will make this happen, you are a willing participant in our communion. But of course we need to be a confident and willing participant, and that is the next step.

Confidence (explain): So it really all comes down to confidence and all comes down to us for all of this to work. Because if we say Ter Voghormea 1000x and offer to God all our complaints and requests, but don’t have confidence (confidence means with faith) that God can actually do anything about it, we throw away all that has come before. Remember that God Himself, Jesus, would only accomplish miracles if there was the smallest amount of faith the tiniest crumb of bread that he could then multiple into 5000 loaves. This is where I think it often breaks down for so many of us in the Armenian church. We have to bring something to church for it too work. We are reminded of what we are supposed to bring to church in the last two lines of Ter Voghormea. By means of this holy and immortal and life-giving sacrifice. Receive, Lord, and have mercy.

Any ideas of what we are to bring?

It all hinges on the word for our Sunday worship Badarak, the sacrifice or offering. We know of course that the offering is God offering himself to us through his son. But what else is the offering? The offering is our offering of our selves, of our presence, of our prayers. What kind of self and prayers? True, open vulnerable, the kind of self that lament, honesty in prayer brings. “The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit. God, You will not despise a broken and humbled heart.” Says lament psalm 51.

If we bring the offering of our broken heart to God then truly we are in communion with God, Jesus dwells in us and we in him, because we ‘show up’ in worship. That’s why we say Ungal receive, because there is always a dialectic, a back and forth going on in Holy Badarak, Christ is offering himself to us, but we are offering ourselves to God, vulnerable and open through lament, song and prayer.

Conclusion
So learning lament is one of those things like learning prayer, or learning to be a better husband or wife, it’s a life-long endeavor that takes a lot more than a sermon series about it to make it happen. But talking and thinking about it seriously is the first step, and it is well worth while to start wherever you are today. Because when it comes to dealing with loss and pain, and turning that loss into spiritual hope and strength-the older you get-the more you are going to need this spiritual resource. And the good news is that all of the resources are here within our Bible and our Badarak, as we saw throughout these sessions. In our weekly worship, and especially in the season of Lent, we have a classroom, a living catechism, to help us learn to bring everything before God, most especially our darkness and sorrows, so that every part of us might be transformed in the Easter light of God’s grace.