



JOURNEY INWARD *to* JOURNEY OUTWARD

The Journey Outward, Week 4: BE OPEN TO THE PAIN OF THE WORLD

Summary

This week's readings pull us into an honest awareness and lament of the world's pain and our share in it. They help us grieve, trusting that grief is a part of personal and communal healing, and a necessary step in the journey outward.

Introduction

When we engage with the world around us, we will always confront pain. It can be tempting to rush past pain, partly because it raises feelings of helplessness or guilt, and partly because it causes us to address our own hurt. The outward journey requires us to open ourselves to others' pain in the spirit of Christ, who did not shy away from the suffering of others, but entered into it with hope and love.

Psalm 13, a Psalm of Lament will frame the conversation. Like many of the Psalms, this one is honest and forthright in naming the pain and sorrow of the world. It gives us permission to be honest with God. We will also look at Romans 8 and Paul's description of groaning and waiting, all the while trusting that God hears our cries and intercedes.

The selected articles give different perspectives on the importance of lament for personal and communal wholeness. They also describe why lament is so difficult for many people to handle and lead us to ask ourselves how we make space for other people's lament.

They include some personal stories of the power of lament to lead to healing. These readings inspire empathy and remind us that listening to other people's stories is a holy act.

Note that this week, there aren't discussion questions on all of the readings. As always, please use this guide loosely and let the conversation go where the group wants to take it.

Gathering Check in and then report back on the faith practices from last week. They were:

- A. Notice when you are judging yourself and be intentional to get curious instead.
- B. Pick an issue or topic in the world that you think is in need of healing. Pray for it.

Discussion Based on the Readings

1) Psalm 13 and Romans 8.

- a. Read the Psalm together and circle the words or phrases that include lament. Then draw a line between verse 4 and verse 5. Notice that the tone shifts from lament to thanksgiving. Discuss what it means to you to have a God who wants to hear our honest cries.
- b. In Romans 8, Biblical writer Paul says that “we hope for what we do not see.” Take a few minutes and share what you are groaning for, what are you hoping for that you can’t yet see?

2) Lament

- a. Read and discuss the excerpt from “This Here Flesh,” by Cole Arthur Riley. She says, “I am most disillusioned with the Christian faith when in the presence of a Christian who refuses to name the traumas of this world.” Why do you think some people overlook traumas? Why do we rush people “out of their sorrow?”
- b. In “A Cry to God,” the authors write that “Lament is a cry directed to God...of those who see the truth of the world’s deep wounds and the cost of seeking peace.” Talk about times you have seen people do “public lament.” What was it like for you?
- c. What does lament have to do with being a Christian?



3) Personal stories

- a. In Anna Martinez's story about an estranged family, what resonated with you?
- b. And in Olive Chan's story of racism and lament, what resonated? What surprised you?
- c. Read Olive Chan's poem of lament (in bold on page 45 in the readings)...and then read her prayer (also in bold on page 45). Sit with them for a minute.
- d. What's the connection between lament and healing?

For faith practices this week:

- A. Write your own "Psalm of Lament." Bring it with you to share next week if you'd like.
- B. Every day, read Olive Chan's "Lament and Prayer" (in bold in the reading).
- C. Try to be patient with other people's lament as you encounter it. Be patient with your own pain too.

Closing

- Make sure everyone knows where and when you will meet next week.
- Next week is the last week. Do you want to have a little party or snacks?
- Close with this prayer, repeated 4 times.

May I be at peace.

May my heart always be open.

May I awaken to the Divine Light within and all around me.

May I be healed. May I be a source of healing.

The next time through the prayer, pray it for someone dear to you.

The third time through, pray it for something of great concern to you in the world. And lastly, pray it over yourself once more.



Week 4 – Be Open to the Pain of the World - Scripture

Psalm 13

¹How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

²How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

³Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,

⁴and my enemy will say, 'I have prevailed';
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

⁵But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

⁶I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Romans 8:22-27

²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes^[b] for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.



Week 4 – Be Open to the Pain of the World - Readings

This Here Flesh, by Cole Arthur Riley

I am most disillusioned with the Christian faith when in the presence of a Christian who refuses to name the traumas of this world. I am suspicious of anyone who can observe colonization, genocide and decay in the world and not be stirred to lament in some way. For all the goodness of God, my ancestors were still abducted from their homes, raped and enslaved. I will not be rushed out of my sorrow for it. And we can delight that God made the garden with all those trees of fruit to feast on, but the earth is ailing and eroding from overconsumption and neglect. I shouldn't need to recite a litany of wounds and injustices and decay in order to justify my sadness. In lament, our task is never to convince someone of the brokenness of this world; it is to convince them of the world's worth in the first place. True lament is not born from the trite sentiment that the world is bad but rather from a deep conviction that it is worthy of goodness....

I think when God bears witness to our lament, we discover that we are not calling out to a teacher but inviting God as a nurturer—a mother who hears her child crying in the night. She wakes, rises, and comes to the place where we lie. She rushes her holy warmth against our flesh and says, "I'm here."

~Cole Arthur Riley, Creator of Black Liturgies on Instagram and author of [This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us](#)



A Cry to God, by Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice

We are called to learn the anguished cry of lament.

Lament is the cry of Martin Luther King Jr. [1929–1968] from his kitchen table in Montgomery after hearing yet another death threat: “Lord, I’m down here trying to do what’s right.... But Lord, I must confess that I’m weak now, I’m faltering. I’m losing my courage. Now, I am afraid.... I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.” [1]

It was not a cry in isolation but rather a tradition King had learned from generations of African American families who were literally torn apart by slavery. The cry of lament had been passed down to him in the music of the Christian spiritual, “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child ... a long way from home.”

Lament is the cry of the psalmists of Israel in exile who, feeling abandoned by God, demanded, “Where are you, Lord?” Or the psalmists who were bothered by God’s remarkably bad sense of timing: “Why are you taking so long?” “The poor are being crushed. The wicked are winning. Don’t you see it?” The twin sisters of Psalms are prayers of praise and lament, and they are always walking hand in hand, sometimes singing, sometimes crying.

Lament is not despair. It is not whining. It is not a cry into a void. Lament is a cry directed to God. It is the cry of those who see the truth of the world’s deep wounds and the cost of seeking peace. It is the prayer of those who are deeply disturbed by the way things are. We are enjoined to learn to see and feel what the psalmists see and feel and to join our prayer with theirs. The journey of reconciliation is grounded in the practice of lament.

The prophet Jeremiah writes of Rachel’s lamenting “voice in Ramah” that can only weep at the world’s suffering:

A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more. (Jeremiah 31:15)



The voice from Ramah *refuses to be consoled*. These are profound words in a world full of easy ways of consoling ourselves. Rachel's cry refuses to spiritualize, explain away, ignore or deny the depth and truth of suffering in this world. She rejects soothing words and "can't we all just get along" sentiments. Her refusal takes seriously the rupture and wounds of the world as well as the deep cost of seeking healing. It is a protest against the world as it is and the brokenness that seems so inevitable. Rachel allows the truth to shake her to the very core. And she is remembered for this.

<https://cac.org/daily-meditations/a-cry-to-god-2023-04-19/>

Crisis Contemplation: Healing the Global Village, by Barbara Holmes

Psalms of lament are powerful expressions of the experience of disorientation. They express the pain, grief, dismay, and anger that life is not good. They also refuse to settle for things as they are, and so they assert hope.
Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*

Communal lament is important for several reasons. It wakes us up and, in doing so, makes us mindful of the pain of our neighbors, who no longer can go about business as usual when the women begin to wail. Their keening rattles both marrow and bone. Who can remain in a stupor with all of that yelling?! But lament is important for another reason: The collective wail reminds us that we are not alone. The sheer power and resonance of a grief-stricken chorus reminds us that we are beings of quantum potential. We still have agency in every cell of our being, enough to survive—even this!

Lament is risky business. . . . The reasons that lament is risky are because it challenges power structures, it calls for justice, and it makes demands on our relationships with the "powers that be," one another, and God. Once lament is released, it cannot be recalled. Lament is risky because we never know until the act is done whether or not we have gone too far.

Lament allows the pain to escape and stitches us to our neighbors. We are called to weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn. Our tears are our prayers when we can't speak, a baptism of sorts, a salty healing, a sign of our vulnerability, and a liturgical response to violence. . .

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Lament is a collective response to tyranny and injustice. When we are confronted with the horror of our violence-laden society, our mindless killing of innocents, we shift from individual sob and solitary whine to collective moans. . . . In similar fashion, the Holy Spirit groans prayers on our behalf. In the Epistle to the Romans (8:26, NIV) Paul states, “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit . . . intercedes for us through wordless groans.”

Throughout Romans chapter 8, Paul writes of sacred utterances of creation and humankind in crisis. We don’t know what will emerge from this time of tarrying, but we do know that something is being born. Like a woman in labor, there is expectation in the darkness, anticipation amid the suffering, hope permeating the pain. Something new is being born and something old is being transformed.

Barbara A. Holmes, *Crisis Contemplation: Healing the Global Village* (CAC Publishing: 2021), 95–96.

3 Ways to Hold Pain & Promise in a Chaotic World, by Caroline DePalatis

“Life will break you. Nobody can protect you from that, and living alone won't either, for solitude will also break you with its yearning. You have to love. You have to feel. It is the reason you are here on earth. You are here to risk your heart. You are here to be swallowed up. And when it happens that you are broken, or betrayed, or left, or hurt, or death brushes near, let yourself sit by an apple tree and listen to the apples falling all around you in heaps, wasting their sweetness. Tell yourself you tasted as many as you could.” – Louise Erdrich

I recently came across this quote and found it so distinctly resonant during these times.

Of course, this sentiment is relevant without a global pandemic as well. Life is full of so much – sorrow, joy, hope, hurt, pain, love. Sometimes we try too hard not to feel it. To keep ourselves together. To “be strong.”

Strength through weakness

It’s intriguing, though, how true strength comes through acknowledging your weakness, through genuine humility, through recognizing how much you lack in “keeping it all together.”



For Christ followers, this weakness is found in the form of submitting to God, to Jesus, to “take control” of the brokenness in one’s life.

For practitioners of Buddhism, the weakness is realized by “emptying out” oneself, meditating to connect with a cosmic, but abstract, purpose.

For practicing Muslims, that weakness is at the crux of ritualistic prayer, five times/day, throughout one’s adult life – something Allah requires you to do to receive his favor.

Regardless of how faith-filled, religious, or irreligious you are, there is a reckoning we all face: we don’t have full control. Life doesn’t always play fair. One day, things seem to be going on smoothly; the next day we get the diagnosis ... or are hit by a car ... or learn a child ran away ... or confront a staggering medical bill ... or lose that job we thought was stable.

How do we hold both pain and promise as we move through our days and look toward the future?

First, recognize pain and struggle is as much a part of life as is health and clarity. Don’t think you can avoid the former. It will come in some shape or form. The question is, how will you deal with it when it does? If you acknowledge it will be there – and that it can coexist with all the happy emotions and moments in your life – then you will be best prepared to walk through the storms and come out stronger and better on the other side.

Second, know that our world systems will never fully satisfy and will always be chaotic to some level, especially now. This includes all types of human striving. Effort, then, may seem worthless, but it isn’t. Sometimes you have breakthroughs, and you dive deeper into the soul of life itself. It is important to feel, to love, to go deep and yes, to stretch and strive (for the right reasons). Just always be aware that the ultimate answers are not found there; they are much deeper and found in the spiritual realm, I believe.

Third, acknowledge that it is only in darkness can we see the light of a candle burning most brightly. That small amount of light can illuminate the darkest cave and, metaphorically, the darkest hour and the darkest heart. Contrast is key to the human experience. It is in sadness where we can be met with joy; in loneliness where we can find the deepest connection if we but look. The concept of yin and yang fits well here.

So, how does this cause us to “be” in our world?

Recognizing these truths – and living by them – I can see several logical outcomes:

1 | We see and appreciate the humanness of all. We see others as humans – like us – first. This is hard to do in an era of Covid isolation and partisan divides. But we need to continually tear down



the walls built by the “us-them” approach and view others with compassion and grace, recognizing that most people are just trying to do their best and make it through another day.

2 | We cultivate a distinct, sincere humility, recognizing how much we do not know. This is not to say we cannot develop expertise in a few areas. But, rather, even in our expertise, recognize we don't know the full scope of the factors and issues out there. Also, we learn how to be comfortable, how to live with, the uncertainty. We lean into inquiry, not hard-and-fast certitude in the face of the big questions of life.

3 | We acknowledge our tendency to judge others. Yet, in fact, we do not know anyone else's full backstory. If we don't know it, we need to hold space for them and view them with more compassion and less disdain, even when their behavior and, especially, the media, wants to stoke our tendency to judge and seek in-group affiliation.

4 | We become more aware of our tendency to confirm our own biases. When we recognize this, we intentionally seek to thwart them and become more empathetic, to listen and learn. This is not easy; it is a continual and deliberate process. We can always do better.

5 | We lean into the opportunities to be part of the light, to be part of the solution, to the various problems bubbling all around us in this world. We make a firm commitment not to contribute to those problems. We check ourselves every step of the way.

...Finally, I believe it is so important to realize you are not alone in this tension of holding pain and promise at the same time in this quite fragile time in human history. If you feel as if the trauma of it all is just too much to bear, there is help...

Check your own well-being frequently during these times. Don't be afraid to ask yourself the question, “How am I *really* doing?” and admitting to yourself if you need help. And then take the steps towards personal health that will contribute to the better world we all want. It starts with you.

<https://yourglobalfamily.com/blog/3-ways-pain-promise-chaotic-world>, Posted on 10/02/2021



Rising from the Ashes of Racism: A Lament and a Hope, by Olive Chan

"How is kindergarten?" my aunt asks me.

"Good," I reply.

"How many other Chinese kids are in your class?" she continues.

I shrug my shoulders. "I don't know."

It hadn't occurred to me to pay attention to such things. My friends were in my class and that was all that mattered.

Eventually, I would realize that as a child attending a private German school in the suburbs of Toronto in the 1980s, I hadn't noticed other Chinese kids in my class because I was one of only two.

It's recess. My elementary school classmates singsong, "Chinese, Japanese..." pulling their eyes into upward and downward slants. I join in, not wanting to be left out. I feel a bit silly because I don't need to pull on the corners of my eyes to get them to look that way. They aren't targeting me in particular, but somewhere deep down, I get the sense that maybe they are making fun of me.

"Ch-nk!" the boys holler as they ride past me on their bikes, laughing. I don't know what that word means but I can tell it's not spoken in kindness. Later, I learn that the term is derogatory, and I feel betrayed somehow.

"*Make-up Tips to Bring Out Your Eyes,*" the words read invitingly. I stand in front of the bathroom mirror with the pamphlet on the counter and my small compact of eye shadow in hand, ready to learn how to make my teenage face prettier.

Step One: Use the lightest shade to cover your entire upper eyelid from the brow bone to your lashes.

Okay, I can do this.

Step Two: Brush the medium shade along the crease below your brow bone.

Crease? What crease? I don't have a crease. Apparently, my eyes are supposed to be recessed under the brows and applying a slightly darker shade of eye shadow along that indent makes my eyes stand out better.

I try it anyway and it looks awful. Confused, I look for instructions elsewhere. I search every single magazine and brochure I can get my hands on. Same elusive crease. I am frustrated and disappointed. I conclude I will never be beautiful like those models. Too many years later, I come across a makeup tutorial for Asian women. Suddenly it all makes sense. Asian eyes don't have that crease.



The Christian magazine for teen girls is running a contest. One lucky girl will get to be on the cover of their magazine. The qualifications are high. They're looking for someone who is beautiful both inside and out. I feel unsure because all the girls featured have been white or, occasionally, African American.

Do I have what it takes? I labour over my application and mail it to the United States. I never hear anything from them. Maybe I'm not beautiful enough. Maybe it's because I don't have the eye crease.

I'm in my mid-20s, on a ferry off the coast of British Columbia. An older white man approaches me with an overly enthusiastic smile.

"*Ni hao ma?*" he beams. He tries to practice his Mandarin on me. I stare at him. "Where are you from?" he asks me in English.

"Canada." I answer. "I was born in Canada." I don't let on that I am conversant in Mandarin. I don't like the feeling of being a means to an end.

I'm 36 now and a mother of two young girls. I'm watching a video of three black women from the UK sharing about "micro-aggressions" they have experienced ("micro-aggression" referring to the casual degradation of a marginalized group).

Something stirs in me. They're like me, I realize. They have been made to feel less purely based on their appearance and race. Their stories invite me to look at my own wounds.

I've been reluctant to address racism. I want to dismiss my wounds because I am not black. What right do I have to speak of racism against me when people of my race aren't being killed unjustly and when my people aren't being incarcerated at alarming rates? How does my voice count in a conversation that is predominantly black and white? Do my experiences even qualify to be named under the banner of racism?

On a grand scale, we all bleed red and our hair all turns grey. So why make a big deal about our differences? Why talk about these wounds?

And yet.

I think of my own kindergartener who comes home with a paper cut. It is small, but we still examine it, clean it, and tend to it so that it can heal. The severity of a wound does not determine its significance. I hear Love inviting me to take a closer look at how I have been hurt. So I set aside some

time and sit in the ashes, recalling my own experiences with racism, welcoming my tears, and lamenting all the brokenness.

With God in the silence, I lament...

For the way we fail to see each other as entire persons.

For the destructiveness of generalizations.

For the pain of rejection.

For lost opportunities for genuine connection.

For our ignorance about other people's experiences.

For seeing the world as us vs. them.

For all the times our deepest question of "Do I belong?" is met with No. Or Silence.

For the systems in place that perpetuate misunderstanding and violence toward each other.

For how blind we are to the glory of Christ in each person.

For how dismally short we fall of loving like Jesus.

For the sting of being judged based on appearances.

And for judging others.

I lament that my ego clamours so loudly for the evidence of inclusion and that I'm so insecure about my status as *accepted*, that I would feel slighted by others when they fail to affirm me. And I lament that our need to be accepted drives us to draw dividing lines in the first place.

Out of my lament arises a prayer that surprises me. It is a prayer of hope and freedom:

God, I want to be so grounded in my identity of being wholly beloved that I would neither exclude others because they are also wholly beloved, nor would I be disturbed when I am excluded because I already know I am loved.

Suddenly, I see a way forward in all of this. Suddenly, I can offer forgiveness freely.

"Why struggle to open a door between us when the whole wall is an illusion?" asked Rumi. His question makes me gasp. There is another way of being! Jesus, help me to see past the illusion. Help me to think beyond black and white (or yellow, in my case).

I realize we may never see the eradication of racism on this side of eternity. And even if we do, our core loneliness will still cause us to feel isolated or excluded for one reason or another. But if we can at least have moments where we are convinced in the core of our beings that we are unshakably loved by God, we stand the chance of living at peace within ourselves, and by extension, at peace with others. So now, when I pray for peace, I pray that each of us would live in the truth of how utterly, deeply, and entirely loved we are by God. Because that is where peace begins.



Olive Chan, "Rising From the Ashes of Racism," <https://shelovesmagazine.com/2017/ashes-racism-lament-hope/>

A Good Cry, by Anna Martinez

My friend Laura is a survivor of a chaotic upbringing. Raising her own daughters, she worked hard to heal and provide a healthy environment for them. Even so, inexplicably her youngest daughter, Sarah, has cut Laura and the family out of her life. She describes the experience as being surreal. Her pain has led her to examine and own what role she might have played in this estrangement and to seek counseling and healing through community. Sadly, the separation persists, causing a strange grief. If Sarah had died, there would be an adjustment to a new reality. But as the days have stretched into a year, this grief taunts Laura with the hope that "Maybe today is the day Sarah will reach out," or she wonders, "Maybe I should just let Sarah know one more time, that I am open and longing to reconnect".

Laura is trying to move forward and be okay with or without the longed-for reconciliation. She's trying to live well in this season of ever-present sorrow. Early Sunday she was passing out flyers in her neighborhood for the National Night Out when she met a neighbor and her eleven-year-old daughter. As the neighbor and Laura happily chatted, the young daughter triggered many memories of her Sarah. In the midst of the conversation, Laura's grief moved unbidden from her gut, to her chest, and up to her face where tears brimmed. It hurt too much to be so powerfully reminded of and so inexplicably separated from her own daughter. Laura quickly excused herself, trying to push down the grief and the tears so she could get home, get this emotion under control and get ready for church and for a busy day ahead.

Preparing for church, she became aware of a quiet whisper across her heart that said, "Stop it. Stop trying to keep it together so hard. Just stop. Say what you need ...". Listening to that whisper, Laura told her husband, "You go ahead to church without me. I need to stay home today". After some caring protests, Jonah got in the car and went on his way. When Laura was sure he was gone, she gave herself over to the grief that had bubbled up that morning. She let the tears flow and she let the sobs out. The pangs of grief had been so deep, she fully expected to be there all day. When the tears dried up and her body was done shaking with sobs, she glanced at the clock. It had only been 7 minutes. In that brief time of being fully present to the grief she had pushed away, she found a new lightness to her being that was not there earlier.

I'm grateful my friend Laura attended to her grief intentionally. This is part of healing and self-care. When we allow ourselves to be with the emotions, they do not destroy us and often we find that the release of the depth of grief is a vital part of moving forward. This is lament. This is the purpose of lament. In lament we are fully present to the pain, giving it full expression so that we can find the help and clarity to move forward and somehow, from this process, we can find signs of hope that we could not see when we were spending our energy pushing down or denying our grief or pain.

This story was told to Anna Martinez and shared with permission. Names have been changed.



