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Worship and the Lament

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**Abstract**

Worship and the Lament

By Andrea Byer-Thomas

Many interpreters of the Bible have chosen to tone down the reality of the ever-green-like presence of trauma in the human experience. Hence, worship practices focus mainly on the possibility of a good outcome without acknowledgement and treatment of the many-nuanced hardships of life. This study aims to encourage the worshipping community—both laity and clergy—to re-examine its worship structure and to learn again to appreciate the value of lament in worship as a tool of liberation and healing. In addition, it aims to shape an understanding of an appropriate relationship between worship and lament to mitigate human suffering by recasting lament as worship through a contextual reading of Psalm 137 and the book of Ruth.

# Worship and the Lament

By

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## Introduction

*"When we lose someone we have loved deeply, we are left with a grief that can paralyze us emotionally. When they die, a part of us dies too."*
*—Henri Nouwen, Bread for the Journey*

When I came upon my grandmother, she was sitting at her usual spot at the kitchen table with her favorite set of books at hand: her find-a-word puzzle book and her Bible, along with a writing pad and pen. I sat across from her and we began to talk. Some minutes into the conversation, a question that I had long carried burst out of me: "Granny, how do you do it? How do you live after two of your children have died?" Granny stated: "I do not know. I do know that if I wake up, I will just live." As if acknowledging for the first time the deaths of two of her children (one being my mother), she started to cry. For what felt like a very long time, she continued to cry, intermittently naming some of the other troubles she has carried, asking God for help, using words from the Psalms. In her lament, she also talked about gleaning and the abuses she had suffered while doing so.

My grandmother was an active church member who read her Bible daily, regularly attended Bible studies and prayer meetings, sang the hymns of the faith, and prayed about everything. Yet she did not know she could name the pains in her life, let alone that the Church, her faith community, has a long tradition of lamenting such sorrows, publicly and individually. My grandmother had been indoctrinated by her worshipping community not to question God, nor to spend too much time thinking about the hardships of life. On her release from the prison of this contradictory approach to her relationship with God, she gave herself permission not only to name and acknowledge, but also to lament. It was then that she could finally begin to heal.

Billie Holiday sang of the evergreen-like presence of trauma in human life. Her song, "Good morning heart-ache, sit down," is advice from which many human beings would benefit. And surely the Bible offers us many examples of this human need to pause, acknowledge, and heal from life's many-nuanced hardships.

**Research Goal**

This aim of this study is to encourage the worshipping community—both laity and clergy—to re-examine its worship structure and to learn again to appreciate the value of lament in worship as a tool of liberation and healing.

**Research Question**

This research will seek to answer the question: How can a reading of the book of Ruth and Psalm 137 through the lens of liberationist hermeneutics both shape an understanding of an appropriate relationship between worship and lament and mitigate human suffering by recasting lament of such suffering as worship?

**Definition of terms**

*Worship*: The nature of worship as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is "to honor or show reverence for as a divine being or supernatural power." In my community, and for the purpose of this paper, worship is framed primarily as a set aside time for collective reverencing of God using music, prayers, reading of Scripture, a sermon, an appeal for financial contributions, and a parting blessing or benediction.

*Trauma*: An injury (such as a wound) to living tissue caused by an extrinsic agent; a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury.

*Lament*: Theologically speaking and from the perspective of the Psalmists from whom we get many of our biblical laments, laments are generally dominated by three elements: God, the one who is lamenting, and the enemy/pain/trauma. Laments begin with the acknowledgment that something is out of sync with God's plans and promises—for example, that we are suffering from some kind of hardship or harm. Laments typically describe a person's or a people's alienation, disconnection, and exile. Expressed in a communal worship setting, laments usually move from plea to praise, thus creating a more inclusive approach to the act of worship.[1]This approach is not exclusively focused on the 'good days of life.' Walter Brueggemann, in "The Costly Loss of Lament"[2] describes this revolutionary component of lament as the redistribution of power.[3] This redistribution of power allows for the lamenter to ask God questions about humanity, eschatology, and even God's nature. It allows the lamenter to also challenge the power dynamics at work. For instance, if God is as omni as historically claimed by the church, why is this person dead? Did God not see this coming? If so, why did God not stop it from happening? In this model, is a kind of melting pot that can help the lamenter and the community face more deeply the mystery of God.

*Liberationist*: A person, actions, or principles that identify and advocate for freedom, identify and remove obstacles to human flourishing. The act of liberating; the state of being liberated.

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[1] Stephen Breck Reid, Listening In – A Multicultural Reading of the Psalms, Abingdon Press, 1997, 9
[2] Walter Brueggermann, The costly Loss of Lament, JSOT 1986, 59

*Hermeneutics*: the study of the methodological principles of interpretation (as of the Bible). In this work, I use a mix of hermeneutics of suspicion[5] and liberation. To learn more about how a hermeneutic of suspicion[3] functions, read works from Musa Dube, Randall Bailey, and Renita Weems, among others. I chose these two tools because they are the main lenses through which I read Scripture. A hermeneutic of suspicion reads a text in a manner that exposes the text to other possible meanings which may or may not be intentionally repressed.

**Methodology**

The systematic literature review methodology will be used for this research. I will review how other authors have shaped thoughts around lament in worship based on their readings of Ruth and Psalm 137, including how these readings, interpretations, and understandings have been used to support or suppress the lament as part of worship. I will interview people in the worshipping community to get a sense of how their lives have been affected by their understanding and expressions or lack thereof of lament, as well as how they have experienced responses of these in and from the worshipping community.

**Search Procedure**

I began by developing a list phrases or keywords with which to search various databases and search engines. The resources used include Pitts Reference Library, ATLA Religion Database, ProQuest, and EBSCOhost. Search Engines used are Google (google.com) and Google Scholar (scholar.google.com). The inclusion of the two search engines is meant to target and identify materials, such as relevant commentaries, although these tools are considered non-

[3] https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199336593.001.0001/acprof-9780199336593-chapter-4, retrieved 03.23.2022

academic. The keywords/phrases used in this search were: “liberation and lament,” “worship and lament,” "liberationist hermeneutic," "liberationist theology," and "biblical liberationist exegesis." For commentaries, the research focused from the start on already established commentators and thinkers, e.g., Wil Gafney, Eboni Marshall, Traci West, Musa Dube, Michael Eric Dyson, Cornel West, Miguel A. De La Torre, Luke A. Powery, alongside others who meet the criteria.

The search results were then examined to determine whether they comply with the inclusion/exclusion criteria established for this research. The inclusion criteria were as follows: material that has been published within the last ten years, materials that are published within the USA, UK, Australia, Africa, and materials published in the English language. The exclusion criterion is as follows: materials published on personal blogs, materials that do not cite any external sources, and materials written by authors with no established writing reputation.

Once I had examined the search results to determine what to include, I examined the included materials to determine their relevance to the research question, first by title, then by abstract/preface. Those that were not relevant were excluded. The final examination was at the full-content level. Only those materials that were considered relevant at this level were then used in the research. The Pitts Library staff assisted me in analyzing possible the materials for this research.

**Expected Outcomes**

I expected that this research would broadly improve the practice of discipleship by helping to create an intimate relationship between oppressed/grieving individuals and faith communities on one hand and with the God of the Bible on the other. I expected to be able to learn and relate useful information describing how biblical texts have informed the individuals of

the worshipping community. Expected outcomes included sharpening my skills of biblical reading and interpretation, as well as coming to a deeper awareness of the ways to proclaim and live into a more open-ended and robust interpretation of the biblical texts. I expected that these outcomes would lead to a re-orientation of the congregation(s) towards a more ethical understanding of God's character. I also expected that this research would engender a more meaningful and ethical way for individuals and communities to understand and practice trauma, grief, and lament in relation to worship.

**Influence by Third Parties**

The scope of this research has been influenced by sources other than myself, including my research advisor, members of my cohort, supervisors, and Pitts Library reference staff. I expected this influence to continue into the research and reporting phases of the project. The influence of supervisors played a crucial role in streamlining the study, especially in the determination of the appropriate research method for this study. The Pitts Library reference staff influenced the proposal by pointing me to the most appropriate resources for this study and by suggesting the most appropriate databases to search for existing materials on my topic of study.

**A Series of Theological Musings Towards A Response to The Church's Repression of the Lament**

What follows in this section are excerpts from my Facebook live 'Teaching Tuesday' episodes that I have delivered to the listening audience help address the need for churches to encourage lament. The presentations are labeled here in the order in which they were presented each Tuesday.

**1) Trauma and Religion**

*"The tears streamed down, and I let them flow as freely as they would, making of them a pillow for my heart. On them it rested."— Augustine, Confessions IX, 12*

*"Don't put on a happy face because you think it's expected. Grief denied is grief unhealed."— Barbara Bartocci, Nobody's Child Anymore*

We see the cliches on t-shirts, bags, bumper stickers, notebooks—everywhere really: "I am too blessed to be stressed." "Life is hard, but God is good." "Faith over fear." These are only a few of the cliches the church has curated in what I believe is an effort to stem the flow of lament – a language which has been sadly removed from the church's dictionary as I have experienced, especially in the Caribbean churches. Such cliches lull people into a false sense of well-being and expectation. They suggest that trauma and grief are adversarial and abusive. I contend that ignoring these life-altering events and "worship-washing" them rather than confronting them lulls people into a false sense of well-being.

John 11 describes Jesus in deep agony, bawling at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. We see him again in Matthew 26 begging for release from the agony of his impending execution. The same Jesus who healed others is experiencing agony. Did Jesus choose to feel this pain,

rather than choosing the option of not feeling it? If Jesus chose to feel this agony, perhaps this is his way of inviting us to understand that he truly enters our sufferings with us, and that the traumas we experience we should likewise not ignore or suppress with praise. To separate Jesus from suffering is to miss vital parts of who Jesus is.

If Jesus felt the weight of trauma, and did not suppress his emotions, what of us humans? I grew up in Antigua in a culture which did not have a healthy framework for processing or language for discussing traumas of death, sexual abuse, or similar evils. For the most part, we were encouraged to "get over it" as quickly as possible or, at the least, not to talk about it too much – meaning not at all. There were comments that suggested that talking about the painful will cause it to stay with us, and thus not talking about it, may make it less present. Yet, the realities of trauma were ever present and damaging. Antigua is a country which was colonized by the British and has its own history of being suppressed and marginalized. In retrospect, it seemed as if nobody knew that one could give oneself permission to grieve or to use whatever language one had for the hurt that one felt. Sadly, not much has changed.

Certain common questions persist in my religious Christian communities: "Why do bad things happen?" "Why do the tectonic plates in Haiti act in such a way as to cause so much devastation?" "What about the wildfires in California?" "What about when children are born with debilitating diseases?" "What about when children die before their parents?"

Answers remain elusive and there is no clear and prescribed way to resolve the pain and uncertainty. The biblical writers struggled to understand how to respond to suffering and evil, just as we do today. Their struggle is seen throughout the Bible. The church today appears to struggle even with acknowledging that some things remain a mystery.

Suffering and evil are two pervasive and common aspects of life. Some examples are hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, accidents, structural and systemic racism, along with other forms of dehumanization. What the Christian believes about God, belies any suggestion that God desires any of this for creation. Therefore, the church should no longer participate in the cover up. Instead, the church is being called upon by those who suffer because of the historically shallow expressions – including myself to become a page where people feel free to author their stories of hurt, their questions of "Why?" rather than the dictionary of shallow phrases it has been.

Come over to the book of Job as a type of orientation. Observe Mrs. Job and listen again to the advice she gives her husband. In Job 2:9, whilst Job was holding court in defense of his faith after the deaths of his children and the loss of his wealth, she tells Job to curse God and die I posit that Mrs. Job is one of the most honest and brave people we have in this book. See her as a mother. Understand that the same children whose deaths Mr. Job grieved are the same children that she carried, birthed, taught, and loved. Yet, she is often vilified in Christian settings because of our perceptions of the "right way" to respond to trauma. She is labeled as foolish. We warn our daughters not to be like her. I say: Be like her! Be honest! Acknowledge your trauma! Then transform it, so that you will stop perpetuating it.

God is indeed good. However, the goodness of God does not mean we should deny our humanity. Emphasizing the goodness of God does not in any way deny the horrors we confront or ascribe those horrors and that suffering to God. Holiness does not preclude us from moving toward wholeness. And moving towards wholeness demands we face the holes in our lives—the pain and anguish, the trauma and grief God prefers our authentic anger over our pretentious praise. Try it. God can handle it.

**2) The Church, Worship, and the Lament in Psalm 137**

*"It is quite alright to show God where it hurts."*

*—Andrea Byer-Thomas, Journal entry, 2021*

Most of the psalms are categorized as psalms of lament. We love quoting them because they echo our thoughts. They are often raw and rife with pain, naming trouble, and crying for help. They offer us words through which to express the messier components of our lives. As Christians, we often feel some sense of safety in praying the Psalms because they are in the most venerated book – the Bible.

In a section in the back of the United Methodist Church hymnal are verses from select Psalms. Psalm 137 is one of those Psalms. Yet despite our love for the Psalms, we maintain a reservation and a kind of shyness about using them in worship. It appears that worship, as presently modeled, is not the place for stating: "God, I am troubled and in trouble. Help me."

Nonetheless, the Psalms, with the rest of the Bible are filled with emotions. These expressions are everywhere in the Bible: anger, joy, sorrow, uncertainty, frustration, despair and others. They are present in the Psalmists' lament of their troubled states and in their cries to God for help (Psalm 22), in Jesus' angst as he cleanses the temple in Matthew 21:12-17, in Jesus' weeping over Jerusalem in Luke 19:41-44, in Elijah's expression of fear in 1 Kings 19. This being so, how do we then account for our lack of deep and thoughtful responses to the traumas in our lives? The church at times, it seems, has become this very clinical entity without a triage unit. How do we mitigate human suffering as worship?

The book of Psalms was the hymnal of the ancients.[4] The people did not have hymns such as "How Great Thou Art" There was, however, Psalm 137. Though not specifically categorized as one of the lament Psalms, and often avoided, Psalm 137—the great Psalm of imprecation—acknowledges trauma, grief, and a fractured worship process: "By the rivers of Babylon…" People who have experienced forms of exile, displacement, or disenfranchisement can use Psalms such as 137 as a framework around which to think about their emotional responses. It offers language that such people can use to give expression to the deeply rooted pain that comes with the sense of not belonging anywhere.

Psalm 137 focuses on the trauma experienced by a people who were exiled in Babylon. It explores and exposes the suffering of the people and their expressions of pain, anger, grief, and hopelessness. One senses the deep well of alienation from their homeland and temple that the Psalmist expresses on behalf of the people. In the Psalmist' call for God to unleash wrath against those who did harm to the people, is a knee-jerk-type response to deeply felt trauma.

The African Diaspora can readily relate to the emotions and language in Psalm 137, as many of them are descendants of captured and enslaved individuals.[5] Here, in this Psalm, the air is stained by the emotional storm the Psalmist identifies. How, indeed, can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? (vs. 4) To refer to the place where one has lived all of life as a 'strange land' is itself a kind of conundrum. Many of the African Diaspora—including myself—have not yet been to Africa, to 'The Mother Land.' Yet, we yearn to feel the soil of that place under our feet and inhale the air that wafts through the trees carrying the stories of our history. For us,

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[4] Mark R. Shipp, "How Can We Sing the Lord's Song? The Psalms as the Church's Hymnal" (2009). *Lectureship and Summit Audio Collection*. 771. https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/sumlec_audio/771

[5] Valerie *Bridgeman "A Long Ways from Home": Displacement, Lament, and Singing Protest in Psalm 137* -*A version of this article was presented in the Project Psalms Section at the XXII Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament, 4-9 September 2016, Stellenbosch, South Africa.

although we were born in lands outside of the continent of Africa, we are spiritually tied to the land where our ancestors were born.

Descendants of enslaved and colonized peoples of the African Diaspora here in the United States and in the Caribbean often feel displaced even in the lands of their births. Indeed, such persons find it strange to live as if captivity did not happen—as if our children were not snatched, sold, or killed. Or as if our women were not raped, and our men not cruelly castrated, as if we were not worked to death in the searing heat and the freezing cold. Here, Psalm 137 is read through the lenses of a people who have experienced and are experiencing state sponsored violence, terror, and other forms of systemic harmful influences.

In her book, *Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture*, Cheryl Sanders describes the lives of African Americans, particularly those in the holiness movement, as an "exilic dialectic." She posits that for centuries African Americans have not had a sense of being "home."[6] This sense of alienation continues in our time through practices such as redlining by the banks and mistreatment and rejection by property owners. To date, the people of the African Diaspora are still learning to "sing the Lord's song in a strange land." People of color born in the US and immigrants of color are often told to "go back" from where we are from by White people who may have claimed space as theirs alone.

In the Caribbean where I am from, we use the term "Babylon" to describe systems of subjugation that include the British-influenced police force. When Bob Marley sang "Chant Down Babylon," it was a lament of yearning for a place to belong in peace. In his examination of how Caribbean artists have employed the lament, N. S. Murrell notes that lamenting the impact of colonialism and slavery with their legacy of oppression and poverty in Jamaica, Rastafarians

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[6] Sheryl J. Sanders "African American Worship in the Pentecostal and Holiness Movements," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 32, no. 2 (Fall 1997), 105-120.

join the Hebrew refrain from the Babylonian captivity. They do so by singing the words found in Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, there we wept, when we remembered Zion. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (vs. 1) Rastas, however, have historically refused to wait for help from the seemingly silent Judeo-Christian God who sanctioned the Jewish Babylonian captivity, four hundred years of African enslavement, and the oppression of Black people. When the Rastas sing: "Buffalo Soldier in the heart of America, stolen from Africa . . . fighting on arrival," still "fighting for survival" (Bob Marley and the Wailers), they are taking charge of their own destiny; they are "Chanting down Babylon."[7] For the Caribbean Diaspora, to "chant down Babylon" is to innovate the gift of lament by protesting the death-dealing systems of the day.

Of course, human beings and organizations such as the church still suffer many catastrophes: we experience different forms of displacement, and our bodies are often riddled with disease and we watch our dreams die. Or our jobs end, and our independence is diminished. Or church members die or leave the community. Or pastors die. Or pastors' children die. Or the church is talking about splitting. Or hurricanes, earthquakes, and wildfires devastate. Or racism devours, filling prison cells disproportionately with Black and Brown bodies. These are some of the many reasons that today, we, too, like the Psalmist, have, to lament.

In verse 4 of Psalm 137, the Psalmist asks, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" This cry of the pain of displacement is felt at a visceral level. In thinking about the psalmist's announcement, it may be worthwhile to ponder: "What is the Lord's song?" Is the song of Psalm 137 not the Lord's song also? Is it not an honest song to the Lord? Personal

[7] Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, David T. Shannon, and David T. Adamo, "Psalms," in *The African Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. Hugh R. Page Jr., (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 225.

experience has revealed the huge gap that often exists in the church's worship life and what is considered in Christian communities to be appropriate sounds and songs for the Lord.

Where worship experiences should include a kind of therapeutic movement, instead, it seems, we often fail to think of it in this way.[8] Worship should include both the "Praise the Lord!" and the "Lord, I have a trouble." One does not have to be brokered at the cost of the other. One way the church, as I have experienced, has demonstrated short-sightedness is its lack of attention to the mental and emotional well-being of the community. To allow people to lament their woundedness is to build healthy and sustainable bridges to the world. The worship experience by the collective, creates room for people to connect with each other and with God. It also provides space for those who move from spectator to participant to have the courage to be vulnerable before God. This kind of therapy lets people willingly enter into their own stories with the support of the other participants, thus removing any sense of isolation and separation. If we continue to ignore the need to make room for the lament in our worship expressions, "may our tongues cling to the roofs of our mouths." (Psalm 137:6) [12][OBJ].

Verses 8 and 9 ["O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!"] are cringe-worthy in their seeming call for violence. I have heard a church leader say that if it were up to him, this part of the Psalm would not be included in the Canon. He stated that he would 'clean it up.' These verses, though difficult to say in a worship setting, echo the ethic of Revelation 16 showing God bringing both salvation and destruction of wickedness. The world needs the deliverance and reversal that the Psalm begs for. If we are not angered by

[8] Ray Repp, *"Hear O Lord"* Otter Creek Music, 1966.

persecution and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves, and we do not want God to do away with these evils, then there is something not right with us.[9]

The editors of The United Methodist Church hymnal made the choice to include Psalm 137 in its entirety. This is a choice to not choke out the sound of those wounded by displacement and other traumas. In the face of crisis after crisis, it makes sense for us to pray with the psalmist, bringing to God's attention the injustices of our world and calling upon God to take action against the constant displacement of people groups caused by racism, war, and the ultimate push for dominance. Doing so reminds us to release our own desire for vengeance to God so that it may be refined. At the same time, its words remind us not to overlook the evils that must be stopped. Given God's commitment to holding sinning accountable intergenerationally, a psalm like Psalm 137 also stands as a sober warning not to perpetrate injustice ourselves. If we participate in oppressing others, we are those upon whom God will visit judgement.

Psalm 137 expresses a wide range of emotions around death and displacement. The book of Ruth does as well. Hence, this work will include theological thoughts on the book of Ruth through similar lenses of liberation. The book of Ruth is one of the biblical stories that have been read through the single interpretive lens of redemption. For the purposes of this paper, the book of Ruth is included as an example of how the church has consistently rushed people to the rejoicing end without acknowledging the existence of trauma in the in-between spaces.

Currently, I serve as pastor in what The UMC terms a cross-cultural, cross-racial context. There is no one at my church to whom I can relate either culturally or racially. The book of Ruth can allow readers to track the movement from displacement to re-placement, and the

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John Goldingay*, Psalms Volume 1: Psalm 1-41,* Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 504.

other moving parts in between. This reading was done through the lenses of my own need for the Christian worshipping community to provide for the lack of honesty around trauma, and to learn better ways to accompany someone in the aftermath of trauma over the long haul. I thought of how Job's friends did not do this well. Because my congregation did not do this well, it fractured our relationship to where I felt I could no longer pastor in that setting. My family was deeply wounded by the isolation that we felt. Consequently, we were thrust into another kind of 'strange land' without the company of those with whom I had sat through their strange lands. In wrestling with this on top of the death of my son Arleigh, I began to re-discover the healing power of lament as a way not to overlook such suffering, isolation, and evil. As I read the book of Ruth this way, I saw the women (Ruth, Naomi, and Orpah) in various stages of despair. Naomi's re-naming of herself resonated for me the deep well of hurt I feel at my son's death. In this re-naming is a powerful lament.

My own experiences have shown me the value of retrieving practices of lament in my own life and in my work in the church as pastoral leader. The work that I am doing is helping people to unmask their pain, and moving towards transformation, thus shifting the church's culture that has diminished or ignored trauma and suffering. What follows are more excerpts from my Facebook live 'Teaching Tuesday' episodes that I have delivered to help churches address the need for churches to encourage lament.

**3) Displacement in the Book of Ruth**

*"The Book of Ruth is a short story about negotiating life's seasons. It catches up death, grief, loss, famine, life, recovery, survival and harvest."*

*—Andrea Byer-Thomas, Teaching Tuesdays: About Ruth*

The Bible is not new to stories that start out bad and turn out good. Such stories are beloved because they support the way the Christian community often romanticizes the Bible, skipping to the happy endings that we hope to attain ourselves. The story of Ruth and Boaz is one story. For the purpose of this research, we will explore this story through the lenses of exploring and exposing the pain and uncertainties often left unexplored.

The book of Ruth follows a pattern of displacement. Dr. Judy Fentress-Williams teaches that the book of Ruth itself has moved around a bit in the Christian Canon. The book appears in a collection called the Megilloth, or festival scrolls. Depending on its ordering, the book occupies different positions. For instance, if the Megilloth is ordered according to the presumed date of authorship, Ruth is first. If the Megilloth is ordered based on when the readings take place liturgically, Ruth is second after Song of Songs. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), the book of Ruth follows the book of Judges. The presence of themes in the book of Ruth, such as famine and harvest, loss and recovery, death, grief and birth, make the book one that functions well in its time and beyond its time.[10]

The book of Ruth begins by telling the story of a family's journey to Moab from a famous city in biblical traditions – Bethlehem. The name Bethlehem means "house of bread" and here in Ruth 1, Bethlehem is experiencing famine. Famine brings death. Death brings grief. The two together can produce desperation.

Out of desperation, Elimelech, a man of the tribe of Judah, and Naomi's husband, leaves his home in Bethlehem and heads to Moab. This could not have been an easy decision to make,

[10] Judy Fentress-Williams, *Ruth* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2012), 10.

considering the rift that existed between these two cousin groups of people: two neighboring countries of ancient Israel, to the east of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, in what is today the kingdom of Jordan. (The capital of Ammon was situated in present day Amman.) Biblical tradition recognizes a close relationship between Israel and these two nations, as they are traced back to the incestuous union of Lot, Abraham's nephew, and his two daughters (Gen. 19.30–38). The cultures of Israel, Ammon, and Moab shared much in common. For example, the Ammonite, Moabite, and Hebrew languages are dialects of the Canaanite language and were mutually intelligible. Ammon (whose chief deity was Milcom) and Moab (whose patron deity was Chemosh) developed as independent kingdoms in Transjordan sometime in the Early Iron Age (c. 13th/12th cent. BCE) and often were at odds with the various tribes of Israel. The earliest Ammonite king recorded in the Bible is Nahash, who besieged the Israelite town Jabesh-Gilead and was subsequently defeated by Saul (1 Sam. 11), who also defeated Moab (1 Sam. 14: 47–48). Soon after Israel became a monarchy, David conquered these two countries and incorporated them into his kingdom. Probably after Solomon's death, Ammon and Moab became independent once more. Later, Omri, king of Israel, subjugated Moab, but within a few decades Moab declared its independence. This event is detailed in an important epigraphic remain, the Mesha Stele (or Moabite Stone, today in the Louvre museum in Paris), written by the Moabite king Mesha (2 Kgs. 3) around 850 BCE. Both Ammon and Moab became Assyrian vassals during the time of Tiglath-pileser III (7th cent. BCE). Because of the tensions that dominated the histories of Israel and its two neighbors, the Book of Deuteronomy legislates that "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord" (Dt. 23.4). This is interpreted to mean that an Israelite woman cannot marry a man from these two countries. However, it appears that an Ammonite or Moabite woman could become an Israelite, since Ruth was a Moabite who

adopted the religion of her mother-in-law Naomi (Ruth 1), married Boaz, and eventually became the great-grandmother of David. In postbiblical times, the Talmud relaxed the attitude toward Ammonites and Moabites, and R. Yehoshuʿa ben Ḥananyah permitted the conversion of their males on the grounds that the original people could no longer be distinguished; even priests were permitted to marry the daughter of such a convert (Yev. 77a).[11]

The book carries with it an entrenchment of ethnic division. Considering this history, the journey of Elimelech's family might have been filled with deep sighs and many groans. They were leaving behind everything familiar to them to head to a strange place among people who might not readily receive them. Surely, there was grief, doubt, and uncertainty in this instance, although here the shift of place was decided upon by Elimelech's family unlike the shift of place we see in Psalm 137 in which the people were forcibly displaced.

For centuries, and now in the year of our Lord 2022, people daily leave the familiar to head to the United States, not always knowing if they will be received or accepted. If and when they arrive on these shores, immigrants often seek out worshipping communities to foster community. Often churches are excited to have new people join their community and have established several guideposts for assimilation. There is, however, no infrastructure in place to treat the traumas that accompany the new people. In an interview with Carey Nieuwhof, Rick Warren, the founding pastor of Saddleback Church, a megachurch with a budget of thirty million dollars ($30M)[12] shared that a main ingredient in the success and growth of the church is for the church to be intentional in caring for the hurting and traumatized.

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[11] The Oxford Dictionary of The Jewish Religion (2nd Edition), Oxford University Press, 2011, https://jewishstudies.rutgers.edu/docman/rendsburg/631-ammon-and-moab-odjr/file retrieved 02.20.2022

[12] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X03gY7HPr7Q 50:09

According to the Book of Ruth, within ten years of their arrival in Moab, Elimelech and his two sons die. Naomi is the only survivor of the four-member family that arrived in Moab. How did she process this? In Ruth 1:20, we hear her lamenting that the Lord has dealt bitterly with her.

Do you know anything about that? Imagine having this high hope for a bright tomorrow, only to have death rush through your front door and back-hand you three times in succession. It is easy for us to leap quickly from the famine to chapter 4 where it all works out (ignoring the death and trauma that happens in between). However, Naomi must be given time and space to work through the displacement she feels from the loss of place (Bethlehem), the loss of goods brought on by the famine, as well as the loss of familial relationships due to the deaths of her husband and sons. Naomi must not be rushed too quickly through the story. Instead, she must be allowed to think about it, talk about it, and navigate it, as my grandmother was not.

In Naomi's discussion, she referred to God as "The Breasted One." (Ruth 1:20)[13] The word she uses in verse 20 is *Shaddai*. This is an indication of a God of nurture, fierce love, and provider of sustenance—like a mother. Incidentally, it is a feminist/feminized vision of God. This effectively offers a broader view of God.

If there were other families who moved with her or before her from Bethlehem to Moab, what kind of support did Naomi have in Moab after the deaths? We know that, eventually, she moved back to Bethlehem. Her re-naming of herself as 'Mara' is a troubling indicator of grief's grip and power. Grief has the power to displace a person mentally, physically, emotionally, financially, and spiritually. Consider the effects of the pandemic or of the war in Ukraine, which have both heightened and exposed the worst of how we manage life. Is not the suffering we see

[13] Wilda C. Gafney; *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church* (Church Publishing Incorporated: New York, 2021), 209-211.

in the book of Ruth a call for us to exercise humility in the assumptions that we make about people? Of course! It is also a call for us to see anew the wideness of God's character.

In 22 verses, we have famine, migration, death and return to home. We return to Naomi to hear more closely what she has to say about her life. By Ruth 1:6, we learn that the famine has subsided. Things are growing again, and it is harvest time. Specifically, we are told that "The Lord had considered his people and given them food." Sit with the implications of that for a moment. What caused the famine? Did God have a role in that? Could the famine have been brought on by some people hoarding the food meant for the many?

Here is a strange thing in the passage: when Naomi returns to Bethlehem, and she is telling about her life, she says nothing of the famine (Ruth 1). According to the book, the famine is the reason why her family left the area. The famine must have gone on for a long time because it was more than ten years before she returned to Bethlehem. Verse 22 says she returned at the beginning of the barley harvest, which confirms that things improved. Here is the irony: she told her people that when she left Bethlehem, she was full. Get this: she left because there was a famine. Yet, she is saying that she was full then, and she is empty now. Now that there is food, Naomi says that she is empty. This has given me pause. I'm reminded of Bob Marley's line: "Them belly full but we hungry" (Bob Marley and the Wailers). When she left, she had her children and her husband. There is her fullness. On her return, they are not there. They are gone. There is her emptiness.

I get it. My children, whom I refer to as "The Fantastic Four," have been the soul of my soul. One is now regaling the other angels in glory with his wit, and there is a void here in me that remains. Here is Naomi, with her daughter-in-law, and the promise of enough food, giving voice to the grief inside her. She alone, can and must live with the wound that comes from this

kind of loss. This is a reminder that human familial connections cannot be replaced by material or any other kind of filler. Naomi knows this. I know this.

This draws our attention to another kind of famine within Ruth 1: the famine of human connection. Perhaps those around Naomi were not necessarily kind to her on her return. She is now a widow, who has also survived her sons. She is without male support which was so critical in her time. This is, indeed, another kind of famine. We might find in this scenario a renewed call to be better in our relationships. The last few years in a pandemic with its deep pockets of isolation has heightened the need for a transformed narrative around human engagements. It reminds us to persist in creating room for us and people to be our best selves in whatever seasons we are. Death empties us. Healthy human connections mediate that emptiness.

**Ruth's Choice (Ruth 1:6–17)**

*"Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge;*

*your people shall be my people, and your God my God." —Ruth 1:16b*

After Elimelech dies, Naomi is left a single mother in a foreign territory. I do not know the details of Naomi's navigation. However, having raised children as a single parent in a foreign territory, I can tell you that the challenges often seem insurmountable. Naomi might have steeled herself to press on out of necessity – perhaps the same kind of necessity that forced her family away in the first place. We think of Jacob's family's story when a famine drove them to migrate to Egypt. However, unlike Joseph and his people, Elimelech and his sons did not live a very long life after the migration (Ruth 1:14).

After their deaths, it makes sense that Naomi would want to return to her homeland. Perhaps there were rituals practiced there that she could engage to help her process the pain of their deaths. Her daughters-in-law attempt to go with her, and, at first, she tries to dissuade them. They would now be leaving their own families, customs, and culture, etc., behind to go with Naomi. What did it take for them to make this offer? Was their offer shaped by the grief in their hearts as well? This pending re-location may further disorient them. Perhaps being close to their husbands' mother was helpful for them.

Their husbands' deaths presented the same kind of existential problem that the death of Elimelech presented for Naomi. As for the cause of their deaths, the Bible is silent on that. In noting this, a realization hit me. When my son died, many people were concerned about the details: What happened? Who was wrong? Are there pictures? They asked many more very aggravating, callous, and traumatizing questions. My response has always been: "It does not

matter. What matters immediately is that my child is dead." I have heard preachers who have argued that the men violated the command given in Deut. 23, which forbade them to marry these women. I want to caution here that we need to re-visit the way we think about assigning reasons for people's pain, or we will further traumatize the wounded. What a sufferer needs most at this moment, is one who is willing to dwell with them in the valley of the shadow of death for as long as it takes (Psalm 23)

Of the two daughters in law, Orpah decides to stay in her homeland. Perhaps she has family there to help her (Ruth 1:14). Ruth, on the other hand, takes the risk of leaving the land where there is enough food to go to a place that was previously unable to support her husband's family, and doing so with someone who is not her blood relative. Uncertainty added to grief would surely further muddy the waters here. Ruth may have found in Naomi a sweet mother-in-law, which would certainly be a God-movement, since the two cousin groups are historical enemies. Ruth shows deep affection and loyalty toward Naomi by accompanying her. So now we have two women, without male protection (as was needed back then), moving across territories that are ridden with conflict. Nothing is said of her, but Ruth may also have had to give up being with her own mother, thus making her even more vulnerable. Ruth and Naomi now both face a seemingly insurmountable ordeal, a world of stress. As the two arrive in Bethlehem, we are told that "the whole town is stirred because of them" (Ruth 1:19). Ruth is in a different kind of spotlight here. What is this "stirring" about? Are people talking about Ruth being a foreigner? Are they speculating that she has come to take another of their men? What are some of the new dangers to which she is exposed now that she is in Bethlehem?

Migration reveals the permeable nature that human relationships can be. Something about the presence and appearance of foreigners make the locals uncomfortable. Locals do not always

know how to deal with people who are foreign and different. Although the narrator does not bother to include or explain this, it can be assumed that there was anxiety among the local people of Moab when Naomi first arrived with her family (Naomi's family likely had anxieties of their own). Then when Naomi returned to Judah (Bethlehem) without her men and with Ruth a Moabite, we can also assume that the locals in Judah found this arrival strange.[14]

Being a foreign woman in Israelite territory, she would likely be viewed as promiscuous, based upon the sexualized origin story of the Moabites and Naomi's instructions to Ruth upon Ruth's acceptance of the laws of Israel (Ruth Rabbah 11:22).[15] Israelite history has sexualized the people they consider beneath them. This includes women and, even more so, foreign women. Throughout history, biblical scholars have talked about the Moabite women as being sexually promiscuous. This descriptor arose out of the belief that Moabite women would lead Israelite men to worship Moabite gods (Numbers 25:1–5; 1 Kings 11:1–8). Women of color know something about this mis-labeling that often gives rise to much mistreatment and misconception about our character. I posit here that this false descriptor is not based on historical facts, and is another bully tactic used as a literary device to further promote subjugation of women and foreigners. As a woman who finds herself in this situation, Ruth must manage her own anxieties, including the possibility that Naomi might not treat her with the same deference once she is back amongst her people. Enter Boaz, who seemingly, on the turn of a dime, uses his influence, position, and power, to make room for Ruth's new reality. This presents another layer with notes of vulnerability and some deception as we will see later in the story.

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[14] Jione Havea, Peter H. W. Lau, *Reading Ruth in Asia* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 12.
[15] Deborah Rosenbloom, https://stljewishlight.org/news/world-news/op-ed-rethinking-the-ruth-naomi-relationship/ retrieved 02.20.2022

**Ruth's Re-mapping: From Displacement to Re-placement**

*"Many of us see ourselves as strangers in this world on our way to eternal life...*
*For this reason, we identify with strangers and include them in our journey.*
*The stranger comes to teach us and give us a priceless gift—the gift of identity."*
*—Joan M. Marusken, United Methodist Women's Study on Immigration and the Bible)*

Ruth is an immigrant. Each time she is mentioned, she is described as Ruth the Moabite, or the one who returned with Naomi from Moab. She is a foreigner, and because of the way that things are set up, no one is allowed to forget this fact. After all of the obstacles that she must overcome, her story begins to take a turn in a direction that will offer redemption.

Now enters this man whom we are told is Naomi's relative. The word used for him here is *gibor*, which would indicate that he is a man of some standing in the community. We find him risking his status when he refers to Ruth as "Daughter" instead of by her immigration status. By referring to her as "Daughter," he opens the possibility for her to re-think her own identity and for the people around her to see her beyond her foreign birth. Boaz is referenced as a person of valor. The specific term used in 2:1 is "gibor" denoting warrior status. The Hebrew word for valor is "Chayil." This is a term generally reserved for males. However, here in the book, Ruth is referred to by Boaz as "Chayil"! (Ruth 3:11)[16]

What's in a name? Power. In her discussion of the impact of naming, Dr. Wil Gafney posits that "naming is the invocation of language to define." Language and naming have

[16] Gafney, *A Women's Lectionary*, 215.

historically been tools colonizers have used to subjugate.[17] Across the African Diaspora, be it during chattel slavery or colonialism, the dominant culture has disparaged the original languages, names, and cultures of the subjugated peoples. The slavers and colonizers have then imposed their languages, names, and cultures upon them. Boaz' reference to Ruth as 'daughter' is significant to the turn in her story.

Here is a woman who has experienced severe hardship in her life – enough to push her to leave everything that was familiar to her to journey not only to a strange territory, but also to a place of strange customs, where her people's history is often ridiculed.

However, Boaz, has begun to re-map Ruth's story. By re-mapping, I mean that a new path is being cut and Ruth is given a new opportunity to assume an identity that belies her pain. Boaz is known as the kinsman redeemer who uses his agency to return Ruth's agency to her. He sees her. He recognizes she cannot completely straighten out the dog-ears from the pages of her life's storybook. He saw her vulnerability. Because she refuses to tear out those pages and hide them, he also sees her valor. She is brave enough to wear her scars into this new world, and her vulnerability allows him to see where his own valor could support hers. Throughout the book of Ruth, Ruth's agency seemed to have been subsumed beneath Naomi's. Old Testament scholar Dr. Wil Gafney suggests that Naomi may even have abused Ruth for her own personal gain.[18] She shows Ruth constantly attempting to negotiate the tension between social reality and identity. Ruth's declaration

> "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my

[17] Wilda C. Gafney, "Reading the Hebrew Bible Responsibly," in T*he Africana Bible – Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2010), 45.
[18] Gafney, *A Woman's Lectionary*, 219.

> God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" (Ruth 1:16–17)

suggests that Naomi may have exercised some level of authority or power over Ruth. Perhaps Naomi had a domineering personality. Ruth has faced poverty, joblessness, homelessness, and a loss of her own identity. When people move across territories, the practices of the territories in which they dwell can re-shape their sense of self and their behavior. Throughout, the book of Ruth shows her to be participating in the practices of Israel, her new dwelling place. Towards the end of the book, we see the ultimate movement to culturally assimilate in the intimate act of levirate marriage. This may indicate further that her own sense of self has shifted.

Perhaps Naomi had somehow insinuated that Ruth was responsible for her son's death. This sense of responsibility and guilt would have added another layer to Ruth's grief, further wounding her. Naomi seems to have appropriated Ruth's very body (Ruth 3:3–5). Whatever the reason for her attachment to Naomi, Boaz' support of Ruth was a turning point in her story.

Those are some of her personal challenges. In a foreign territory, Ruth may also have experienced cultural bias for not being a native of the land in which she lived. Or nationals and nationalists may have pretended not to understand her accent in attempts to shame and silence her. Because her foreign birth and Moabite nationality put her at a disadvantage, she could easily have run into more trauma. One could speculate, too, that Boaz chose to protect her from possible sexual assault. Since the rise of the #MeToo Movement, there is more awareness and much attention given to the actions of males in positions of authority towards women – mainly women who are in vulnerable situations. More sexually assaulted women are naming their traumas and more of those who committed the assaults are being called into account. I thought of Ruth being on the younger side of life, single, and vulnerable in other ways due to the death of

her husband and her migration to a foreign space, and how easily she can be a part of that #MeToo Movement. On the surface, Boaz's actions towards Ruth are praiseworthy. There could easily have been other, more unpleasant dynamics at work on his part.

Across the US landscape and elsewhere, there are foreign women, Ruths who become domestic help, and often find themselves at the mercy of the men of the houses who may prey on them sexually. Desperation and fear are often the tools used to silence them to prevent them from protesting. Chances are, if they do complain, they end up being blamed and shamed. Although there was a law (Lev. 19:9–10) that provided for her physical hunger as an immigrant, if Boaz had not run interference, Ruth might have become prey – hungry, poor, and vulnerable as she was.

Thanks to Boaz going beyond what the law requires to offer her protection, Ruth gets to hold on to her dignity and her humanity even as she stands amid strangers. At the borders of this country of America are women, children, and men who are attempting to re-map their stories as they seek asylum, and what is commonly termed "a better life." Laws don't provide for them, nor protect them as they should be protected. As a matter of fact, the laws prevent them from common human provisions as gleaning would provide. This is a further re-traumatizing of people who have lost much and are simply trying to live, much like those who make the laws did many moons ago.

In Ruth's re-mapping, Boaz is referred to as a man of valor (Ruth 2:1). He is bestowed this title not because of military might but because of his compassion and basic human decency, a sign that he was willing to go beyond the basic requirements of the law. When my husband was seeking to court me, he told me that if it was okay with me, he would like to be my Boaz. He had

read the book of Ruth through the more romantic lenses. I do know that he was aware of the harder places in life that I had endured, and he was willing to help to re-map my story.

Where do we find agency that leads to healing? If we do not recognize the trauma of others or allow ourselves to express grief as worship, we may effectively be limiting the movement of God in our own lives.

**Suppressing the Lament: From Personal Experience**

"My groaning has worn me out. At night my bed and pillow are soaked with tears" (Psalm 6:6)

Part of why this work is important to me is because of my personal experiences of trauma, and my responses to these traumas. I have put these in conversation with the historic responses of the worshipping community with regard to trauma and lament as they relate to the worship of God. Because my worshipping community's responses were shallow at best, they did more harm than good in helping me to process their trauma.  as well as the experiences of the people around me in the worshipping community.  those in the secular community and their responses to trauma, lament as these relate to the worship of God.

I was a twenty-three-year-old mother and wife when my mother died at the age of forty-three. My mother had suffered a stroke during surgery to remove a tumor from her brain. She was wheeled into the operating room as someone who was able to move about under her own steam. She was wheeled out paralyzed on her left side. Prior to the surgery, my mother was a physically active person whose green thumb was legendary. After the surgery, she was bedridden and broken. Her youngest child was five years old when she died, thus making me, the eldest, the caregiver for my other siblings.

My mother was taken by ambulance to the hospital three years after the surgery when we could not wake her up one Saturday morning. When the hospital called to inform me of her death, the person who made the call, bluntly asked, "You know that your mother has died, right?" I remember a numbness and anger coursed through me as I asked, "How would I have known this? Is this any way to inform someone of their mother's death? Are you stupid?" Then I wept. The enormity of Mommy's death would not truly hit me for many years, not until another death, one that to this day crushes my spirit.

In the colonized Caribbean, as with my grandmother's experience, little if any room is given for expressions of grief. I heard stories from my grandmother and other elderly members of the community of how ancestors were severely mistreated and dehumanized by their masters. I heard of women giving birth in the fields and not being given an opportunity to care for their bodies but being forced to return to work immediately, often in pain and surely exhausted from pregnancy and childbirth. When someone died, life continued as if death did not relocate a family to a strange land. Forced to continue life in this manner is akin to the Babylonian captors asking for a song from the captives (Psalm 137).

Generations later, suppressing the lament has become the rule and not the exception to how Caribbean people manage trauma. Neither then nor now was the Christian community very emotionally aware, intelligent, or astute. Sadly, not much has changed. So instead of creating healthy outlets for the processing of pain, the Christian community generally stuffs the pain with useless platitudes to suggest that grief is a demonstration of faithlessness.

"Don't cry." "Your mother is in a better place." "You just need to trust God." The list of foolish advice given me was long enough to make a rope by which my grieving heart was lynched. My grandmother died suddenly in 2010 on a Sunday morning. The call came as I prepared to leave the house to attend that day's 10:00 a.m. worship service at the congregation I had joined. "Andrea, Granny passed away this morning." My Granny and I were close, and the news of her death was difficult to receive and accept. I was living in the United States at the time, and she was living in Antigua. She and I had spoken by phone the day before and she had ended the call with her usual benediction to me: "I love you, Andrea. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. Andrea, in all your ways acknowledge God and God will direct your path."

Granny's death unearthed again, the pain of my mother's death. It was as if my mother had died for a second time. It did not help that there was enough fragility and uncertainty around my traveling that I opted to not return to Antigua for the funeral service.

While I grappled with this crisis, the many suggestions from the church community in the US echoed what I had heard after the death of my mother. "Don't cry." "You must be strong." etc. When I watched a recording of the funeral service months later, I recall feeling myself sink deeper and deeper into the blankets surrounding me. In retrospect, it was not until I could no longer see the screen that I realized how much I had physically tried to distance myself from the seeming finality of the funeral.

With the cultural pressure upon me, although the tears fell for a long time, I suppressed the hurt without even realizing that this is what was happening. When the other death occurred, I decided to permit myself the gift of lament – to name the ripping of my heart and to call on God to say something.

**Releasing the Lament: From Personal Experience**

"O my son (Arleigh), my son, my son Arleigh! Would I had died instead of you, O Arleigh, my son, my son!" (based on 2 Samuel 18:33)

Even now, x years later, there is no thinking of, telling, nor writing about this without feeling excruciating pain in my heart. Nothing in the events of the day, prior to that fateful moment, indicated the coming disaster. My son Arleigh was busy that Saturday morning cleaning his room, doing laundry, scheduling changing the oil in my car, and reminding my husband to make the meal he had asked him to make.

It was Saturday August 24, 2019, one week before Arleigh's 24th birthday on August 30, when I looked out a window of my house and watched as people dressed as police and another person out of uniform make their way to the front door. My mind did not prepare me with my usual suspicion. Instead, my mind seemed to have retreated. I, in turn, went back to completing the task in which I was engaged – bottling a fragrance I had been developing over the last month for my son's upcoming birthday. I was creating his own line of skincare products with his own unique scent.

There was a sound at the door indicating that my attention was needed. I opened the door and smiled in welcome at my guests. One uniformed person remained outside. I was told to sit down and specifically to sit next to the person in plain clothes who identified herself as the Victim Advocate. The other uniformed gentleman identified himself by name. He informed me that there had been an accident. I replied, "Yes, okay." Then he broke the news of Arleigh's death. I heard, "You know that your mother has died right?" and then, "Andrea, Granny passed away this morning." I heard that my son had died. I remember watching my hurt rise out of its

resting place and push past the reserve of stoicism to color the entire room the color of a fresh horrible wound.

Following this moment that has forever divided my life, the communal response to my grief was like the previous times when I had experienced the death of a close loved one. This time, however, I was the pastor. The congregation consisted mainly of older people of color. The people were not prepared for a pastor's lament. I was not prepared for my son's death. I sat by the waters of my own kind of Babylon. I wept, I lamented, I questioned God—all the things my Afro-Caribbean culture said I should not do, and I did not accept shallow, religious responses from those who felt the need to offer some. I needed to be authentic. I showed God where it hurt.

Members of my congregation demanded a quick recovery, saying that as a pastor, my grief should not be as obvious. Some accused me of being weak. Some rumored that I had "lost" my faith. The few who visited were disappointed by my silence. They expected me to offer them words of encouragement and wisdom, because I was a pastor.

When something happens to us that we cannot readily fit into the interpretive categories we normally use to make meaning in our lives, it is hard to reflect on the situation. When my son died, I could not reflect. I did not want to reflect. Arleigh's death was no ordinary event that had happened to my family. I could not be comforted. The usual religious jargon that people often use in such situations is useless. I had no reflection to offer. My heart was filled with lamentation. Lamenting became the land in which I dwelled.

**My Lament for my Son**
I saw the pain

I heard the hurt

I felt the disdain that ricocheted

Around the room filled with gloom

And I could not help but assume

That the scene to which my eyes were glued

Was the story of my own becoming.

There is no sound from over there

I am listening but all I hear

Is the sound of tears echoing in the silence.

What is your answer to the threat

That is making me wet

with tears and sweat sunup to sun set?

Nothing. Nothing? Do you not have anything to

Sing, to say, to offer my way? When I incline my ear

For the sound of your voice, there is nothing.

Hello?

Are you there?

Can you hear?

I am calling, but you are stalling

Do you not see your people bawling

In despair? Do you not hear? Do you not care?

I am picking a fight, but your lips are locked
Tight

As if

I am nothing

As if

I am a bug just buzzing. I am pumping

Pumping for a fight but your lips are locked

Tight.

I am hopping, puffing, stunting, jumping, bucking

I am not bluffing.

Say something! God!

Say something. Answer. Argue. Talk back.

Cut me some slack

So I can go back

And tell my family, that yes you are here.

I keep hearing that you are there

But where?

Where is your voice?

The one I used to rejoice

By choice

About your faithfulness?

Where are you God? Cat got your tongue –

Hushed up your song?

Answer!

Is it morning yet, Lord?

They said that in the morning we can rejoice.

Is it morning yet?

Then when will it get here

And chase away the tears

That are always so near?

They tell me that you collect tears in a bottle.

How big is your bottle? Is it strong enough

To bear the weight of my pain?

Weeping is enduring. Is it morning yet? Weeping is enduring…weeping

Help Lord. Gather the scattered.

My hope is in you. I know no other

Who will bother

to stoop to the lowly.

The lowly is leaning into your redeeming.

You are my God and I love you.
—Andrea Byer-Thomas

This is an on-going lament of my heart on the death of my son Arleigh. Sometimes, the anatomy shifts in its progression across my heart. I do not seek answers. I believe that if God were to explain in divine or earthly terms any "why" connected to my son's death, the pain would not be any less painful or any more bearable. I do not seek answers.

In my lament, I lift many emotions that chase themselves across my life. Admittedly, some of these emotions were a shock to me and have set me face to face with a deeper look at my humanity. But those emotions have also liberated me in ways that I was not previously. I was born, raised, and lived most of my adult life in the Caribbean. This is a multi-faceted heritage that continues to inform my thinking and treatment of my pain. Sometimes, I lean into it.

Sometimes, I resist it. It also continues to offer many points of reference when crafting language and plotting paths in how I live out my theology in the world.

This lament itself is an act of resistance against the very heritage that shaped my earlier life. The context in which I grew up did not have room for this. I chose to create my own room. The pain I feel at my child's death cannot be salved with "God knows best." I insist that I do not need to make any excuses for God because I believe that God is wide, deep, and decent enough to handle and redeem my raw lament.

My son died within the same week that I started this Doctor of Ministry program. Since beginning this program, my pastoral context has changed twice. The changes have added to my grief in diverse ways. I grieved that I needed the first move to put distance between myself and unhealthy behaviors, and to facilitate my freedom to heal. The second move was more drastic and took me out of the county and physically away from a support system, and some familiarity. My youngest child, whose school friendships had become a lifeline for him, is wrestling with being in what for us is a strange land. For us, the strangeness is further compounded by the lack of familiarity in race, culture, and even environmental sounds. The adaptation that is needed must first be accompanied by an acknowledgment of the strangeness in which we are trying to live.

My most recent efforts to recover and return the lament as an act of worship have been in the form of a weekly Facebook live conversation around Psalm 137 and the book of Ruth. As a result of this work, I have been hearing from people with whom it resonated. A member in my current congregation shared with me that she is familiar with Naomi's grief, having experienced the death of her husband and two children. When I asked her how she managed the hurt of these

losses, she shrugged her shoulders, stared at me and promised to talk with me about what she wishes she could have done. We have a date.

Examples of how I teach my congregation to recover lament as an act of worship are through the aforementioned Teaching Tuesday live sessions, specially designed worship services, the use of specially designed scripture study materials, being my authentic self, and constantly assuring the members of the wideness of God's grace to locate and come to us in our strange lands.

In studying Psalm 137, the book of Ruth, and listening to the many nuanced conversations around the idea of lament as worship, the need to provide further guidelines in aiding the faith community to think and respond more authentically and faithfully to the more traumatic experiences of our lives became even more clear to me. To this end, this project will evolve into a series of small group studies to include pointed questions that lead to the work of deeper engagement with the Scriptures. The evolution will also include several lectures that treat the subject matter, with the goal of leading transformation.

Including a hermeneutic of suspicion in a reading of the Bible is vitally liberating, as it helps the reader to uncover some of the hidden nuances which are often overlooked. This overlooking has for centuries led to much harm. Rather than trying to protect God, the church must begin to recover its credibility by making room for expressions of the human experiences of trauma in its acts of worship. A fuller exploration of the Psalms of lament and the Psalms of imprecation, such as 137 in this paper, can mitigate some of the anxiety that people experience around telling God where it hurts and wanting God to smite the cause of pain. This will help to move people from displacement to re-placement. When my son died, I was angry. I am angry. My anger is directed at God for not preventing the accident, at the at-fault driver whose

irresponsible decision caused Arleigh's death, and at the church for not having any infrastructure to allow for my lament. I, who had a vibrant prayer life prior to Arleigh's death, could not pray. I did not want to have conversations with God that did not accuse God of being careless and cruel. For me, there was no suppressing this.

Because suppressing the lament has also had a negative effect on the celebration aspect of worship, acknowledging the presence and effects of anger, loss and various traumas, will create a strong on-ramp to the intimate covenant that God initiates with humankind. God's movement of salvation includes a desire for all people to overcome suffering. The way we overcome is not through glorifying or avoiding suffering. The late biblical scholar and theologian Walter Wink agrees with his statement:

> We are so interconnected with all of life that we cannot help being touched by the pain of all that suffers. . . . We are literally inundated with news of suffering from all round the globe, and it cannot but affect us. . . . We human beings are far too frail and tiny to bear all this pain. The solution is not avoidance, however. Refusal to read the papers or listen to the news is no protection. I am convinced that our solidarity with all of life is somatic, and that we sense the universal suffering whether we wish to or not. What we need is a portable form of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, where we can unburden ourselves of this accumulated suffering. We need to experience it; it is a part of reality. . . . We are to articulate these agonizing longings and let them pass through us to God. Only the heart at the center of the universe can endure such a weight of suffering.[19]

We insult God and miss out on this gift of intimate covenant when we hasten through the lament to get to the praise. Neither our religious cultures, cliches, or a one-dimensional biblical perspective is finally satisfying in our attempts to skip over this humanizing and healing work.

[19] Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 305 .

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