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In a Strange Land: The Necessity of Lament (Psalm 137)

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The psalm we just heard – with its notoriously confronting ending – was almost certainly composed just after the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of the people of Judah to Babylon in 586 BCE. It expresses the anguish of exile, as well as the impotent longing that those responsible for the psalmist’s torment suffer the same unspeakable pain. Its lament moves from grief and despair to rage, and it ends well before it gets to the place of ‘acceptance’. Often its final verses are omitted from public reading. After all – curses, the invocation of divine payback, and the desire to dash infants against rocks seem hardly spiritually edifying. But the words have the advantage of being real, staying close to the white-hot fury provoked by experiences of violation and desolation.

At one level, this agony of the conquered may seem far from our experience. But in another way perhaps, it’s quite close. Many of us who’ve experienced betrayal or violation can relate to the rage of its final lines. We may even have succumbed to the same impulse to curse those who have caused us great suffering. More generally still, it seems to me that this psalm composed in the context of exile speaks deeply to our current situation. Because thanks to the pandemic, we too are living in a kind of exile – as life as we’ve known it slips away.

Of course, unlike the Jewish exiles from the 6th century BCE, we’ve not been forced geographically from home. In fact, many of us are more confined to home than we’ve ever been. Even so, we find ourselves in a strange land. And many of us, many around us, are feeling profoundly dislocated and unsettled, bereft of a way of life. In the immortal words of cartoonist First Dog on the Moon, ‘we miss just going out our front doors and doing stuff’. And like those ancient Jewish exiles, we don’t know when or even if we’ll return to the way things were. Like them, we have to find

a way of coming to terms with what has befallen us and what it could mean for our future. Over the next few weeks, I'd like to touch on some of these themes, in conversation with the psalms. Tonight we focus on the necessity of lament.

The destruction of Jerusalem was a long time coming. The great powers of Egypt and Babylon had been vying for control of Judah, creating a 'climate of fear and confusion'.¹ Finally Babylon defeated Egypt and invaded Jerusalem in the year 597, placing a puppet king on the Judean throne and deporting some of her leading citizens to Babylon. A second attack followed ten years later, when after a period of uneasy calm, the king rebelled and provoked Babylon to crack down. 'According to biblical accounts, the 587 invasion of Judah devastated the city'. The siege itself 'lasted nearly two years, and the trapped citizenry fought Nebuchadnezzar's armies as well as famine'. When the Babylonian forces finally broke through the city walls, they destroyed the temple and the king's palace, and deported yet more of the populace to Babylon.² There was a last attempt at rebellion by surviving members of the Judean royal family, and this provoked a third and final invasion and the exile of still more people.

The cumulative impact was catastrophic. As scholar Kathleen O'Connor writes, 'along with the destruction of buildings, families, and communal life came the painful collapse of the community's symbolic world, that is, the story of its relationship with God'. Indeed, she says, this 'story underwent "narrative wreckage"'.³ The life the people had expected to lead, the future they anticipated, just disappeared: in her words, the 'assumed story is over, but a new one has not taken its place and may never do so'.⁴

And I'm struck by some significant parallels. For us too, our plight has been a long time in the making. Epidemiologists have long warned that a global pandemic was inevitable and environmentalists have told us that the more human activity

¹ Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations & the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), p.6.

² O'Connor, *Lamentations & the Tears of the World*, p.7.

³ O'Connor, *Lamentations & the Tears of the World*, p.7.

⁴ O'Connor, *Lamentations & the Tears of the World*, p.7.

disturbs the balance of natural systems, the more likely will be the emergence of new pathogens. Today is, in fact, Earth Overshoot day – which marks the day on which we humans will have collectively consumed what the Earth can renew for this calendar year, the day on which we begin to ‘exceed’ or ‘overshoot’ our 2020 planetary budget. And this overshoot is directly implicated in what’s happening. Cutting into forests or previously undisturbed ecosystems, often to expand agricultural land, drives out pathogens that were locked in the wild. Biodiversity and habitat loss helps spread diseases among wild animals. Meanwhile, the intensification of livestock farming, and increased hunting and trading of wildlife are mixing animals like never before, while industrial agriculture means animals kept in crowded and stressful conditions have lowered immune defences. ‘A group of scientists writing in the Lancet in **2015** concluded that far-reaching changes to the Earth’s natural systems posed a growing threat to human health, naming emerging diseases alongside climate change as one of these threats’.⁵ As with ancient Jerusalem, we’ve even suffered some preliminary ‘incursions’ in the past 10 years – SARS and MERS. So we’ve known this was coming, and that in fact we’re the ones provoking it, bringing it upon ourselves. But it’s different knowing it’s coming, living in the pre-disaster skirmishes, and the blow actually falling.

And when it does – as happened for the people of Judah – not only do we suffer the direct impact of events, but a whole way of imagining life and our future comes into question. They thought that because God dwelt in the Temple it could never be overthrown; we thought that, despite clear indication of ecological limits, we would keep enjoying the fruits of technological progress and ever-increasing affluence, without there being consequences. They thought God would come to their aid and rescue them from their enemies; we thought that with targeted economic stimulus and a concerted search for a vaccine, we’d get through this blip and life would resume more or less as before. That could still happen ... but maybe it won’t ...

⁵ Michael Dulaney, ‘The next pandemic is coming – and sooner than we think, thanks to changes in the environment’, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2020-06-07/a-matter-of-when-not-if-the-next-pandemic-is-around-the-corner/12313372> (accessed 20 August 2020).

And, like those weeping by Babylon's streams, if it doesn't, we can't begin to imagine what it will really mean.

So how do we live in this time, in the midst of the crisis, where we have no perspective yet on its magnitude or duration or ultimate impact? I think part of what our psalm helps us understand is the importance of simply naming our loss and bewilderment, of giving ourselves permission to lament. Many of us are aware that our personal losses aren't as devastating as those suffered by some. Most (though not all) of us still have an income, a place to live; we and our families have not been ill; and by comparison with citizens of Brazil, the United States and India we live in relatively secure circumstances with a functioning public health system. Often, in conversations I have with friends, family, members of our Benedictus community, I hear people say – 'I really have nothing to complain about'. And at one level, that's true. But it doesn't mean there's nothing to grieve.

Some among us have had loved ones die during this time, with farewells and funerals curtailed by border closures and limits on public gathering. Some have had grandchildren born interstate or overseas, and been unable to visit or support as they dreamed of. Many of us have parents, siblings, children or friends from whom we're cut off indefinitely, and where old age or illness is involved, we wonder – will I ever see her, will I ever see him again? Some are feeling more isolated, as the usual rhythm of activities is interrupted and they face night after night at home by themselves, while others are feeling their intimate relationships strained. Some struggle with mental health or with supporting the health of others as anxiety and depression are exacerbated; some feel under-occupied and others are dangerously over-stretched, or daily at risk as they work in aged care facilities, schools, hospitals and other essential services. And we miss touch, spontaneous gathering, giving and receiving hospitality, and just going out our front doors and doing stuff! We all live with a heightened sense of provisionality – what someone recently described as the exhaustion of uncertainty. What will the world be like in the aftermath? What kind of

‘recovery’ is possible, including for the natural world? What can we hope for and look forward to right now?

In the Hebrew Scriptures, lament functions personally and corporately as a means for coming to terms with this kind of loss, bewilderment and dispossession. Lament names the truth of our experience, including our struggle to accept or be with our experience – but it’s different from mere complaint or negativity. There’s an intentionality and discipline about true lament that helps us move through our pain and resistance to a more fruitful relationship with what’s so. But you can’t skip the process! Joanna Macy says we must ‘do our “despair work”, because despair cannot be banished by simple injections of optimism or sermons on ‘positive thinking’’.⁶ A practice of lament takes us into the truth of suffering, helps us name it with as much rawness and intensity as we need, because if can’t acknowledge where and how we really are then, in the beautiful words of the Book of Common Prayer, ‘there is no health in us’. The wisdom of our tradition teaches that grieving our losses, naming our fear, rage, sense of injustice or hopelessness, is necessary spiritual work. Without it, we get stuck. We cannot become available for what may be asked of us.

I imagine that all of us are struggling with these times, with ourselves in these times, one way or another. So this week, if you sense it may be helpful, I invite you to set aside some time in a disciplined, intentional way, for lamenting. I don’t mean spending the week stewing, worrying, complaining inside our heads. Rather, I mean, giving yourself space in the week, or each day, to pay attention to what you’re feeling, what’s hard, what you miss and how it’s affecting you. Maybe you’d like to write it down ... make a list; and then look again, what else is there to be named, felt, sat with? Maybe you’d like to write a poem, a psalm – to rage against God, or life ... Maybe sing, or wail, or cry ... ‘By the river of Babylon, there we sat, oh we wept, when we recalled Zion’. We too are displaced in important ways. And it’s OK, in fact it might even be necessary, that we too weep, when we recall the life we miss and when we face the travail of our world and all her creatures in these difficult days.

⁶ O’Connor, *Lamentations & the Tears of the World*, p.108.