

## Praise and lament in the face of death

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**A** friend of mine once remarked, “You know, Dan, we Christians do some crazy things.” I have come to believe that his observation holds true in many areas of Christian life. I certainly see it at funerals. At funeral after funeral, in the face of life’s deepest pain and loss, we sing hymns and read scripture texts praising God for divine grace, goodness, and even protection.

The apparent craziness of our actions impressed me at the funeral of my wife’s aunt, Irma Epp. Aunt Irma was an energetic, gifted woman, struck down far too early in life by cancer. At her funeral, a table at the back of the church held pictures and other significant objects that members of the family had lovingly placed there. Prominently displayed was her Bible, open to a favourite text: “But those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (Isa. 40:31). I felt acutely the contradiction between what this text claims

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and the event that had brought us together. Aunt Irma had indeed waited for the Lord, but despite many a prayer for healing, her physical strength had not been renewed; she was no longer walking or running among us.

How dare we feature a passage such as this at a funeral? On such an occasion, how dare we claim that “goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life” (Ps. 23:6)? How dare we bless the Lord “who heals all your diseases, . . . who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s” (Ps. 103:3-5)? How dare we sing hymns of praise as we surround sisters and brothers in the faith who are too choked by grief to sing with us? Wouldn’t it be more appropriate, less crazy,

to highlight a text such as “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:1).

A cynical psychologist would likely have a ready explanation for our Christian craziness: When faith in the goodness and power of God meets up with the brutal reality of human suffering, Christians sense a threat to some of their basic convictions. In reaction, they hold funerals permeated with pronouncements that God is still powerful and in charge, that believers can count on God to be faithful. Praise of God at funerals functions as a form of denial, creating a spiritual bubble in which Christians can continue to perpetuate their illusions.

I confess to having had similar thoughts, until I had opportunity to teach a course on the Psalms and reflect more deeply on the significance and function of praise in the Christian life. Laments are the most common type of psalm, numbering about sixty of the 150 psalms. These psalms are prayers in which the worshipper cries out to God for deliverance from calamity, usually from illness or enemies.

One feature of these lament psalms that puzzles many biblical scholars is the fact that most end on a note of praise, or at least include a significant element of praise. Psalm 22 is a striking example. After its opening cry of godforsakenness, the first two-thirds of the psalm consists largely of bitter descriptions of the psalmist’s plight, which alternate with pleas for deliverance. Psalm 22 contains one of the bleakest descriptions of distress of any of the laments, yet the middle of verse 21 marks a sudden shift, and the last section of the psalm contains some of the most glorious praise of God and God’s deliverance found in the Psalter.

The stark contrast between the two parts of the psalm has led more than one scholar to surmise that Psalm 22 represents the combination of two formerly independent psalms. I am less interested in theories that seek to account for the striking juxtaposition of praise and lament in such psalms than in asking what might be the theological and practical significance of combining these contrasting impulses. I believe that the juxtaposition in these lament psalms can be helpful as we face the tragedies and painful experiences of life and as we plan for Christian funerals.

The importance of lament at funerals is obvious. The pain of those who are left behind must be named, and their grief, loss,

anger, and disorientation thereby validated. When the pastor publicly names such pain at a funeral, she speaks for the community of faith, assuring family and friends that the community recognises their anguish and is surrounding them with love, prayers, and other forms of support. Naming people's pain also brings that pain into the healing presence of God. Words of lament spoken in public worship have a sacramental power to release streams of divine grace, bringing strength, comfort, heal-

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ing, and renewal. For similar reasons personal sharing has become important in many Mennonite worship services. Speaking openly before God and God's people about health concerns and other serious matters can be a sacramental act through which worshippers experience God's grace and healing power.

As necessary as lament is at funerals and in the face of life's tragedies, it is not sufficient, *especially* at funerals and in the face of life's tragedies. By itself lament can be too negative, too self-absorbed, too focused on our human condition. If lament is all we do in our

hour of need, we are left gazing into the abyss of our pain and brokenness, and we will find little hope and potential for healing there. Our eyes also need to be drawn heavenward: "I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth" (Ps. 121:1-2). Praise has the power to draw us out of ourselves and focus our attention on God, the source of our strength and salvation. When is attention to God more necessary than when we face life's deepest hardships, when we recognise that we do not have within ourselves the resources needed to face the challenges that lie ahead?

Praise and lament need each other, both in times of crisis and in the Christian life as a whole. Without praise, lament is too negative and self-absorbed, and it leaves us without much hope. In turn, praise needs lament to keep it honest. If all we do in worship is praise God, our theology is reduced to "God is great and good, and isn't life wonderful!" But for many people, life is anything but wonderful. Our worship must hold together praise that affirms the sovereignty and goodness of God, and lament that

acknowledges the pain and brokenness in God's world. Without lament, our praise becomes shallow; it lacks integrity and power, and it becomes a denial of the painful realities of life.

At the funeral of a man I will call Paul, the pastor kept a smile on his face as he repeatedly assured Paul's wife, children, and grandchildren that they had no reason to be sad: Paul was a good Christian man, and he had gone home to be with his maker. I wanted to shout, "Of course Paul has gone home to be with his maker, but that means he won't be going home with Helen anymore. The home they shared for fifty-two years will now be big and lonely, the bed cold and empty. We must acknowledge the pain of this loss!"

This funeral had an abundance of praise, but because there was a dearth of lament, the praise was shallow, lacked integrity, and functioned as denial. The pastor meant well. His goal was to help the family experience God's healing and comforting touch, but I suspect that he stood in the way of what he was seeking to accomplish. By choosing to avoid lament, he deprived Paul's family of an opportunity to express their pain, and an opportunity to experience the community of faith surrounding them in their time of pain. The pastor also missed the opportunity to bring the anguish of a grieving family into the gracious and healing presence of God.

After our eight-year-old son, Tim, died of cancer some nine years ago, we received a touching note from an Old Order Mennonite woman whose son had sometimes ridden the school bus with Tim. After commenting that little ones who die are better off with God (a theology that makes me squirm just a bit), she concluded, "but it is the parting that is so hard." In her own unsophisticated way this woman understood intuitively a thing or two about grief, about the importance of juxtaposing praise and lament, and about what it is helpful to say in the face of death.

During the funeral of thirty-eight-year-old Robin Jutzi, mourners gathered around the open grave to bid final farewell to his body. His family had requested that during the committal service we sing "Praise God from whom all blessings flow"—not the modest version often sung as table grace, but the jubilant version many Mennonites refer to affectionately as 606. Some of us might choose a different hymn for such an occasion, but in this case the

praise of God was anything but shallow. It was a vigorous declaration that, despite the enormous pain of the moment, Robin's family and friends continued to cling to their faith and hope in a sovereign and gracious God "from whom all blessings flow."

This praise derived much of its power from the family's lament. The Jutzi family was not in denial. Three of the family's four sons were born with cystic fibrosis. Now for the third time in eight years, the sting of death had touched this family. When Christians who face losses of this magnitude are still able to sing their praises to God, such praise has power beyond description. Yes, we Christians do some crazy things.

How does praise function at a funeral like that of Robin Jutzi or Aunt Irma? If our praise is balanced by lament, it can become a potent act of defiance in the midst of suffering. Praise can be a declaration that despite the pain and loss we are experiencing, we will continue to believe that "the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting" (Ps. 103:17). Despite the evil,

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injustice, and suffering that plague our world, we will continue to trust that "the LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all" (Ps. 103:19).

Such praise is anything but denial. It looks the pain and evil of this world straight in the eye and says, "You are all too real, and you hurt deeply." But in the same breath our praise declares that because of what God has done through Jesus Christ, we know that suffering, evil, and death are not the ultimate realities of life. God's love is the ultimate reality. Praise reminds us that God's love and

grace are strong enough to carry us through life's difficult experiences. Praise reminds us that evil and suffering will not have the last word here on earth, because some day God's reign will bring a new heaven and a new earth. Bold praise nurtures faith in trying times. Christian martyrs through the ages have died with such defiant praise on their lips.

Combining praise with lament can help us steer a course between two dangers—the danger of promising people too much in our preaching and pastoral care, and the danger of promising

them too little. By focusing exclusively on praise, the pastor at Paul's funeral promised the grieving family too much. No smiling assurances about eternal life and God's presence can erase the pain of those who have lost a loved one to death. Promising people too much pulls the rug of integrity out from under our faith, theology, and pastoral care. A healthy dose of lament ensures that we do not feed people simplistic answers that do not hold up in the face of life's tough questions.

But if we spend too much energy lamenting the sad state of the world, we may lose sight of the sovereignty and saving works of God, and then we may promise people too little. We need praise that reminds us that God is still Lord of this universe, no matter what we or others may be suffering. We need praise that celebrates the signs of God's reign among us, even while we live in a broken world. We need praise that illumines the ways our lives and the lives of others can be and have been transformed by the grace of Jesus Christ. Promising God's people too much is a temptation some evangelicals are prone to, but equally dangerous is a liberal tendency to promise people too little of God's transforming power.

Our praise does far more than just remind us of the grace and power of God. Praise actually helps us experience that grace and power and become rooted in it. To put it simply: praise puts us in touch with God. Claus Westermann writes that "the secret of praise is its ability to make contact with God; through praise one remains with God."<sup>1</sup> Intuitively we recognize the way praise connects us with God, and this experience is a reason why praise is so central to our worship and Christian life. As we praise God we come to experience some of what we sing and speak of in our praise.

After stumbling upon Westermann's observation I began to understand something that happened to me when our son Tim was dying. For the last month of his life, Tim was unconscious, and Esther and I took turns keeping watch by his bed, waiting for the inevitable. To comfort myself and to pass the time, I started with the first hymn in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* and worked my way through, singing all the hymns I knew. To my surprise, it was the hymns of praise that spoke most meaningfully to me. I still remember singing the words of that grand old hymn, "Now thank

we all our God with heart and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices,” as the tears streamed down my cheeks. I remember feeling both crazy and guilty for singing such songs while Tim was dying before my eyes.

Now I understand. Praise puts us in touch with God, and connection with God was exactly what I needed during that painful time. I needed to draw close to God and feel God’s love and grace and strength surrounding me. When we praise we open ourselves to experiencing the power, mercy, and love of God that we extol in our praise. Through praise we abide with God. Be-

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cause my praise was more than balanced by lament, it functioned as both a powerful act of defiance and as a way of opening myself to the healing power of God. Not everyone is able to sing hymns of praise in time of crisis or at the funeral of a loved one. When sisters and brothers are too choked by grief or anxiety to sing the praises of God, then it is the church’s task to uphold such people by proclaiming God’s praises on their behalf.

As Christians we must lament, because all too often life brings hardship, loss, and struggle, and it is essential that we acknowledge such pain and bring it into the healing presence of God. But even in the midst of grief and suffering we are invited to praise, because our praise opens us to the grace and power of God, and because our praise can be an act of defiance that nurtures and strengthens our faith. Our praise declares that ultimately God’s love and grace are more powerful than the sorrow and pain that prompt our lament. May we Christians continue to do crazy things.

## **Note**

<sup>1</sup> *The Psalms: Structure, Content and Message* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1980), 6.

## **About the author**

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