


Lament for people who carry *han*

Sue Park-Hur

“Mom, you fell again? Are you okay?”

“Aigo, I’m okay. I’m sorry I make you worry.”

My eighty-two-year-old stepmom lives in the heart of downtown Los Angeles in an affordable community for older adults. I have seen her frail 110-pound body growing weaker as her bones have become more brittle,



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causing more falls, even with a walker. Since the pandemic, my worry for her has compounded. In addition to elders’ vulnerability to contracting the coronavirus, Asian elders across the country are being targeted for racially motivated attacks. They are vulnerable to being pushed, punched, slashed, burned, and even killed in broad daylight in their neighborhoods. According to the reporting database Stop AAPI Hate, almost three thousand accounts of anti-Asian hate crimes were reported between spring 2020 and spring 2021.

It is no coincidence that these hate crimes have grown exponentially after President Trump and his administration introduced COVID-19 as “the China virus” and other racially derogatory references. Scapegoating and violence are not new to Asian Americans. Historically, we can point to xenophobia and racist laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, discrimination against Filipino American laborers in the 1930s, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Racist attitudes toward Asian Americans continued while America fought wars in Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos because we have the “face of the enemy.” No matter how many generations have lived in this country, we are seen as “perpetual foreigners” who don’t really belong here. Perhaps elders of Asian descent are easy targets because they do not and cannot assimilate in this country and thus are easily dehumanized as targets of violence.

How should faith communities respond at such a time? Soong-Chan Rah proposes that the Bible gives us a proper response to tragedy and suffering: lament.¹

Call to lament

Lament is found throughout the Bible, most notably in the Old Testament Psalms and Prophets. Lament is a liturgical response to the reality of suffering. It gives us a way to engage God in the context of pain and trouble. The biblical practice of lament is crucial to shalom (or wholeness) with God; it creates space to speak honestly with God about what has happened and collectively mourn that the current reality is not as it should be. As we name suffering and injustice, we open ourselves to God's vision for justice and shalom.

In *Reconciling All Things*, Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice write:

*Lament is not despair. It is not whining. It is not a cry into a void. Lament is a cry directed to God. It is the cry of those who see the truth of the world's deep wounds and the cost of seeking peace. It is the prayer of those who are deeply disturbed by the way things are. . . . The journey of reconciliation is grounded in the practice of lament.*²

Ellen Davis adds that lament is a spiritual practice that does not come naturally. Whining comes naturally, but voicing rage and grief to God is difficult theological work.³

Lament, confession, and han

Lament is difficult theological work because it is not just a cognitive exercise; it is an embodied practice. It is often an outward release embodied in a shake of a fist, collective march, loud cry, wail, song, or prayer. It allows the sinned against to break the silence of oppression and suffering. It is a gift to those who have been wronged: "Confession is the cry of the sinner. . . . Lament is the cry of the victim."⁴

Andrew Park adds that the Korean concept of *han* can deepen the distinctions between lament and confession. He describes "sin as the

1 See Rah, *Prophetic Lament*.


2 Katongole and Rice, *Reconciling All Things*, 78.

3 See, for example, Davis, *Getting Involved with God*.

4 Park and Nelson, *Other Side of Sin*, 168.

wrongdoing of people toward God and their neighbors. *Han* is the pain experienced by the victimized neighbors.”⁵ Those who have sinned need to confess. Those who have experienced *han* need to lament.

Boo-Wong Yoo defines *han* as “a feeling of unresolved resentment against injustices suffered, a sense of helplessness because of the overwhelming odds against one, a feeling of acute pain in one’s guts and bowels.”⁶ It is an emotion that is essential to the Korean identity—a sense of collective loss, resentment, and grief. The concept of *han* likely originated during the Japanese colonization of Korea as a term the Japanese colonizers used to stereotype Koreans as weak and sorrowful. *Han* was a word of the colonizer to dispossess the oppressed. However, the Korean people have reclaimed this concept to acknowledge and name the truth of



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the wounds and collective suffering that have come through colonization, war, division, and displacement. Recognizing the experience of *han* makes clear the need for biblical lament.

Lament is a bold act of faith by the oppressed to approach the God who hears. Lament creates space for people to shed their sorrow in the presence of a God who they believe will act on behalf

of those who are suffering. This spiritual practice reminds those with *han* that they do not need to stay frozen in their grief. Lament allows room for those with *han* to acknowledge the deep pain and let go, release, exhale.

People with *han* need places to lament. By recentering the spiritual discipline of lament, our churches and faith communities can help create spaces to acknowledge the *han* we carry in our minds and bodies. In the process of genuine lamenting to God, new visions can unfold, and we can be transformed. Naming the *han* in lament opens new possibilities for healing and reconciliation.

What would it look like for our faith communities to lament what we are witnessing during the pandemic? Who needs to confess? Who needs to lament? How can we help people to see God as a lamenting God who knows *han* and suffers with the oppressed? What would a communal in-

5 Park, *Racial Conflict and Healing*, 9.

6 Yoo, *Korean Pentecostalism*, 221.

vation to lament look like in our communities so that we can let go and be ready for the next season of our work?

As I put on my shoes to leave my mom's apartment, I hear a knock at the door. Her neighbor, Mrs. Lee, is holding a bowl of steamy rice por-

Sometimes communal lament looks like shouting the psalms with our fists raised; sometimes it is lightening the burden by carrying the han together.

ridge. "Aigo, I heard you fell again. You need to be careful these days. It's not much, but I made some extra *juk* so you can eat, too. You need to heal quickly."

I see in Mrs. Lee's bent back and deep wrinkles that she too has known suffering and knows the power of lamenting together. Sometimes communal lament looks like shouting the psalms with our fists raised; sometimes it is lightening the burden by carrying

the *han* together. Lamenting with a bowl of porridge—this is a path to healing.

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About the author

Sue Park-Hur is the denominational minister for Transformative Peacemaking for Mennonite Church USA, overseeing peace and justice related issues. She also supervises

Women in Leadership. Park-Hur codirects ReconciliAsian, a peace center in Los Angeles specializing in conflict transformation and restorative justice for immigrant churches. A former co-lead pastor and co-church planter, her passion is to see the church living out the shalom of the gospel. She has a graduate degree in Christian formation and intercultural studies from Wheaton College and a bachelor's degree in sociology and Asian American studies from UCLA. She attends Pasadena Mennonite Church in Pasadena, California.