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Faith Community Nursing: Ministering to God's People in Ukraine through Lamentation

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Moments of Reflection

Faith Community Nursing: Ministering to God's People in Ukraine through Lamentation

“Mom, you must leave Ukraine now! They are bombing all over the country and there is no telling where they are targeting next!” It was two of my three sons calling from Boston at five am on February 24, 2022. Remembering that conversation brings a heaviness to my heart. My life as a tenured Faith Community Nurse and Reach Global missionary in Kyiv, the Capital city of Ukraine, would forever be changed.

I’ve been a missionary for the better part of twenty-two years in Kyiv, Ukraine, and no one prepared me for work in a war-torn country, let alone one I called “home” for so long. The driving questions that plagued my mind were: What do I do next? How do I minister and give hope when I feel so hopeless? How do I maintain a balance of safety and trust in God, while helping my grown sons and others make sense of all the pain and danger? Most importantly, how do I resolve the huge questions of “Where are You in all of this, God?” and “Why is this happening?” I left Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and found myself in America lost and unsure of anything other than where I was now. I found myself in need of lamenting.

A lament is the honest cry of a hurting heart wrestling with the paradox of pain and the promise of God’s goodness (Vroegop, 2019). A lament starts where we find ourselves: in the pit of strong emotion. It may be grief, despair, anger, or deep sorrow. The key is to be present with God amid turmoil, strife, and desperation. It is not easy to place oneself in a vulnerable position with God amid the rawness that those emotions bring. These emotions must be expressed to God with honesty and humility. Since the first Russian attacks, I have continually experienced pain and questions. I did what I knew best, which was to desperately serve harder. From afar, I maintained communication with my teams across Ukraine. I supported them through humanitarian aid and prayer. I ministered with my presence by listening to their experiences, and I did my best to help financially.

My heart broke a hundred times over the first few months of 2022. After all, Missionaries are supposed to be the leaders, the strong ones, the ones who are pointing others to Jesus. That first summer of 2022, a friend and I agreed to spend several hours lamenting over Ukraine. We lamented the families that were separated from each other; the many husbands remaining in Ukraine while wives and children were sent abroad. We lamented the children that were abducted from their homeland and forcibly adopted into a family and country they had not chosen to go to, all while their real parents were still alive and looking for them. We lamented the atrocities that were documented and those that were still hidden from the public. We used Psalms to express the feelings and despair for which we could find words.

The Psalms are a collection of religious poems, hymns and prayers that are attributed to King David and others in the Hebrew Bible. A third of the Psalms written are Psalms of lament. We don’t know how long it took the Psalmists to write each Psalm. Some may have been written quickly in jubilation, as a response to God’s goodness. Others may have taken months to work through their anguish as they wrestled with God. We do know, however, that the lamenter’s pain was real. Their questions were deep, and their losses were felt from the very core of their beings.

“Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me.” (Ps. 69:1-2, NIV)

“Rescue me, LORD, from evildoers; protect me from the violent, who devise evil plans in their hearts and stir up war every day.” (Ps. 140:1-2, NIV)

“ How long, LORD? Will you hide yourself forever?” (Ps. 89:46, NIV)

Lamenting before God, with a vulnerable posture of pain, fear, loss, and disillusionment is not a natural posture for me. How do I do this? How do I express in earnest these raw emotions to one who I have always praised and honored? There was a nagging feeling that I was, in my deep and personal lament, challenging my relationship with the Almighty. Interestingly, when we empty our hearts of pain, anger, hatred, and mourning, there is a silence that enters in. In this silence, there is room for God to work, speaking peace, forgiveness and mercy that can only come from Him. As we lamented with vulnerable cries to God, our hearts were emptied, and we began to hear and remember His truths.

“I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy.” (Ps. 140:12, NIV)

“But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.” (Ps. 86:15, NIV)

“My feet stand on level ground; in the great congregation I will praise the LORD” (Ps. 26:12, NIV)

“May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope, LORD, is in you.” (Ps. 25:21, NIV)

Many people are at a loss for words, the pain blocks their throats; rather, they angrily kick a soccer ball with all their might or viciously hurl stones into the nearest lake. Some struggle to put their feelings into words but can draw everything out on a canvas. Still others find writing a letter to God helpful. There is no right or wrong way to lament, and words are not always needed. The point is to begin by inviting God into the lamentation and honestly, humbly sharing your thoughts and feelings with Him.

Nothing has changed on the outside. The war continues to rage, people continue to suffer, and there are still more questions than answers. Yet I know that in those moments of lament, God meets me, and He understands my pain. The exercise of lamentation has become a regular part of my life. When I take the time to create the space, I feel heard. When I lament, He is always there to listen, and I experience His ministry of presence as He gives His everlasting peace, “...not as the world gives..., but as HE gives. (Paraphrased John 14:27)

Vroegop, M. (2019). Dark clouds, deep mercy: *Discovering the grace of lament*. Crossway.

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