

# Lament with the Spirit

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Edson (Bill) Lewis  
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## Scripture references

Romans 8:18-27

Psalm 102:18-22

Luke 4:14-21

## Sermon

For the purposes of this sermon I am going to compare the life of a Christian to the warp and woof of a Navaho rug. I saw many such rugs on the homemade looms of Navaho friends during the years I was growing up on the Navaho reservation. The tedious weaving of a Navaho rug is an art and practice that's much less common now than formerly, and you may have to be somewhat lucky to see one under construction these days.

The looms are constructed so that the vertical threads of what is called the warp of the rug, hundreds of them, are right next to each other. The threads of the warp are stretched vertically between two horizontal beams, one above the weaver and the other near the floor. The warp constitutes the foundation of the rug and its outside dimensions determine the size of the rug.

The weaver, as far as I remember, was always a Navaho woman, seated in front of those vertical threads of the warp, she wove the horizontal multi-colored threads of the rug's woof back and forth through the vertical threads with such skilled and speedy motions that her hands dissolved into a blur. Gradually, miraculously, the pattern fixed in her head appeared on the loom. In the process the vertical threads of the warp disappeared as they were covered up by the brightly colored woof. The warp was still there, serving as the foundation for the rug, but was not so easily seen.

We are something like that. The woof of our lives...that which can be seen...covers up the more foundational and invisible warp on which the Master Weaver constructs the more visible patterns of our lives. I want to pay attention to that foundational warp on which the Master Weaver does His marvelous work...as it is revealed in chapter eight of Romans. It's a deeper part of our lives, often covered up by what can be more easily seen.

## Romans 8

According to Romans 8, the warp, the foundational part of a Christian's life is provided by the activity of the Spirit of Christ, who, of all things, is said to LIVE IN US...IN US! In another place Paul describes the indwelling to be such that he no longer lives, but Christ lives in him! Who can understand these things? Go to Galatians 2:20 and see the text for yourself. That's what it says!

Paul is obviously spelling out the implications of the promise that Jesus made the night before his crucifixion: I am leaving, but "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Comforter who will be with you forever -- the Spirit of truth -- he will live with you and be in you." Then to verify that the Spirit and Jesus are in this together, our Lord continues, "I will not leave you as orphans: I will come to you...then you will realize that I am in my Father, and your are in me, and I am in you." (John 14:15-20).

It is quite clear that Paul intends this activity of the Spirit, and therefore Christ, to be taken as the warp of our lives on which the woof, that which can be seen, is worked out! For my part I stand open-mouthed before a mystery that is beyond my comprehension. And so I'm not too surprised when the mystery leads to the implications Paul which spells out by the end of the chapter: "...in all things God works for the good of those who love him..." How can that be? How can it not be if the warp of one's life

is the indwelling Spirit? Or “Who can separate us from the love of Christ?” Can trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?” No! Not when the bond is an internal, mystical one, arranged by the indwelling Spirit, threaded into the very warp of one’s life.

### **The Deeper Mystery**

But then the mystery deepens. Paul says that the activity of the Spirit is one of deep groaning, profound sighing, intense lament...to which the Spirit calls us and in which He joins us. That’s the warp. Now isn’t that amazing? Isn’t that a surprise? Wouldn’t you expect the presence of the Spirit within to result in all sunshine and light, victory and triumphant living? Wouldn’t you? That’s the way Joel Osteen understands the Gospel. The other day I heard a portion of one of his sermons on TV. It was richly sprinkled with the promises of what some call the “Health and Wealth Gospel.” Come to Jesus and all will be joy, success, and happiness! Well...not so in Romans 8!

However, we must not be too hard on Joel Osteen and similar preachers of a “positive” or “possibility” Gospel. We have our own encounters with similar aspirations. Last week our liturgy included the song “Our God Reigns.” Do you remember? It contains these words.

*How lovely on the mountains are the feet  
of him who brings good news, good news,  
announcing peace,  
proclaiming news of happiness.  
...news of HAPPINESS?*

In the light of Romans 8, and the warp of lament that comes with the activity of the Spirit, one can only ask...”REALLY?... REALLY?” What has happened to the firstfruits of the Spirit..that groaning within? What about proclaiming news of lament as well as blessedness? What about that Spirit-led-prompting of earnest, inward groaning, and lament so profound that we cannot find the words to express its content, but must depend on the Spirit himself to intercede for us? The dissonance between the words of the song and Romans 8, for me, is palpable.

### **The Root Idea of Lament**

It’s time to take a closer look at the words in the text with the prayer that the Lord will help us believe and understand. The root idea under the Greek word for groaning which, in our text, is translated in various ways, is a profound one, rich with powerful and evocative images. Translators of our English versions of the New Testament strive to get at some of that when they variously refer to the same word as the groans (1) of a woman in labor or (2) to the unquenchable inner groans that long for circumstances to be different than they are, a situation in which we can imagine many Israelis and Palestinians to be, to say nothing of ourselves. (3) Or the translators may conjure up the image of sighing so deep it cannot be put into words. For me that image comes to mind when I see the photograph of a mother in Darfur holding a dying child to her empty breast. Her vacant look bespeaks a sigh that is too deep for words. She no longer has anything to say!

The root image of the Greek word for groan, so variously translated in Romans 8, is that of being hard pressed in a narrow place, of being confined to a small box, unable to move, like a prisoner under torture. The word introduces us to one who is unable to get out of a troubling situation like...well, an animal caught in a trapper’s device, an animal which will even chew off its foot to get out of the trap. These are the sorts of images that go with the groaning mentioned in Romans 8. This is what lament is like for the one who is trapped, AND also (this is important!) for the one who sees the suffering one. Both can groan together, as does the Spirit with us when we are trapped. The circumstances prompting lament are all about us.

Just open the pages of today's Dispatch. Two stories among many others come to mind: (1) the implications of the mortgage meltdown are squeezing many into narrow, confined, and restricted options. Just attend to some of the specific cases mentioned in the Dispatch. They are indeed tragic and heart-rending. Or (2) review the account of the laments that surrounded the very final concert of the Columbus Symphony Orchestra last evening. Somehow the orchestra and its leadership got out on a limb from which there was no escape. It's situations like that that churn up the sort of lament mentioned in our text.

I haven't even mentioned personal tragedies...our's or those of our acquaintances and loved ones. Lament is generated everywhere about us. It's so pervasive that Paul can even say that the whole creation groans as in the travail of a woman in labor, right up to the present time (Rom. 8:22)! For those with eyes to see, and ears to hear, reasons for lament are everywhere.

### **Why So Hard? Why So Important?**

Why then does lament come so hard for us. How is it that we can sit down in front of TV screens without tears streaming down our faces? How is that possible? Why is it so hard to groan? Why don't the daily statistics from Iraq drive us to our knees? Why not? How is it that polar bears can go on the endangered species list without a chorus of sighs too deep for words filling our public airways? How come?

There are probably many reasons. Perhaps we think Christians should always be positive and cheerful. A Christian in the depths of lament...impossible! Perhaps we don't think God can, or should, suffer and weep...impossible! Perhaps we don't think the Holy Spirit groans. Perhaps, as Akbar Ahmed, a Muslim, complains in a recent book, *Journey into Islam*, we Americans live in a bubble, self-satisfiedly luxuriating in our relative prosperity which protects us from the suffering of others, and keeps us from really seeing the suffering of the planet itself. Perhaps it's this! Perhaps it's that! Why is our inner self so strongly barricaded against lament?

I think that Kathleen Norris, celebrated author, may have part of the answer. I heard her speech at the recent "Festival of Faith and Learning Conference" at Calvin College. She mentioned her most recent book, *Acedia and Me*, which will be released in September. All indications are that it will be a worthwhile read, and one that all of us might profitably consult. She said the book would explore the sources and implications of the growing boredom and sense of meaninglessness that pervade our culture, which, I suggest, therefore keep us from the lament and groaning of which Paul speaks. The boredom, according to Norris, is insidious and pervasive, a threat to our moral integrity and the ability to empathize and care for one another.

Well...now to some concluding observations. First, we lose something when we can no longer lament. Though Paul, referring to a mystical relationship with the Spirit, may speak of basically incomprehensible mysteries, one thing is certain. Groaning (lament) is an essential part of our lives because of the Spirit. We lose something when we can no longer lament because we lose touch with the Spirit.

Consider, for instance, this. Losing lament, we will lose compassion. Only those who can groan can be truly compassionate, that is, suffer with others. Remember the Good Samaritan. Three people came by the wounded man on the road to Jericho. All of them heard his groans, but only one groaned with him. Those who cannot groan with others will not reach out to people in need. Remember the Father in the parable of the prodigal son. From afar off the Father saw the son and had, we read, compassion on him. How different the inward state of the Father, who could lament, and the elder brother who could not groan for and with his younger brother.

In both parables we are, of course, being taught something about the person of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This may be the place to mention a profound difference between the Greek and Hebrew notions of God. Both attributed strong emotions, strong longings, strong desires to their deities. In the case of the Greeks the lives of their gods were shaped by the surging demands of anger and/or violent erotic love. Just read the mythologies of the Greek Gods. That will be the warp you will find! On the

other hand, among the Hebrews, who worshipped an equally passionate God, the warp turns out to be the groaning of which our text speaks. And, THEREFORE, the heart of this God issues in mercy and longsuffer and the sort of empathy which will allow Jesus himself to weep when he remembers the rejection of the nation and foresees the suffering that is to come upon Jerusalem.

Next, it's worth pondering the implicit claim of the biblical story: when it comes to rationale for right behavior, lament is a more powerful motive than is anger or even erotic love. That was the Good News that came to the first century world. The warp of the Spirit-filled life is lament, not anger, not erotic love! It's worth remembering that Nehemiah wept (groaned) over the crumbling walls of Jerusalem before he returned to build them and became angry with those who stood in the way of their restoration. One wonders what it would be like if the initiatives of BREAD were first of all spawned in exercises of lament. I don't know the answer to my own question. Or, a similar question, what would have happened in the USA, and the world (!), if our first response to 9/11 had been lament rather than anger and revenge? We will never know, but the question is worth asking. Throughout the text, the Scriptures are counseling us, don't despise the power and place of lament in the Christian life. It's God-given. It's the warp that makes us who we really are.

A final thought. Try to stay with lament long enough to let it do its work in our lives. Don't run away from it, or try to cut it short, like parents who tell weeping children to shut up and quit acting like cry-babies. That's generally very bad advice. It's groaning that teaches us to be attentive to the Spirit and the needs of others. It's lament that puts us in touch with our own needs and may even instruct us in the virtue of humility. It's lament that will bring us to the Table, like the publican in the temple, really hungry, really thirsty, full of groanings and sighs too deep for words other than "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner." I suggest we come to the Table that way. We can dare to so approach the Table, and even do it with some hope, because it is the Spirit within that prompts us to do so. Thanks be to God.