

Sunday, October 6, 2013: Lamentations 1:1-6; 3:19-26; Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

by [Cornelius Plantinga](#) in the [October 2, 2013](#) issue

In late July the largest city in my state declared bankruptcy. In 1950, Detroit, Michigan, was the fifth largest city in the nation, roughly the same size as Philadelphia and Los Angeles. Booming automobile companies made middle-class citizens of people who worked in them. If a worker showed up on time and did his job, his union would see to it that he had comfortable wages, excellent health care and a generous pension. A single worker could support a family with food, clothing, a house, a car and an annual vacation. But by 2008 these terms were unsustainable and were part of what drove the auto companies to bankruptcy.

Today Detroit has \$18 billion in unfunded promises, including commitments to retired police and firefighters. Its population has shrunk by over 60 percent and its tax base along with it. Forty square miles of the city are strewn with weeds and rubble. Whole neighborhoods sit desolate, their houses standing empty and forlorn, with gaping roofs, toppled chimneys, missing doors and busted windows.

Municipal services are a shambles. Buses don't show up at their stops. Aging police cars break down in city streets. Calls to 911 go unanswered. "In a life or death emergency," said the *Detroit News*, "you might as well ask for a hearse."

All of this calls for lament. "Lament," said South African theologian Denise Ackermann, "is the sound suffering makes when it recovers its voice." Devastation can silence us. You see a lonely city that once was full of people, and what do you say? In the early 1940s Detroit women would tie up their head scarves and then rivet bombers at the Willow Run plant, producing one B-24 Liberator every hour. It was a world-class display of industrial might. In prosperous days, neighbors called to each other from their porches, and children played "red light, green light" on city sidewalks.

But now the city "weeps bitterly in the night" (Lam. 1:2). The author of Lamentations never heard of Detroit, but he knew what devastation looks like and he knew that in the face of it, lament is the sound suffering makes when it recovers its voice. The author writes of Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem, a now lonely city, with its people

exiled and forced into hard labor by their enemies.

Even “her children have gone away, captives before the foe” (Lam. 1:5). Over the years I’ve often thought of children in the midst of religious or tribal or national strife. Some goon breaks down the door to the family dwelling, and for the first time a child sees things no child should have to see. What does it do to a child to see the big people in her life—her oldest brother, her mother, her father—being cursed, slapped, kicked, slammed with a rifle butt, and then crying out in pain and humiliation?

When trouble comes, the godly person may go silent or weep or cry out. Like witnesses to atrocity in the old South Africa, she may sit in the meetings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, telling the world what the enforcers of apartheid did to her. She may then rock back and forth, hugging herself and keening like a wounded animal.

The authors of Lamentations, of Habakkuk and of many psalms see trouble and cry to the Lord. Much lament rises from the interrogative mood. How long, Lord, how long? Why, Lord, why? When, Lord, when? It’s important to see that lament makes no sense if God is indifferent or off duty. Lament makes sense only if God is present, addressable and full of steadfast love.

So the author of Lamentations pauses in the middle of five chapters of lament to testify to one ray of hope: “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end” (Lam. 3:22). The author finds hope and love because he is lamenting in good faith.

Unbelief shakes its fist at God or dismisses God or tries to get an invasive God off its back. It’s faith that laments. Faith wrestles with God because trouble and enemies and terror are all anomalies in God’s world. They don’t belong there. In a world in which the King of the universe has steadfast love, these things *should not happen*.

But they do, and so the believer points them out to God and laments them. These terrible things should not be. A young medical student in India should not be gang-raped on a public bus and left for dead. How long, Lord, how long? A man in Webster, New York, should not set his house on fire to lure firefighters into a trap so that he may kill them there. Why, Lord, why? A gunman should not enter the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, and think that he has the right to destroy the lives of 20 children and six adults and everybody who loved them. How

long, Lord, how long?

When I think of how much there is to lament in this sad world, I simply cannot stop believing in the second coming of Jesus Christ “to judge the quick and the dead.” Social gospel theologian Walter Rauschenbusch used to ponder this. Think, he said, of all the people in the world who have been terribly wronged. Shall there be no justice for them? Not ever? They lead an awful life, they die—and the universe closes over their wounds that have never healed? That’s it?

Rauschenbusch refused to believe this because then what would be the sense of anything?