

A lament for Baltimore

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For more than a week I've been reciting [Habakkuk](#) in my mind:

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you 'Violence!'
and you will not save?
Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
So the law becomes slack
and justice never prevails.

These words were likely written in the 8th century BCE, but they may as well have been written just days ago in the West Baltimore neighborhood of Sandtown-Winchester.

Have you seen those posts about "the two cities" in Baltimore? I live in the first one: Charm City, the leafy city, the city of education, the city of one of the best medical institutions in the world, the city that reads. I don't live in the other city: the one with appalling poverty rates and food deserts and the constant threat of violence. I've driven through that one once or twice, but for the most part (let's be real) it's the part of the city you stay away from unless you live there.

It's the city you might recognize from the *The Wire*. It's the one that featured on the national news last week, when protestors clashed with police in riot gear and looters damaged local businesses and a CVS went up in flames.

I wept watching the news that night. This was my city. Well, it was and it wasn't. On the one hand, I believe in what we Baltimore residents, black and white and Arab and Asian and Hispanic, have been telling the rest of the country this week: we are

#OneBaltimore. We love this city. We believe and hope that something better and more beautiful will rise from these ashes.

But I also got to go home to a quiet, safe, leafy neighborhood every night last week—while my brothers and sisters in Sandtown swept the glass off their street, and listened to the cops shouting at them through bullhorns to keep the curfew, and begged CVS and Target not to abandon their stores and leave them with nowhere to buy basic goods. And I feel that painful contradiction. I made a commitment to live in the city and not the county. I attend an ethnically and economically diverse church. But I can't salve my conscience so easily. I have choices that so many others do not.

All I've been able to turn to is the prayer of lament. Habakkuk's words are a lament. *How long?* How long must we endure police brutality? How long must we watch the city fail our children and our public schools? How long must we watch our young black men go to jail instead of college?

These words are echoed [in Revelation](#): "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" These are the words of a community that has suffered, that's been abused and oppressed, that has shed blood. They might make good middle-class Christians cringe a little: *avenge?* Avenge our *blood*, on the earth? But that's lament: an anguished cry to God for justice in the midst of distress and pain.

Because God is the God of justice, and this just God *hears* their prayers. [One chapter later in Revelation](#), the martyrs who cry out to God with their demand for just judgment reappear, but now they're clothed in white robes, and they stand before the throne of God,

and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.
They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;
for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

That's my prayer for Baltimore. I know that perfect justice and peace only come with the eschaton (*your kingdom come! your will be done!*), but I pray that some of the tears might be wiped away in the meantime. I pray that we can stand in solidarity with the suffering and work for greater justice and deeper peace. I pray that the charges filed against the six officers are a sign of genuine change, of real reform. I pray I might humbly learn from those who have suffered in ways I never have.

I pray for Baltimore—because it's my city, too.