The theological work of antiracism needs to include lament

The Bible shows us what to do with our frustration, outrage, and complicity.

by Rob Muthiah in the January 27, 2021 issue

(Illustration by Daniel Richardson)

The bus stopped outside the Watts Labor Community Action Committee in Los Angeles. We piled out—a group of clergy and congregants from various locations in the LA area with a desire to understand and engage the ways racism has played out in our own geography. Our tour of the WLCAC was an attempt to remember racism's toll on us as individuals, as a region, and as a nation.

During the tour, we arrived at an exhibit of a noose hanging from a tree. At that moment, our guide, Tina Watkins, began to sing an a cappella rendition of "Strange Fruit" in a clear and powerful voice.

> Southern trees bearing strange fruit
> Blood on the leaves and blood at the roots

Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Many in our group had never heard the song. Many were moved to tears. The moment was an arresting example of memory, emotion, and truth telling coming together. It was a moment of lament.

The idea for the bus tour emerged from conversations a year earlier when several racist incidents took place on our university's campus. In the class I was co-teaching we pondered how our seminary might contribute a theological response to the university community. An unexpected answer came out of those conversations: lament.

In a campus worship service we organized soon after, lament proved to be a powerful response to the racism in our midst. It gave voice to the pain and anger being felt by many people of color, and it challenged those who needed to repent for their complicity in the status quo. Lament named these realities and created a public protest.

Lament is a lost tradition in many churches today. One indicator of this is that few churches have songs of lament in their musical canon. Many praise choruses highlight a theology of celebration, an important aspect of Christian faith but not enough to account theologically for the full range of our lived experiences. Nor do many hymnals get us much closer to the Bible's unfiltered, heartfelt outbursts of lament.

After this initial experience on campus, we wanted to go deeper. To explore this lost practice and how it could intersect with the task of dismantling racism, a team of us—four pastors and four professors from diverse backgrounds—began meeting over the course of almost a year. Always in the back of our minds was the question of how we could take what we were learning to our congregations. The result: 40 racially diverse congregants from our four team pastors' churches gathered on two summer Saturdays to learn, listen, eat, and lament together.

Our stop at the WLCAC reflected the first step the book of Lamentations offers us: remembering. "How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal," reads the book's very first verse.

Then Lamentations names current realities. “She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies” (1:2).

Along with remembering and naming, we found that personal stories were essential to connect the past with the present. Anthony, one of our team pastors, told about his recent experience in a local flower shop. He had a last-minute idea to buy corsages as a surprise for a father-daughter event he and his daughters would be attending that evening, and he stopped at the downtown florist. As he waited his turn, he noticed how patient and attentive the shop employee was while helping a White man pick out flowers for a bouquet.

When Anthony, a Black man with dreadlocks and earrings, asked for help designing what he wanted, the clerk curtly responded, “I have no idea what your daughters would like.” She suggested that he go to a nearby grocery store where the flowers would be cheaper.

He knew that he was receiving different treatment because of the color of his skin. In that moment, he wanted to respond with indignation, but he didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of labeling him as an angry Black man. He swallowed it, turned, and walked out of the store.

As Anthony told this story, we felt a measure of his pain, outrage, frustration, and disappointment. It was obvious that the constantly mutating virus of racism is alive and well in our midst. But what could we do with our frustration and outrage? What could we do to confront the injustice of it? While it’s not a comprehensive response, scripture provided us something profound to do: lament.

In the church context, lament can take different forms, depending on who is doing the lamenting. These include confession, despair, and protest. Lament is capacious enough as a liturgical form to communicate all of these.

The pattern of lament as confession and repentance is woven throughout scripture. It can be corporate, as in the book of Daniel: “We have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and ordinances” (9:5). It can be individual, as in Lamentations and the Psalms: “The Lord is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word” (Lam. 1:18); “For your name’s sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great” (Ps. 25:11). This type of lament expresses anguish at having forsaken God and seeks forgiveness and restoration. In

relation to racism, this lament type fits for those who realize that they have benefited from and perpetuated the racist paradigms and imagination of the dominant culture.

The WLCAC is in the Watts neighborhood of LA. After our visit, some of our participants were moved to lament the systemic racism that created the tinder box of anger and despair that exploded there in 1992 after the acquittal of the police officers who beat Rodney King. When people are ready to face up to their complicity in a racist system or to their own internalized racist views, penitential lament provides a form for doing so. One congregant wrote this lament of repentance:

> Oh God, my Great Redeemer and Restorer of life, even though my ancestors walked dark roads filled with evil, I ask that you would deliver me and my children from the legacy of lies and wickedness. Sever the ties that bind to the old way full of hate. Flood us with cleansing waters that wash over and erase any remnant. We praise you and will be your love as a sign of your goodness and change.

Penitential lament confesses personal and corporate sinfulness and pleads for God to act in order to cleanse and restore the supplicants.

But what about those who have borne the brunt of racism? What about Pastor Anthony? Confession in relation to the oppressive forces of racism is not his task. Part of the richness of lament as an antiracist practice is that you can find a type that is appropriate for you regardless of your story in relation to racism. For some, rather than laments of confession, laments of despair are the appropriate type.

Laments of despair cry out in pain about the current situation and often point to enemies as the source of suffering. This is what we hear when the author of Lamentations writes, “For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me, one to revive my courage; my children are desolate, for the enemy has prevailed” (Lam. 1:16). This form of lament cries out to God about an overwhelming sense of isolation and defeat.

Along these lines, one of our congregants wrote this lament of despair during our second church summit:

> You once took a people through the wilderness into a land of milk and honey. But I am a stranger, an alien, a Forever Foreigner in my own land. “Where are you from? How is your English so good?” This is supposed to be the promised land—one nation under God. Why am I still homeless? And if these aren’t my people, who is? Do I have a people? Or will I forever be alone? Still in this strange and weary land, I will trust in you. We will trust in you. For you are a God who knows homelessness, you are a God of the wilderness.

Despair comes through also in another congregant’s lament prayer:

> O Lord am I not good enough? Is my skin not good enough? Is my skin so dark that it offends? Or is my hair so unruly and nappy that it requires a law to be tamed? O Lord where are you? Show me your mercy. Show me your beauty so that I can see mine because after all I am made in your image.

These prayers emerge from different stories, but the depth of anguish is similar. The inclusion of laments of despair in scripture releases us to also pray in this way.

When the internal despair related to racism erupts in anger and protest, lament provides a channel for that as well. Protest laments sharply question God’s inaction, as in Psalm 10: “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” and Psalm 6: “My soul is struck with terror, while you, O Lord—how long?” Protest laments also can be accusatory: “You have made us the taunt of our neighbors, the derision and scorn of those around us” (Ps. 44:13).

One of our congregants included this protest in her prayer lamenting racism: “You God have the power to bring us to our knees and change our ways yet you allow this injustice to perpetuate from one generation to the next.”

Protest laments not only question and accuse God but also demand action from God. “As a protest,” writes theologian Rebekah Eklund, “Israel’s lament calls on God to account for the way things are wrong in the world, and demands that God listen and respond—to set right what is wrong, mend what is broken, and bring light to the darkness.” We stand in this tradition when we protest to God about the racism in our midst.

To help our participants write their own laments, we gave them the common elements found in lament psalms: direct address to God (sometimes by a unique name or title); a statement of the complaint, sin, or problem; an appeal for specific action, intervention, or justice; and a vow to praise or an expression of trust in God. We found that this pattern gave enough structure to keep the participants from floundering, while also offering enough flexibility to accommodate many different stories and feelings.

In our church summits, we not only asked people to write prayers of lament but also invited them into an experience of bodily lament. During the afternoon worship of our second church summit, Pastor Anthony, who has a background in dance and movement, called up groups of eight to ten people at a time and had them line up off to the side. Each participant was asked to choose, on the spot, an action and a sound that they would use to express lament. The first in line was then asked to step onto the stage and to carry out repetitively her action and sound. Quickly the second person was asked to add his action and sound to the scene.

Soon the front area was full of repeated actions (a foot stomping, arms reaching up, a chest thump, prostrating) and sounds (a powerful release of breath, a guttural cry, a plea of “Why?”). Acting like a choir director, Anthony asked the group to get quieter and then louder, to slow down and speed up, to continue the action but stop the sound, to resume all, to freeze. Table by table, groups came up to enact bodily lament.

The process pushed most of us way out of our comfort zones, but participants reported that the impact was amazing and the discomfort well worth it. One congregant later shared: “I felt something during the physical expressions part . . . I had no idea what he meant by ‘show a physical expression,’ and then when it was happening and everyone was doing it, it made perfect sense for some reason. And all these people expressing these deep emotions and groanings towards God and a community was just really powerful.”

Another said, “I thought it was so incredible when we got up on the stage with our emotions and sounds, and then when you got everybody up there one at a time, and then the total picture was just like, ‘Oh God,’ you know?” A third person described it as “the collective expression of God’s heart. Like that’s God’s heart, the groanings and the sound and the pain and the sorrow.”

I was deeply impacted by the experience, too. So a couple of months later I pushed out of my comfort zone again and tried out bodily lament with my own church on our fall retreat. The response was the same. The process is intense, communal, personal, physical, visual, and auditory.

From studying, discussing, and leading people into expressions of lament over the last two years, I've learned several things about how lament functions as an antiracist practice. First, lament opens up emotional space. It can draw on the insights from history and the analysis of how racism was constructed, but it doesn't stay in the head. It doesn't pass reform legislation, but it can provide the motivation to do so. It can be a method of protest, like showing up at a march, but it takes on a more intimate, more personal hue. Lament can move those who have benefited from the system into empathy and connection. And for those who have suffered from the same system, lament opens space where responses don't have to be filtered through the lens of acceptability politics. We need space to be raw, vulnerable, and personally honest in facing racism, and lament provides this.

A second important function of lament is that it explicitly connects God to our struggle against racism. News reports don't do this for us. Race theory generally doesn't do this for us. Politicians don't do this for us. This is our work as the church, but sometimes it can get left to the side.

What I've seen in reading through numerous prayers of lament written by participants in various events I've helped to lead is that God is given heightened, intensified attention. As participants pour their stories into their prayers of lament, they connect these stories to God in one way or another, sometimes wrestling with God, sometimes turning to affirm trust and hope in God for change. The moral framework for judging racism and at the same time not losing hope comes to the surface when God is addressed in lament. This then contributes significantly to a faith foundation for other types of antiracist work.

Many participants expressed appreciation for learning that lament is an act of faith, not faithlessness. You don't lament to God if you do not believe that God is there. You don't demand that God do something unless you believe that God can indeed act. Ironically, in being given permission to yell at God and question God and shake fists at God, many came away feeling closer to God and inspired to live more fully into God's vision for shalom. Several congregants commented that it was significant to them to learn that lament can be an act of worship.

Too often our church members have received the message that questioning God and expressing negative emotions are signs of faithlessness. As one congregant put it, “Growing up I was taught that you never challenge God. Understanding lament confirms that this is not truth.”

Another wrote that learning about lament taught her “that it is OK to cry out to God when you are in a rough season. That every prayer or conversation with God does not need to be positive.” We’re not going to make progress on racism if we’re not honest, and if we’re going to be honest with ourselves and with others, we need to be honest with God.

A third insight is that lamenting itself counts as doing something. It is not just a therapeutic stop on the way to doing real antiracist work. Lament is real work. It challenges us, it raises awareness, and it births motivation. Lamenting communally also invariably generates spin-off conversations later, and while talk is not enough, these conversations feed awareness and attention, which are crucial components for shaping our imaginations and social realities toward celebrating the dignity and beauty of all people.

At the end of our day together, many congregants asked, “What’s next?” The fact that people asked the question provided further evidence that lament itself does antiracist work. People were motivated through lament to look for other ways to combat the injustice of racism. And unexpectedly for me, many congregants came away with a heightened sense of hope. Lament does real work.

Lament is not a silver bullet for eradicating racism. It is not a replacement for legislating reform, changing medical and educational systems that perpetuate racial injustice, and nurturing relationships across racial lines. But lament does powerful work that these other important initiatives don’t attend to. The church, which was complicit in the unfolding of our racist system, is called to fully engage the fight to undo that same system. Reviving the neglected practice of lament in our churches can make a powerful contribution to the struggle against racism and for the Beloved Community.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Lament as antiracism work.”