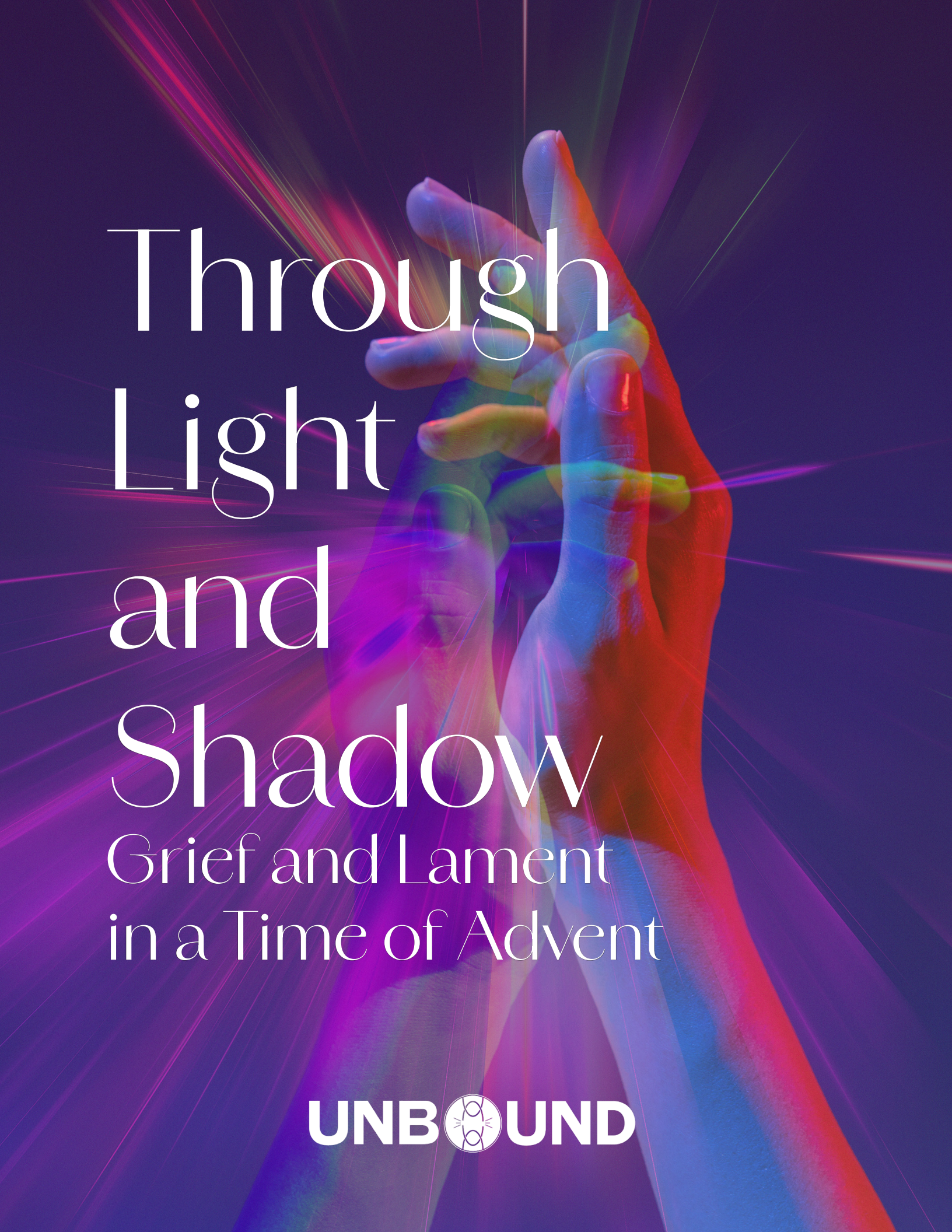




Through Light and Shadow Grief and Lament in a Time of Advent

UNBOUND

Introduction

by Lee Catoe, Editor of Unbound

“The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater.”

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

Tolkien was never shy to express the worst in us and yet was so bold to find the perfect mixture of words to illustrate the nuance of both our world and our inner selves. We are indeed within times of peril that spur grief within the human and collective emotion. Surrounded by war, hate, bigotry, death, and disease, it is so easy to either live in the confines of the cynic or the alternative reality of the denier, losing the depth of what it means to live in the “now” and uncontained ways we experience life.

Advent has historically been classified as a time of waiting in our Christian calendar. Waiting for the Christ child to dwell and walk among us. Waiting for a savior to open up the gates of the kingdom of heaven so that it may be ushered here on earth. Waiting, looking up to the stars, wondering when will Christ come again to remove us from a world easily fallen into disarray. And yes, Advent could be about all of these things.

And what if Advent was a space we could live in our human emotions that bubble up every holiday season? What if we actually grieved together? What if we actually yelled out to God, “Why?! Oh Lord have you forsaken us?!” What if we stopped pretending that the human experience is constructed into binaries and what if we just felt our feelings? After all, the manifestation of love, the Incarnate, experienced the whirlwind of human emotion.

Love does mingle with grief and I do believe that when we move through our grief that love grows in ways we might not have imaged. Our capacity to see each other grows all the while we learn more and more about ourselves.

Through Light and Shadow: Grief and Lament in a Time of Advent centers the movement toward grief while giving us ways to express our losses, our hurt, our anger, our rage, and our tears. It is my deepest hope that all who journey through this Advent devotional will take time to breathe, to feel, to cry, to laugh, to scream, to wait with purpose knowing that joy, peace, hope and love cannot be defined by anyone but ourselves...

1st Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 64:1-9 ~ Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 ~ 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 ~ Mark 13:24-37

by Liz Walker

In the chaos of these times, it's hard to be optimistic about the holidays. With increasing social and political unrest, economic turmoil, war, natural disasters - even the most pious among us struggle for hope. Thankfully, the season of Advent offers us sacred space to confront our doubts and powerlessness. And this passage by the prophet Isaiah reminds us of the power that is within our reach. The prophet's words all point to a spiritual practice that is sure and immediate, tried and true, a practice that reflects our deepest longing and our greatest hope - that we are not alone. Isaiah teaches us a prayer of lament. With passion and boldness, the prophet instructs us to cry out to the Lord.

*Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you!*

² *As when fire sets twigs ablaze
and causes water to boil,
come down to make your name known to your enemies
and cause the nations to quake before you!*

This is not the time to put on our Sunday best and repeat words of tempered worship. There is no need for restraint. Like the prophet, we must express our honest despair, longing for God to *tear open the heavens* and intervene in a world that has gone out of control. We pray in sadness and desperation, in frustration, and in fear. We pray demanding that God *come down* and intervene in the affairs of this crazy world...*cause the nations to quake before you!*

How often do you just let yourself go with God, pouring out your heart, telling Him what's really on your mind, honestly, sloppily, with warts and all? Being honest with God means dropping the mask and sharing our most vulnerable pain or anger. God doesn't want our cliches nor is He impressed with our biblical knowledge. God wants our hearts. That's how we grow in Him and in faith. Whether it's frustration with the state of the world, our own habits, or God's seeming indifference, following the prophet's lead, we shouldn't leave anything out.

*...you have hidden your face from us
and have given us over to our sins.*

Complaining in prayer is not a matter of putting God "in his place." It is an act of faith, as long as our complaint is motivated by a desire to draw closer rather than turn away. Too often we tend to box God in, or even more destructively, out of our lives. We limit our approach separating the things we want God to control from the things we think we control. We forget that God oversees everything.

The prophet is bold at the throne of mercy, begging God to break through the heavens, turn from His wrath and stop the madness.

⁴ *How long, LORD God Almighty,
will your anger smolder
against the prayers of your people?*

It is easy to turn our daily prayers into a rote ritual, adapting a mindless attitude, repeating the same well-worn words as if God simply checks off a box in hearing our voices. I am now in my 70's and it has taken me a lifetime of prayer to understand more clearly how it works for me, enabling me to see my supplication as a big part of my purpose. Our prayers are meant to be our humble offering in an authentic communion with the creator of the universe. Not because God needs it, but because we do. God wants honesty, transparency, and trust.

And trusting God can quiet our spirits.

Perhaps it was a moment of stillness that led to the prophet Isaiah's shift from despair to an affirmation of trust. *Yet, you are the father. We are the clay and you are the potter.* We have all experienced those prayers that started out in rage and somewhere along the way, turned into humble surrender. Bringing our raw and authentic selves to God prevents that lurking bitterness and bile from taking root. It opens the door for real and lasting healing. And in the process, something else can happen. Taking time for stillness in prayer helps us to prepare a space in our hearts where God can speak. We don't have to be mystics to hear from God. Guidance may not come immediately or in words or other audible cues, but it can unfold in a greater sense of peace and clarity.

There are no perfect prayers. And in the midst of the darkness of this broken world, we may not always feel that God is near. But keep praying. Even God's silence can bless us. The quiet can lead us to align our hearts more closely with God's. *Not my will but thine be done.*

Grief and Lament Practice

Cry

by Brooke Scott

There have been seasons of my life when tears have come to me so easily. Whether I was very happy or very sad, my emotions were often accompanied by tears.

When I think of my relationship with tears, I remember a funny college memory. One summer, I was in RA training with some fellow students. It was extremely hot, and we had been working hard to prepare the residence halls for the new semester. The work was incredibly arduous, and the whole time I had been craving Rita's Water Ice, which is one of my favorite frozen treats in the Philadelphia area. At some point in the day, our supervisor, Kyle, had given us immense praise for all the work we had been doing and suggested we take a break by getting some water ice! I was so hot, sweaty, and exhausted that I was overwhelmed with excitement and relief at this invitation. Later, when we reached the front of the line to order, I was so happy that when the cashier said, "How can I help you?" I started to cry a little! Through tears, I said something like, "I'm sorry—I'm just so happy to be here." Of course, the people I was with had a giggle, and I'm sure it seemed so ridiculous to that cashier, but the invitation to do something refreshing was so meaningful to me at that moment.

It was a silly moment indeed, but I remember it because I did not always feel safe being so vulnerable. As a child, I cried at everything. I was sometimes criticized for my tears and my ability to feel so deeply. I was often moved not only by my own experiences, but also by the emotions of others. I grew accustomed to hearing things like "You're too sensitive," "You're taking this too seriously," and "You need to toughen up."

With the added pressure of being raised as a Black girl in America, there was this sense that if you're too emotional, the world will be harder on you—less compassionate and less forgiving. Black women do not always have the luxury of being seen as dainty, vulnerable, and needy in the same way that other women might. Some people's tears are met with empathy, while others are seen as dangerous. My mother worried for me that if the world saw me as weaker, people would take advantage of me more easily. I wonder if underneath this there was also the fear of bringing shame to our family and our community if I did not appear strong and unbreakable.

I am sometimes surprised at how much shame still exists around tears. While crying is often one of the first things we do as human beings, it can quickly become one of the things we are most afraid to be seen doing. Our tears, like most bodily processes, serve important functions for us. They help us to cleanse, clear out, and release things that overwhelm us. Tears activate and release hormones that help us calm down and eventually feel better. They signal when something has deeply moved us or wounded us. They let us know what we value or when something is not right. Our tears let others know that we need care and tenderness.

In my work as a therapist, tears are often seen as the moment that a client finally experiences a breakthrough. It is the moment when words are finally not enough, and they are no longer able to hold in the very real pain that they have been avoiding, minimizing, or trying to fill with distraction. When people are unable to cry or respond to tear-worthy moments with something like laughter, it is often a sign of emotional incongruence and imbalance, as well as mistrust of other people when tears have been unsafe to express in the past. While not every space in the world is safe enough for us to cry (especially for marginalized people), it is essential that every person has at least one or a few spaces where their tears are finally allowed to flow. It is sometimes the only way through.

While our culture sometimes wrongly views tears as a weakness, tears are a very necessary part of our health and well-being. They keep us honest, and they keep us whole. They keep us connected to what matters to us. The practice of crying is here to help us when words are simply not enough.

Some ways to engage crying as a grief practice:

1. Schedule uninterrupted, private time to be present with difficult emotions that you can say aloud or write about.
2. Find your trusted few: the people who are safe to witness your tears (a friend, pastor, or therapist).
3. Listen to, watch, or read something that deeply moves you emotionally.

2nd Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11 ~ Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13 ~ 2 Peter 3:8-15a ~ Mark 1:1-8

by Abby Norman

Around my neighborhood, there are these yellow signs: JESUS is coming REPENT! They show up overnight and seemingly everywhere - nailed to a telephone pole in a place where someone obviously had to use a ladder, zip tied to the stop sign at the grocery store, next to the Black Lives Matter sign by the crosswalk. Yellow signs with bold letters, warning everyone they had better repent before Jesus gets here. These signs have been appearing since before I moved in 17 years ago. So prevalent are these signs, that when I went to an art exhibit about my side of the city, the artist had reproduced one of those signs and was willing to sell it to me for a few hundred dollars. I declined that offer and carried scissors in my minivan until I saw one that was easy to cut down. It lives in my office now.

Recently, someone has started noticing these signs and has begun putting red signs with bold letters on them next to the yellow signs warning people to repent. The red signs say “BEWARE! Santa is watching!” Now, I am not suggesting that Jesus and Santa should be taken with the same amount of gravity, but the red signs made me giggle. They cleverly point out the tone of the yellow signs that had been bothering me. Somewhere, somehow we got Jesus, savior of the world, mixed up with a dude who sees you when you’re sleeping and knows if you have been bad or good. Jesus, savior of the world is not, in fact, a part of the surveillance state.

We shouldn’t be scared that Jesus is coming back. That shouldn’t be a threat held over our heads so we will behave, and get all good things. Jesus coming back is a promise, not a threat. At the end of the Psalm for this week, there is a description of what God coming for God’s people is like:

*See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

God comes back mighty, and in that might God scoops up the lambs and leads the mothers. God is gentle and nurturing. God feeds and cuddles. God is mighty like a mother’s love is mighty.

So what does that mean for us in Advent? A time of waiting and preparing for Jesus to enter into this world? I think the image of God coming to care for us shows me the ways I can be waiting. I am not preparing to battle the world, to scorch the earth, to burn it all down, even if I may want to some days, even if it feels like that is what the world deserves. The text reminds us that this is a shortsighted attitude. God wouldn’t call the current world a dumpster fire, God would call it beloved. It may feel to us like God has abandoned us. While it may feel like right now is SERIOUSLY BAD and GOD SHOULD FOR SURE SHOW UP NOW IN A BIG WAY, we aren’t the first Jesus Followers to feel like that. 2nd Peter was written between 30 and 90 years after the life of Jesus and they too were over the waiting.

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years

are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Waiting for the fulfillment of God's word seems like the majority of this life. So what do we do while we wait? How do we live in a world that can look abandoned by God, but we are told God actually cares about deeply?

For me, I probably have to stop threatening to burn it all down. I maybe should ask God for the strength and discernment to just burn the bad bits. Maybe, we live in a world worth saving. And that is, perhaps, what this week is telling us. Yes some things are terrible, but what if we cared for the bits that weren't? What if we cherished the love that is here? What if we took care of the world, our community, each other, ourselves as though we are babysitting humankind for a mother God who will one day open the door to this world and snuggle us like a beloved child?

*All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.*

We are experiencing a terrible, horrible, very bad time. There are people who seem less interested in humanity than their stock prices or whether or not a robot can replace relationships. What the heck are we supposed to do? How could the Bible possibly speak to that nightmare?

And yet, it does. God does see us clearly here... is with us clearly here, right here, in the wild world of 2026. And the Love of God will endure forever and that is worth being a part of.

My dad used to tell a story that his grandfather used to tell. I think about it a lot. According to family lore, Great Grandpa Burgess was a boy riding in a wagon from his farm to town. He noticed a group of people in their Sunday best, sitting on the front porch, looking to the sky and waiting. He asked his father (my great-great grandfather Burgess) why they weren't in their fields and he was told that those people were sure Jesus was coming back. Great Grandpa Burgess looked at this group of people and asked his dad what if they are right? And his father said "Well, then I suppose Jesus will find us soon enough at work."

We don't know when Jesus is coming back or if it's a metaphor for the end of the world, but we do know what to do while we wait. We can get to work making peace in the world, treating ourselves and each other like the precious sheep we are. Jesus isn't coming like Santa, to reward and punish us. Jesus is coming back like when I was a little girl and had a babysitter, and I would wait in my room for my parents to come home. They would delight in how well I had been cared for and loved that I had enjoyed my time with my babysitter, and gave me a snuggle. I want Jesus to find me caring well for this world.

Grief and Lament Practice

Engage the Body

by Brooke Scott

I've always cringed a bit at the phrase "Frozen Chosen" when it comes to the Presbyterian Church (USA). Of course, there is some truth to it. We are known for being intellectual, and sometimes that means being overly scripted in our worship. Sometimes it is joked that we hold the same expression in worship, whether we are happy, sad, or inspired. We are not necessarily the type of denomination full of people who dance, lift our hands, or spontaneously emote during worship. At the same time, though, this is not necessarily always the way it needs to be. My experiences in the Black American Baptist church taught me about the real importance of fully engaging the body in worship. It was there that I learned how to shake my head wildly and speak out loud: "Amen," "come on somebody!" and "preach!" when I deeply agree with what is being said. It was there I learned how to sway my body, clap, shake, and stomp my feet when I felt the Spirit's movement. It wasn't always about performing a certain level of spiritual depth; it was about understanding that worship involves all of who we are, allowing the experience to flow fully through our bodies. As Presbyterians work to become more diverse, more anti-oppressive, and more aware of other lived experiences, we can and should challenge ourselves to engage more of our own human experiences. Without that growth, we risk not only excluding different kinds of cultures and people, but also limiting our own ability to fully feel and express ourselves.

When it comes to grief and lament, there are ways that we can think about and analyze our emotions without actually feeling them. I remember the first time I was ever asked in therapy, "Where do you feel that emotion in your body?" I had no idea how to even answer. I was mostly mad that the therapist interrupted my deep analysis. Now, I'll be the first to admit that there are real ways that this question can become obnoxious and misunderstood. But in a moment when I was using my intellect to avoid feeling, it was perfectly timed and perfectly illuminating. I was trying to explain my feelings when I just needed to feel. I was trying to analyze when I just needed to experience. I was trying to understand when I just needed to witness.

The truth is, I have lived so much of my life in my own head. As an only child, I spent a lot of time alone. That time alone was spent with a lot of words—books, magazines, journals, you name it. I was immensely curious, and I had a lust for knowing as much as I possibly could. And while I eventually developed an extensive vocabulary, that did not necessarily always translate to experiencing my emotions in healthy ways.

If I could have taken a step back when that therapist first asked me how my body was experiencing those emotions, I would have been able to say something like this: "There is a pain that stretches from my throat all the way down to my stomach. My chest is tight."

Next, I would ask myself what that feeling needs. And hopefully, I could eventually recognize, "Ah, my breathing is too shallow because of what I'm worried about. I need to slow down and take deeper breaths." Or, "My throat and stomach are carrying the heaviness of being wounded and alone. I need a hug or to feel connected with someone right now."

Sometimes we may be tempted to believe that feelings are simply thoughts in our heads, but feelings are also sensations in the body. Sometimes, before we even understand what's happening or why, our stomachs tighten. Our throats become dry. Our eyes become wet. Our jaws clench. Our palms become sweaty.

Grief and lament are embodied experiences; they are not just intellectual endeavors. And they are not necessarily experiences that fully make sense to us or have clear explanations. They just are.

Lament is needy. Grief demands our acknowledgment. Emotions are temporary, but they need some way to be expressed in order to pass. When we do not pay attention to these phenomena, we risk them coming out in unhealthy ways later on. The body carries secrets and wisdom. In order for us to heal, we need to ask the body what it needs for expression.

This week, try one of these embodied grief and lament practices (if they are safe for you. Choose what feels accessible):

1. Do some deep breathing.
2. Give yourself a hug.
3. Allow yourself to externalize through noise: sigh, yell, groan, or moan.
4. Engage in a body scan meditation, paying attention to each part of your body, one thing at a time. Notice where there are sensations of heaviness or tightness.
5. Lie on your back with your feet up against a wall. Allow it to hold you.
6. Go to a rage room that allows you to safely break things and release anger or rage.
7. Walk, run, or do some sort of sport.

3rd Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 ~ Psalm 126 ~ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 ~ John 1:6-8, 19-28

by Jerrod Lowry

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. For I, the LORD, love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my whole being shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

- Isaiah 61:1-11

To the widow and the widower. To the sad, lonely, depressed. To those grieving, anticipating grief, to those feeling the feelings, unaware that what they are feeling is grief. To those who have lost someone special and precious. To those who are watching their loved ones transition. To those who smile when they really want to cry. To those who will not allow themselves to cry, and to those who cry only where they can't be seen or their wails heard. To those who have no joy, have distant memories of joy, and can't even imagine what might bring them joy. What do we do on this third Sunday of Advent, when the church gathers with great anticipation and excitement to light the Advent Candle of Joy?

I invite you, particularly those whose day-to-day is devoid of joy, to light the Gaudete candle...and...confess to God and neighbor whether joy is an emotion you can even imagine conveying based on all that you're experiencing.

On this Third Sunday of Advent, we come to the Advent wreath to light the candle of Joy, and we hear the promises made to the prophet Isaiah. Maybe you've heard the exact or similar promises shared by well-meaning family, friends, and loved ones who know how hard life has been for you (is for you) and desperately want to see in you the joy that you once exhibited. They want you to be happy. They don't want you to wallow in despair. And so they come to you with prophetic platitudes like the promises offered to the prophet Isaiah to a people overwhelmed by the disappointing realities of life.

Exploring the context of our scripture passage, we learn that the post-exilic writer of Isaiah and his people return to their homelands - lands they would have only heard and dreamed about seeing. Yet, when they arrived, their dreams would have been crushed by the reality around them - the temple burned, the city in ruins, rampant injustice, poor leadership, and corruption reigned. There was no parade to welcome them back. They returned and went from being strangers in distant lands to strangers in their homeland. They returned to conflict and mistrust with those who had been occupying the land while they endured exile.

And at some point in the midst of devastation and disappointment, grief and lament, frustration and fatigue - God speaks to Isaiah about a promise that is to come. I wonder how long it took the writer of Third Isaiah to peek beyond his dreary, dreadful daily reality to imagine any other possibility on the horizon - even the promise of God. I find myself curious about Isaiah's thoughts after he heard God's promise about the future while standing in the present day's rubble. I wonder about how he might have felt after he heard but before he believed it was possible. There must have been some time after he heard God's promise but before the writer could dream about proclaiming Good news about healing, liberation, gladness flowing like oil, repaired cities, and God paying reparations for endured suffering. How long does it take him to move from being all consumed with grief to even believing the promise is possible? In my experience, the switch from grief about reality to joy in a promised potential reality does not happen overnight. Like any of us, Isaiah would have juxtaposed the future promise with the rubble he was standing in while having doubts. We do not transition from grief to joy because someone who loves us dearly attempts to alter our feelings with prophetic promises of pending praise.

Months and even years after my Molly died, I would receive cards with similar scripture passages promising me that God will give me a garland of joy to replace the ashes of my Molly that I still cling to tightly. Some would even write that they hoped I would find love again.

These card senders wanted me to believe that my life would one day be smooth and soothing as oils instead of burdened by lament and mourning. They wanted to see me happy and full of praise. I believe it was painful for them to see my failing spirit. They understood my grief but also wanted to see a swift transition to joy, like the rush from the graveyard on Holy Saturday to Easter Sunday's rejoicing. Well-meaning, they didn't like seeing me suffer and hoped I would take courage that God would rebuild the ruins in my life and heal the brokenness in my heart. After months and years, they felt I was ready to transition from grief to joy because God promised such transitions would come.

They would have loved to see me shake off the ashes and rise in a pink bow tie on this Sunday of Advent, lighting the candle of Joy. Honestly, despite how I truly felt for years, I might have stood before the congregation and smiled as I spoke about promises of joy that I could not even begin to imagine personally. I can't count how many times I felt that I needed to put aside how I really felt about my life because I was convinced *"the spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news..."*.

How I wish I had the courage to stand up those first few years, confess how I struggled to imagine my life being anything but painful, and still light the candle in hope that my truth might bring comfort to someone else pretending that their life was filled with more joy than pain. How I wish I had the courage to light the candle and invite those in the congregation to think about how they truly feel about their own lives and struggles right now. I imagine this Isaiah, standing in rubble months if not years after hearing the promise, initially struggling to believe in a different future also. He would be like so many of us who are so immersed in the day's toil that we can't see past the present into a different-looking future. This Isaiah would understand that some of us believe that where we are is where we will always be. This Isaiah, at some point, hearing but not yet believing the promise, would understand that the brokenness and pain and frustration and anxiety so many of us feel makes it impossible to imagine our lives driven by any other emotions. And when glimmers of the promise were starting to unfold, I'm sure this Isaiah would regularly return to momentary despair when sight of what was promised was blocked again and again by set-back and hardship. This Isaiah, like all of us, knows that waiting is hard.

During Advent we are supposed to devote ourselves to a season of waiting. Yet we fail to embrace or speak truth about how dreadful life can be while we wait. We want to rush to hope. We want to imagine once we have found hope, we no longer experience doubt. But I'm convinced it is the job of the faith community to slow us down, encourage us to look at where we are, and trust that this too is holy ground - in the suck, in the grief, in

the rubble.

Maybe it is up to those of us who are stuck in the suck to help our siblings rushing to Christmas morning to slow down and sit in life's discomforts with our wounded hearts as we pause to hear the struggles woven into the Biblical text.

Today, we wait in ruin and rubble with Isaiah. Before we join angels singing "Gloria in excelsis Deo" about the divine robed in flesh and lying in the manger, we need to sit with a scared young girl named Mary and consider our own fears, join a worried young man named Joseph whose worries may look like our own, and this unhoused couple trying to navigate government threats by seeking asylum - a story not relegated to Biblical text.

Advent is the opportunity for us to sit together or gather together around the candle and focus on the real. Let's be in the now together. Light the candle, not because you are ready to rush past today and into the promise that God's joy awaits you. Light the candle and boldly share where you are now. And invite those around you to answer the question: Where are you now? Take your shoes off. Sit for a minute. This, where you are, is holy ground!

To those of you that cannot imagine joy in this moment,
To those of you that have received the frightening medical diagnosis,
To those of you that can't figure out how to rebuild,
To those of you singing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" and you're not sure God is listening to your prayer song, light the candle, sit with us, and tell us where you are. That where you are, we might be also!

Grief and Lament Practice

Memorializing/Acts of Remembrance

by Brooke Scott

When my mom died, I experienced a kind of fear that nobody could have prepared me for. It was the kind of thing that I had not yet read about in self-help books or talked about in support groups. It was the fear of forgetting. I cannot explain it. It seems silly to even think this way about someone who was such an important part of my life, but I suddenly became consumed with the thought that I was going to forget things. I knew I would never forget obvious things like her face, her birthday, or her voice, but I was afraid of forgetting little things like how her hands felt, how her laughter sounded, her favorite soda, or the little way that her slippers sounded scurrying across the wooden floor. I was so afraid that I quickly began compiling all the photos and memories I possibly could into a scrapbook that was all in one place. It is one of my proudest creations, spanning from the time right before I was born all the way to the last photos taken and then the condolences that followed. I return to that book on my hardest days, as it allows me to transport back in time and remember moments that can leave my mind when life gets busy. I journal when there are memories that pop up that were never captured in photos, and I try to write them quickly before they leave my mind. Sometimes they are not even full sentences, just random things that come across my psyche—like that time she sneezed so loud it shook the house or remembering her favorite cut of meat from that one place. Sometimes they are memories of things that are not so great, like remembering a painful argument or a quirky habit that annoyed me. Those are honest and important too. I recognize that not every grieving person has the privilege of many years of memories or of being able to fill a book with memories of the things or people they have lost. And yet, honoring whatever memories we do have is an important part of staying whole. My grief taught me the importance of practicing remembrance.

Here in the U.S., we are not the greatest at remembering. At the very least, we are very particular about the types of memories we want to hold onto, as evidenced by book bans and limits on Black history in schools. Put plainly: We don't like to remember things that are difficult or that put us in a bad light. It's why history books are filled with stories of American victories and exceptionalism, or of things happening to us, but less about the violence we have done to those within our own borders and overseas. I have to think that at least part of the fear of remembering is the real recognition that if we remember certain things, we make them real. And if we make them real, we give them power. And if we give them power, we have to face the ways that they have made people feel and continue to make people feel today.

The problem with this kind of amnesia is that when we do not make space for remembering, we are in the perfect position to repeat the same cycles of dysfunction and white patriarchal supremacy.

Experiences of grief and lament beg to be remembered. And they beg to be remembered honestly—not just the good, but also the bad. There are some cultures that are much better at this. When I want to remember deeply, I do not look to American society; I look to my roots.

In African Indigenous spirituality, there is a heavy emphasis placed on rituals of remembrance, and honoring the ancestors who have come before you. There is a real understanding that we cannot understand who we are without understanding the past and how we got here. Though it is Advent, some of my favorite times of the year are All Saints' Day and Día de los Muertos because they are reminders of the biblical belief that “*we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses*” (Hebrews 12:1).

When we remember well and connect to those who have gone before us, we can draw strength and power from their examples. We can figure out what tools they used to support themselves, as well as learn lessons from their mistakes and shortcomings. We can also draw upon them for comfort, as we remember that they understand what it is like to be human.

As we grieve and lament this week, consider a new way to practice remembrance. Here are some ideas:

1. Create a remembrance altar.
2. Create a memory box, collage, or scrapbook of the person or thing you lost.
3. Write a letter to those you lost or wish you could have met.
4. Learn about your family history or cultural heritage.
5. Honor special days, such as birthdays, death anniversaries, or lesser-known dates in history.
6. Visit cemeteries and places that remind you of certain people or historical moments.
7. Engage in acts of remembrance, such as doing things your loved ones enjoyed or eating their favorite foods, or participating in activities that honor certain social movements.
8. Read books that honor marginalized experiences

4th Sunday of Advent

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 ~ Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26 ~ Romans 16:25-27 ~ Luke 1:26-38

by PJ Chavez

Christmas has a way of arriving whether we are ready or not. Usually, when we say that, we mean the shopping is unfinished, the house needs attention, or the calendar has become impossible. But there is another kind of unreadiness that cannot be resolved by getting a few more things done. Sometimes Christmas arrives while we are still grieving, still waiting for answers, or still trying to understand how life became so different from what we expected.

For those carrying sorrow, the season's insistence on joy can feel lonely. We may love the familiar music and traditions while wondering where our pain belongs within them. As a husband, father, and someone who serves people through Spiritual Care, I find that question especially meaningful this Fourth Sunday of Advent. What does the promise of God's coming offer people whose lives remain unresolved?

The readings invite us to consider that question through a king with plans and a young woman whose plans are about to change. David wants to build a house for God. Mary learns that she will bear a son. In both encounters, God's presence reaches beyond what either person can arrange or fully understand. That is welcome news for those of us who would like to have everything settled before we say yes to what comes next.

My wife, Bethany, and I are raising three boys: Luca, Caleb, and Jude. We want them to become men of God, with hearts open to God's love and lives shaped by compassion. We also want to give them a secure home and protect them from harm. Those desires live side by side, although parenting keeps teaching me that protection has limits. I can help my sons navigate the world, but I cannot promise that the world will always be gentle with them.

This past summer, all three boys and I participated in a theatrical rendition of The Prince of Egypt. Sharing the stage with them was a gift, especially because music and theater have been such an important part of my life. Yet the story we were telling carried the anguish of parents trying to protect children, people longing for freedom, and prayers rising from suffering that had lasted far too long. It brought together something I treasure, being with my boys, and something every parent fears: being unable to keep sorrow away.

That tension helps me hear Mary's story with greater attention. We know where the Gospel is going, so it is easy to hurry through her encounter with the angel. Mary does not have that advantage. She is troubled by the greeting, considers its meaning, and asks how this can happen. Before she offers herself to God's unfolding purpose, she speaks from within the uncertainty of her own life.

I am grateful that Luke preserves her question. It reminds me that a faithful response can include bewilderment. Mary's willingness does not require complete understanding, and the angel's reassurance does not provide a detailed explanation of everything ahead. She receives a promise of God's presence and power, then responds without knowing all that her response will ask of her.

For someone who is grieving, that distinction matters. Faith does not always bring the explanation we want. A person can trust God and still struggle to understand a diagnosis, a death, or a future suddenly changed. Lament gives that struggle a voice. It allows us to speak honestly to God rather than imagine we must first become calm, certain, or grateful enough to pray.

At Cleveland Clinic Mercy Hospital, where I serve as Director of Mission and Ministry, I have the privilege of accompanying patients, families, and caregivers through Spiritual Care. I get to serve as an extension of Christ's healing ministry, and that work continually teaches me to listen before I speak. People carry grief that is visible and grief that is easily missed: the loss of health, independence, familiar routines, or the life they expected to resume.

In those circumstances, Advent's waiting becomes deeply recognizable. People wait for results, for news, for another conversation about what comes next. Christmas may be approaching, but their attention is fixed on a hospital room or an uncertain tomorrow. Offering care means honoring that reality. I cannot ask someone to set sorrow aside so our conversation can feel more hopeful. Sometimes hope begins with being able to tell the truth and discovering that someone is willing to remain beside you.

Bethany, my wife, understands that responsibility through her work as a nurse. Our experiences shape what we hope our children will learn about faith, although they hardly make us perfect parents. I want our boys to know that they can bring us their hurt without having to make it easier for us to hear. I want them to become men who can ask for help and offer it, whose tenderness survives the pressure to appear unaffected by everything.

That kind of faith reaches beyond our own household, just as Mary's song reaches beyond her own remarkable news. She sings of God lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things. Her words describe mercy with consequences for people whose needs have been overlooked. The promise taking shape within her concerns the world around her, including the way power and resources are distributed.

This is where lament asks more of us than sympathetic feelings. If we hear someone's suffering, we may also need to ask what is making it harder to bear. In my ministry, illness can arrive alongside worries about food, transportation, or access to care. Prayer belongs in those circumstances, and so does practical assistance. Mary's song challenges us to recognize that a neighbor's hunger deserves a response and that dignity must be reflected in how people are treated.

I hope my wife and I can help our sons make that connection. Caring about another person's pain involves listening, but it also involves a willingness to act. Sometimes love pulls up a chair. Sometimes it provides a meal, helps someone reach an appointment, or speaks up when a person is being ignored. We teach our children about God's love partly by showing them whose lives matter enough to interrupt our own.

David's encounter with God brings me back to the limits of what we can accomplish. He wants to build God a dwelling, but God recalls having accompanied him long before this proposal. God's faithfulness is already part of his story. As a parent and ministry leader, I need that reminder. We have work to do, but we are not responsible for creating God's presence. We can learn to recognize it and respond to it.

Psalm 89 speaks of making God's faithfulness known across generations, while Romans points toward the God who strengthens us. Together, these readings help me name the inheritance I want for our boys: an honest faith that can carry questions, a compassionate faith that notices suffering, and a trusting faith that allows them to receive love when they have little strength of their own.

Perhaps that is also what we need as Christmas draws near. We may arrive with grief still fresh, prayers still unanswered, and hearts unable to match the celebration around us. We can bring those hearts with us. The child whose birth we await enters a vulnerable human life, entrusted to a family living without a complete map of the future. God comes close enough to share the uncertainty.

I cannot promise my boys a life without sorrow. I hope, with my wife, to help them know they will never have to earn love by hiding it. And I hope our family will keep learning to extend that same welcome to others. When

Christmas comes before we are ready, there is still a place for us, and for every person whose heart is carrying more than the season can see.

Grief and Lament Practice

Storytelling

by Brooke Scott

One of my favorite moments in the Black American Baptist Church was the time of testimonies. Testimonies gave everyday people the opportunity to share inspiring stories of what God had done for them: what medical reports had been overturned, what dangers they had been delivered from, what marriages had been saved, what healings had taken place, and what experiences of pain and suffering had been transformed.

Everyone had their own way of sharing their testimonies. Some were quiet and modest, while others were dramatic and theatrical. Some people added humor or difficult language to emphasize their points. Some were brief and to the point, while others droned on forever and ever. Some people were so good at telling their stories that they felt fabricated or over the top. And some testimonies were so similar to others that you knew what the ending was going to be before the person even finished. I did not mind too much, though, because it was a healing experience of storytelling in community.

What is interesting about testimonies in church is what an equalizer they are. They allow people without titles or formal theological education to teach and inspire one another. This is so significant in a world that so often does not value Black life or experiences. It was the Church that provided that level of dignity when other parts of society refused. The practice of storytelling allowed people to be heard who are often overlooked and misunderstood.

The sharing of testimonies was also beautiful because it did something powerful for both the speaker and the listener. The speaker had the opportunity to be heard (often the one safe place they had during the week), and the hearers all had the opportunity to have their own beliefs and hopes reinforced. As a listener, I was always energized by the victories and healing that others had experienced in Christ. Through the stories of others, I learned about areas of life that I could improve in. I learned survival strategies that I had not yet thought about. I learned to understand faith in new ways.

A good testimony could shift the whole room. If I was having a bad day or a bad week, there was just something about hearing what someone else had overcome that could change my whole mood. It made me feel like my faith was really worth living. It made me feel like if good things could happen for them, they could happen for me too. If God cared for them that much, God cared about me that much. And if they were able to survive, then maybe I could too.

Storytelling, it seems, is sometimes a lost art. In this day and age, there can be an obsession with only things that can be proven through data or captured on video. There can be so much information coming at us all the time and hardly any substance in any of it. Even when things are important, like politics or world affairs, we aren't always able to personally connect with headlines and statistics. What does capture our attention, though, is stories. Stories where we know people's names and faces, where there is something about their experience that reminds us of our own lives. Stories move people like nothing else does. Stories break down seemingly insurmountable barriers. Stories cause people to act. Stories cause us to think, laugh, and cry. They cause us to reflect on our own life, our own mortality, our own values, our own fears, and our own hopes. Stories build our sense of empathy. Stories let us know that we are not alone and that we are not the only ones who have suffered.

Grief and lament can be extremely isolating experiences. And in a way, that makes sense. None of us can fully understand another person's experience simply because we are not them. Even when we are in the same community or the same family, we cannot fully understand someone else's pain because we all experience the same things so differently.

At the same time, we are not able to survive alone. We need other people to join us in some way, or we can get ourselves into serious trouble. If we are going to survive grief and lament, we need to hear the stories of those who have experienced what we have experienced. And we need to find ways to tell our stories in the presence of people who can hear them without judgment. In the same way that church testimonies energize us, sharing our stories of grief and lament with one another can help us maintain hope and give us ways of moving forward.

This week, think about some ways that the practice of storytelling could support you. Here are some ideas:

1. Write your story.
2. Talk with a trusted spiritual or mental health practitioner.
3. Join a support group or recovery group for people who share similar identities or experiences (in person or online).
4. Participate in a listening circle around shared experiences
5. Read stories of people who have experienced the difficulties you are facing.

Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7 ~ Psalm 96 ~ Titus 2:11-14 ~ Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)

by Cindy Kohlmann

The images we conjure of Christmas Eve are probably more informed by the hymns and carols we sing than the sparse details offered in the Gospels. We even know that many of the pictures painted in our favorite Christmas carols just aren't true, but it's hard to stop ourselves from imagining a silent night, with snow on the ground, the cattle lowing, and a shining star dominating the clear heavenly sky, beaming as bright as the angel chorus.

The reality, of course, was gritty and raw, real and human. The night was not silent and Mary had no interest in what the night sky looked like as she bore down and birthed her first born son. The smell of blood may have indeed set the cattle lowing, if cattle were sharing the space, but it was Mary's face gleaming that night from the exertion of pushing life into the weary world.

Did Mary have a moment to savor the miracle of giving birth before the magnitude of the birth of this particular baby fell like a crushing weight on her shoulders? Did she pause to count the fingers and toes and nuzzle the soft downy head of her baby boy? Did she hope for a moment, perhaps even until the shepherds showed up and ruined any flight of fancy, that her newborn might be spared the burden promised when the angel first greeted her?

Or did the reality of what she had been told push down on her with every push of her body? Did the sorrow and fear for what would befall the flesh of her flesh blossom with the first sensation of little lips latching on? Was she flooded with a range of emotions as deep as the sea and as high as the highest heavens? I suspect that this, and so much more, swirled through Mary's heart and soul in that little town of Bethlehem. She knew, better than Joseph, better than the shepherds, perhaps even better than the heavenly host, that this was not a simple story, and that her child would go where angels fear to tread.

But I don't actually want to focus on Mary in this meditation. As deserving of focus and consideration as she is, as complicated and multi-layered as her life and legacy would come to be, she is not the focus of my reflection on this Christmas Eve. When praying about the theme for this Advent devotional and the subject of Christmas Eve, my heart turned to God.

What was it like for the Triune whole to experience the violence of birth in their own selves? Was there a sundering when Jesus took that first breath? Was the baby's agonized cry echoed by Creator and Spirit as part of themselves became human?

Did God feel weak like an hours old baby, experiencing a vulnerability unknown to the Alpha and Omega? Was there a chasm where before the Triune dance had filled the cosmos? Did it hurt for the Holy to become human, as it hurts for us to become human?

I'd never wondered about this before considering the theme of lament and grief in connection with Christmas Eve. Did God grieve as part of God's very self was folded into the fragile, frail frame of an infant? Did God lament for what that division would lead to?

When we apply the words of the prophet Isaiah to the birth of Jesus, we are granting God omniscience, the capacity to know all that may happen and all that will happen throughout the span of time. Whether or not that

is consistent with your own view of God's divinity, omniscience is somewhat central to the traditional telling of the Christmas story.

God knew, and Isaiah 'twas foretold it, that one day a young woman would give birth to the Prince of Peace, Mighty God. This babe would be the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth, risen with healing in his wings, Christ, the Lord, the newborn King.

If God knew this much, then God knew it all. God knew that the story didn't end with angels singing and shepherds worshipping, but would continue with Herod's scheming and the slaughter of innocents. God knew that the baby would grow into a boy already challenging the religious authorities, and into a man who would be labeled and dealt with as a threat to the powers and principalities of the time.

Before the baby took his first breath, God already could trace the span of years and knew, in God's heart of hearts, how this precious child would die.

As the angels sang "Gloria in excelsis Deo," did God's heart break?

Perhaps, in the impossibility of divine hope, God held fast to the possibility that this time, in the presence of the Father's Love Begotten, humanity would choose love and mercy and forsake power and privilege. Perhaps, with the song of the angels praising God and calling for peace on earth, there was a moment where it all felt possible. Creation restored. Relationships in balance. The thriving of all.

Perhaps it was this tremulous hope, buoyed up by hymns of joy to the world, that kept God's own lament and grief at bay. Perhaps the light of the star brightly shining was, for the night of Jesus' birth, the shining hope of the One who keeps choosing love.

Because, in the end, that's what God continues to choose. To have hope, to hold out faith, to extend mercy, to offer grace, to choose love. Even as God's heart breaks. Even as the Trinity experiences the enormity of birth. Even as death looms from a hillside called Calvary. Even now.

Even now, God's heart continues to break, even as we call on our good Christian friends to rejoice. Even now, as our voices join the angel chorus in praising the newborn king, tears must fall from divine eyes. Even now, as we gather to adore him, the reunited Trinity observes and laments at the state of what was once a very good creation.

Innocents are still being slaughtered, as self-made kings and profiteers hoard what was always meant to be shared. Babies are still being born without a secure shelter, in refugee tents, in alleyways, in whatever space can be clawed out by the desperate mothers of the world. Tyranny still runs rampant and the chasm between rich and poor grows deeper and broader and less traversable every day.

This is not the world God intended when the Spirit first hovered over chaos and goodness began to take shape. This is not the community God intended when a people were first claimed as holy and told to walk blameless in God's sight. This is not the reality God intended when the first proclamation of good news of great joy for all the people rang through the night.

And the world we live in today, the communities we have created, the reality that we exist within, these are still so far from what God hoped for on that Christmas Eve. Instead of peace on earth, humanity chooses bombs and guns. Instead of joy to the world, desperation and desolation fill the streets. Instead of justice and righteousness flowing down like streams of living water, the powerful make their own laws for their own benefit.

There is so much to lament and grieve. There is so much to resist and deconstruct. There is so much to be done to return to the promise of God's kingdom finally fully here on earth as it is in heaven.

But here we are, once again, lighting candles and singing of a silent night which was holy and full of hope. Here we are, once again, perhaps through tears, wondering what child is this who summons us through the ages to worship him. Here we are, once again, perhaps with our own hearts broken, like God, clinging with all of our strength to that thread of hope for a future yet to come, when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling.

Here we are, once again, and God is still, ever, here with us, our Lord Emmanuel.

Christmas Day

Isaiah 52:7-10 ~ Psalm 98 ~ Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12) ~ John 1:1-14

by Q Hailey

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” John 1:5 (NRSV)

At Christmas we celebrate the coming of the Light. We gather around candles, decorate our homes with lights, and tell the story of a star that guided travelers toward the Christ child. Light has become one of the most recognizable symbols of Christmas, representing hope, possibility, and the presence of God in a world that often feels uncertain.

And perhaps because we love the light so much, we have learned to be suspicious of darkness.

We speak about darkness as something to escape, overcome, or leave behind. We associate it with suffering, confusion, isolation, and fear. We pray for God to bring us out of dark seasons and into something brighter. We look for the first signs of morning, trusting that daylight will somehow make what we have endured easier to understand.

But not everything that happens in the dark is dangerous.

Some things can only begin there.

Before a seed pushes through the earth toward the sun, it begins its transformation underground. Hidden beneath layers of soil, it absorbs moisture, breaks open, and begins the slow process of becoming something more than what it was. In some seedlings, protective structures form and remain in place as the young plant pushes through the darkness of the soil, shielding its developing leaves until they reach the light.¹

Long before anything appears above the surface, life is already unfolding beneath it.

Roots grow in that same hidden place. While we admire the branches of a tree, the beauty of its leaves, and the strength of its trunk, we rarely think about the roots extending deep into the earth. Yet those unseen roots provide nourishment, stability, and the ability to withstand difficult seasons.² A tree does not become strong simply because of what grows toward the light. Its strength also comes from what has been established in the darkness.

Beneath the forest floor, networks of fungi perform another remarkable work. Mycelium stretches through soil and decaying matter, helping to break down what has died and return nutrients to the earth. Fungi play an essential role in decomposition and nutrient cycling, contributing to the life of the forest in ways we seldom see.³ What appears to be the end of one thing can become nourishment for something else.

Even the earth reminds us that darkness is not always empty.

Before we see new life, it is formed in the shelter of the womb. Organs develop, cardiac tissue begins to form, and a human being grows in a place protected from the outside world.³ Before a child ever opens their eyes to the light, an extraordinary amount of becoming has already taken place.

When our bodies are exhausted, much of their restoration happens while we sleep. During sleep, the body continues supporting immune function, physical health, and the formation of memories.⁴ We close our eyes, surrender our activity, and enter a period in which the body continues its work without our conscious participation.

There is something sacred about these reminders. Growth does not always announce itself. Transformation does not always require an audience. And what is hidden from our view is not necessarily absent from God's care.

Darkness is not always the absence of life. Sometimes darkness is where life is being prepared.

That possibility changes the way I hear the opening words of John's Gospel.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

John begins his account of Jesus not with a manger, shepherds, or angels, but with the beginning of creation itself. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

John reaches back to Genesis, reminding us that Christ was present before creation took shape. Before there was a sun to illuminate the earth, before there was a distinction between day and night, the presence of God already existed.

And when John announces that the Word became flesh and lived among us, he invites us to consider something extraordinary about the way God chose to enter the world.

God did not arrive in the fullness of visibility.

God entered human history through the hiddenness of a womb.

Before the shepherds heard the angels, before the wise men followed the star, and before Mary held her newborn child, Christ was growing quietly within her. The Incarnation began in a place where no one could see what was taking shape.

For months, the promise of God was carried in darkness.

This is remarkable when we consider all the ways God could have chosen to appear. The Creator of the universe entered the world through a process of waiting, dependence, vulnerability, and gradual formation. The One whom John calls the Light of the world first experienced human existence within the darkness of Mary's womb.

Christmas reminds us that God's presence is not limited to what has already emerged.

God is present in the becoming.

And perhaps this is an invitation to reconsider the darkness we encounter in our own lives.

There are seasons when we cannot see beyond our immediate circumstances. Grief can alter the way we experience time, making ordinary days feel unfamiliar. Loss can leave us wondering who we are without the people, places, or possibilities that once gave our lives meaning. Uncertainty can make us question decisions we previously felt confident making. Sometimes our circumstances change so dramatically that we struggle to recognize the person we are becoming.

In those moments, darkness does not feel like a place of preparation. It feels like a place of absence.

We want evidence that something is changing. We want to know that the grief is becoming more bearable, that our efforts are making a difference, and that the waiting will eventually lead somewhere meaningful. We want to see the roots growing beneath the soil.

But much of life does not offer us that kind of certainty.

A seed does not become visible the moment it begins to germinate. The roots of a tree do not emerge from the ground to reassure us that they are growing. There are processes of becoming that remain beyond our sight until something changes.

And sometimes, even after something changes, we may never fully understand what has taken place.

This does not mean that every experience of darkness is necessary or that suffering should be celebrated because something good might eventually emerge. Some darkness is the result of injustice, violence, abandonment, and circumstances no one should have to endure. We should never ask people to find beauty in what has harmed them or suggest that their pain was required for God to accomplish something meaningful.

Christmas offers no guarantee that every darkness will make sense.

But it does offer this extraordinary promise: God is willing to enter it.

John does not tell us that the darkness disappears when the light arrives. He tells us that the light shines within it, and the darkness does not overcome it.

There is a difference.

The arrival of Christ did not immediately end oppression, poverty, grief, or human suffering. The world into which Jesus was born remained complicated, violent, and uncertain. Yet the presence of God entered that world, not from a distance, but through the vulnerability of human flesh.

The promise of Christmas is not that we will never experience darkness. It is that darkness does not have the final authority over God's presence.

Perhaps, then, we do not have to understand every season of our lives before recognizing that God can be present within it. We do not have to rush ourselves toward clarity or force meaning from experiences we are still trying to comprehend.

There may be roots growing beneath the surface of our lives, establishing a deeper sense of who we are. There may be old understandings of ourselves slowly giving way to something more expansive. There may be parts of us learning how to rest, how to trust, how to begin again, or how to live differently than we once imagined.

And there may be seasons when the only thing we can do is remain present, trusting that our worth is not measured by what we are able to produce or reveal.

As we celebrate Christmas, perhaps we can make room for more than the brilliance of the light. Perhaps we can also honor the sacred mystery of what happens before anything becomes visible.

Before the manger, there was the womb. Before the branches, there were the roots. Before the emergence of

new life, there was a period of waiting and becoming.

The Light of the world did not bypass the darkness of human beginnings.

God entered it.

And perhaps that is the invitation of Christmas, not to rush everything hidden into the light, but to remember that God is present with us, even when we cannot yet see what is becoming.

Reflection

What has the darkness been preparing in you that may now be ready to come into the light?

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1st Sunday of Christmas

Isaiah 61:10-62:3 ~ Psalm 148 ~ Galatians 4:4-7 ~ Luke 2:22-40

by Brent O'Neill

On a sweltering, high-humidity June day on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, my now-husband and I threw a Christian summer camp-themed wedding we proudly and campily combined our names to call Camp Shoneill!

We extended an open invitation to everyone we knew – “If you want to come, we want you there – we just ask that you bring some food to share.” And our campers indeed came from far and wide – crossing the Delmarva Peninsula from my home state of Delaware, road-tripping from his home state of Michigan, and flying from places like Texas, Oregon, and even Vancouver. People we knew well and saw regularly mingled with internet friends we were meeting IRL for the first time. It was truly magical.

Our campers sweat it out with us as we danced, crafted postcards with Polaroid printouts, and played the kind of camp games that put my cousin on a team with my husband’s friends from his days in a home school co-op. That kind of fun, silliness, and love surrounded us as we stood in front of picnic tables, completely drenching our sky-blue suits with sweat. It was there that we proclaimed those beautiful words, “In sickness and in health, I do.”

In many ways, our Camp Shoneill wedding came at just the right time. It wasn’t just a summer day, but a “summer season” for us. After five moves in two years, we were finally settled in our new life together. I had recently been ordained and had been serving my congregation for long enough that my beloved church folks filled the dessert table past capacity. My husband had been in seminary for long enough that classmates put down their books to join us in celebration. And even the hot summer day was a miraculously sunny break in a long stretch of storms, which sent another Severe Thunderstorm alert to our phones just after we packed up the last of our camp supplies the following day. Camp Shoneill came at just the right time.

Yet, at the same time, the time wasn’t right at all. Unfortunately, several months before our high-energy Camp Shoneill wedding, my husband had what we originally thought to be a mild Covid infection that gradually disabled him. Our wedding day was exhausting for us both, but it was even more challenging for him. The months since our wedding have been largely shaped by Long Covid – trying countless treatments, recording data in spreadsheets to make sense of it all, explaining to doctors each new symptom, and navigating life while bedbound. We are newlyweds, and we are exhausted. As I reflect back on it, a celebratory day at Camp Shoneill just doesn’t seem to fit the middle of the crisis we have experienced.

That it was simultaneously the right and the wrong time for a wedding has plenty of precedent. Charles Dickens points towards this in his iconic opening line, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” So many of us know what those polarities feel like when they crash together, especially during the Christmas season when grief mingles with Christmas carols and children’s pageants. Maybe the bad doesn’t necessarily override all the good, but it certainly complicates it. It reminds me of Kahlil Gibran poetically describing us as being suspended between joy and sorrow. Life often – maybe always – contains both. This duality appears even in today’s Gospel passage as Mary, Joseph Simeon, and Anna each experience unexpected joy in the middle of ongoing sociopolitical and personal challenges.

As the author of Luke situates the rituals for Mary’s purification and Jesus’ dedication in the temple, he references the Exodus passages for dedicating the “firstborn male.” Verse 23 is easy to skip, especially when

Bible translations place it entirely in parentheses, but I have been trying to practice slowly reading these familiar stories to notice what I've been missing. This practice stopped me on the word "firstborn" and sent me flipping back to Matthew's description of young males being systematically murdered. Luke doesn't mention details of this genocide – I admit these narratives often blend together in my head. But Luke does say these events all take place during a census, a tool the Roman Empire used to exploit the people it oppressed. Even the small detail of Mary and Joseph offering up pigeons or turtledoves instead of a lamb places them with the poor of their day (Lev. 12:8). Similarly, Simeon's and Anna's stories highlight the underlying tragedy of their situation. Simeon's Spirit-filled proclamation of Jesus' messianic identity comes after his lifetime of hoping for his people's deliverance from their oppression. It's a hope shared by the 84-year-old prophet Anna, who dedicated her life to praying in the temple for Jerusalem's redemption. Between the empire's oppression, the experience of poverty, and the widespread yearning for deliverance, it's clear they came to Christ in a season of tragedy.

Yet tragedy is not the entire story. The prophet Anna sets eyes on the Christ child and praises God for what she sees. She can't contain the excitement and the new hope she feels, so she tells all the others about this beautiful baby she has just witnessed. It's that same excitement that leads Simeon to take Jesus into his arms as he praises God with a prayer about light shining in darkness. It's so easy to forget he holds a baby while sharing that beautiful prayer. And while Luke doesn't share any details of Mary and Joseph's emotional life in the temple, we know from our own sacrament of baptism that they too were filled with joy, happy tears, and a love that led them to dedicate themselves to their child. Jesus growing, becoming strong, and being filled with wisdom is undoubtedly a product of God's work through his parents, who loved him so deeply.

Sometimes I would prefer life to be segmented into neat and tidy "seasons" of life: spring and summer for awesome times of growth and celebration; autumn and winter for bleak and painful times of decline and death. It would certainly make for a cleaner narrative of my own life, but it's just not true. The winter of life was present even on that joyfully hot day at Camp Shoneill. Christmas carolers bring unexpected joy on even the coldest nights. It somehow happens all at once.

It is precisely in the complicated mixture of sorrow and joy, love and tragedy, sickness and health that Christ appears. God's incarnation in Christ teaches us that God doesn't wait for a time when life is perfect or when life has completely fallen apart. God joins us in life as it is – in all its beautiful, tragic, and messy reality. God's love reaches us exactly where we are.

The Christmas season is filled with tragedy, joy, ritual, grief, and love all mixed together in a complicated way that goes beyond definition. Some of us feel like we should be more holly and jolly than we really are, while others may feel guilt over the moments of joy amidst tragedy. Whatever complex multitude you carry, my hope and prayer is that you may sense and be comforted by Christ's presence with you in the mess and beauty of it all.

Grief and Lament Practice

New Year's Day ... Take Action

by Brooke Scott

I will never forget the year 2017, when the Trump Administration enacted a travel ban that restricted entry into the U.S. from predominantly Muslim countries. I remember feeling so angry at what felt like blatant hatred and discrimination. As a child, I had the blessing of growing up in a very diverse neighborhood. Therefore, I was very comfortable with friends and classmates of all different cultures, ethnicities, classes, religions, sexual identities, and abilities.

It pained me deeply to see the kinds of cruelty my Muslim and Sikh classmates endured after 9/11, simply because of what they looked like, what they wore, and what they believed. I knew that deeply unjust things happened in the “war against terrorism,” and the travel ban felt like a continuation of those injuries. When the news of the travel ban first broke, I remember immediately hopping into a car with several other students to protest at the Philadelphia International Airport. When we arrived, there were already massive crowds gathered, marching up and down the streets. It was almost impossible to walk through. Folks of all different ages and cultures were chanting and holding signs that said things like, “Immigrants and refugees welcome here” and “Love, not hate, makes America great.” Many of those around me cried. I was able to recognize that what was underneath all the anger and outrage was grief over the violence of Islamophobia and xenophobia.

When Trayvon Martin was killed, the #BlackLivesMatter movement gained momentum, and people flooded the streets with their shared heartbreak over police brutality and racial terrorism. This became a continuation of long-held American grief, expressed in different ways by all kinds of marginalized communities since the nation’s inception. In the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement brought people together in massive marches that drew attention to Jim Crow segregation. Later, in 1969, at the Stonewall Inn in New York City, Black and Brown trans women and drag queens threw bricks at police who had been harassing them, contributing to the birth of the modern queer movement we know and recognize today. At the heart of all these movements was deep heartbreak. They are potent reminders that rage is often underlying grief, and sometimes honoring it looks like speaking up and/or putting yourself at risk.

Oftentimes, our deep lament and grief can take the form of righteous anger and rage. These are signals that something is deeply wrong or unjust. Sometimes, those wrongs are much bigger than us and our loved ones—they are systemic injustices, such as white supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia, transphobia, or ableism. But when we are grieving, we often feel powerless. Sometimes, we heal our grief by connecting to real actions that are within our control and allow us to feel like we can change what is happening.

In the new year, think of some ways you could engage in concrete actions connected to the things that break your heart. Here are some possibilities:

1. Engaging in civil disobedience
2. Speaking with government representatives
3. Educating the public
4. Donating to nonprofits or supporting mutual aid efforts
5. Checking on or bringing resources to a vulnerable neighbor

2nd Sunday of Christmas

Jeremiah 31:7-14 ~ Psalm 147:12-20 ~ Ephesians 1:3-14 ~ John 1:(1-9), 10-18

by Paul Burgess

This September, my beloved and I left everything that is familiar to us so that she could pursue a graduate degree at a university in Italy. We live in a beautiful town, where I walk most mornings down a sun-dappled, cobblestone street, past quaint cafés and ancient churches, to a nearby market to collect the ingredients we'll need for dinner that night. The weather has been lovely, the people have been friendly, the beach is only twenty minutes away, the food has been spectacular, and our open windows let us enjoy both the smells of a nearby bakery in the mornings and the sound of buskers playing in the evenings. In many ways, it's surreal— we're living the dream.

And while I know perfectly well how blessed we are to be able to have this experience, the move has not been without difficulties. It's not just that we miss various familiarities— the convenience of speaking our native language, or owning a car, or being in the right time zone to watch our favorite show— but we deeply feel the absence of the communities we've left behind. We miss feeling the closeness of those with whom we have shared laughter and tears, we miss being able to count on seeing those who love us...I suppose you could say that we're missing church. We're missing a sense of community where we feel welcome and at ease, where we feel God's love made real in the people around us.

All this to say, the chapter we've just started has been lovely— and also, kind of lonely. And in my more melancholic moments, I find myself drawn to the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah is called “the weeping prophet” for a reason: the book of the Bible that bears his name can be a difficult read, brimming with ominous portents of divine justice and the seeds of despair for God's people. The first half of Jeremiah lists the repeated failures of Israel to live up to their calling, and much of the second half documents the conquest of Israel that happens as a consequence. Between these two halves, though, there is a small section reassuring us that God will not abandon God's chosen people— an ember of hope that smolders resolutely through the Babylonian diaspora and is breathed into flame by the coming of the Messiah six hundred years later. This ember is a promise of God's enduring faithfulness through the difficulties that darken the horizon: though the time of hardship is coming, a time of goodness and plenty will follow it. Though tears will be shed, sobs will soon turn to laughter. The chosen people are soon to be scattered, but they will be gathered together again.

This promise of gathering is especially compelling in this present moment of loneliness in my own life. My move to Italy is by no means the same as the generational trauma of God's people being conquered and ripped from their homeland, but I do feel a bit...scattered. A bit cast away from home. So when that promise of gathering is made twice in the hopeful interval of Jeremiah 31— first in verse 8 and then again in verse 10— I noticed a pang of desire in my heart. I want to be gathered.

I think we all want that sometimes: to have God scoop us up and hold us close, to feel the safety and assurance that there's someone greater than we are who is in control and wants our good. I'm sure that Jeremiah's first audience would have understood that, at least. After all, God's first commandment to their ancestor Abram was to “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house” (Gen. 12:1)-- and the tapestry of God's people since that point has been woven from threads of diaspora and wilderness wandering. I'm sure even the most devout Israelites, in the forty years after the exodus and after being dragged as captives to faraway lands, wondered if they would ever enjoy the peace and security of “home.” I'm sure, in the moments when true belonging felt like a distant dream, that they wondered if they would live to see the fulfillment of God's promise

of gathering.

Thanks be to God, we need not wonder as they did.

Ephesians 1 tells us that Christ came to us to fulfill God's ultimate plan: to gather all things in heaven and on earth to Godself. In the person of Jesus, we find the goodness, the plenty, the joy that Jeremiah foresees, though perhaps not in the way his first audience (or we) would have expected. We expect a homecoming— but in the life, death, and resurrection of the Messiah, home comes to us. We expect a lion, a mighty king who restores Israel to its former glory— but God sends a lamb through whom God's love and grace is known to each person. We expect God to purify us, so that we may enter into God's presence in the innermost chamber of the Temple— but instead, God bursts out of the Temple to be among us as Immanuel, God With Us.

That is the promise of gathering that is fulfilled in the coming of Christ. That is the blessing we celebrate in the season of Christmas: that like the shepherd in Jeremiah 31:10, the one who calls himself “the Good Shepherd” in John 10 gathers the flock, that we may know peace and security under the watchful eye of the one who desires their good.

If you have ever had occasion to crack open the Book of Common Worship, you will see that every worship service is divided into four sections, the first of which is called “Gathering.” It's an opportunity to greet one another and prepare to come before God in worship together. It strikes me that it's also a remembering and an honoring of God's promise, fulfilled in Jesus. It's a chance to rejoice in the connection and beloved community that God has blessed us with, in the ways that we recognize the Spirit moving through one another, in the presence that is promised in Matthew 18 “wherever two or three are gathered.” I hope you join me in remembering this the coming weeks, that every coming together as a community might be a holy re-enactment of the first congregation gathered by the Messiah: a motley crew of farm animals, travelers from faraway lands, and poor shepherds gathered around a manger...with the glorious host of heaven looking on.

My prayer for you at the end of all of this is the same prayer I have for myself as I adjust to life in a new country: that you see in Jeremiah 31 not only a promise to an ancient people from a faraway land, but a promise to you. I pray that you allow yourself to feel fully whatever parts of you feel scattered, feel out of place, feel cast out from home...and hear God's assurance in these words:

*I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
And gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
Among them the blind and the lame,
Those with child and those in labor, together;
A great company, they shall return here.
With weeping, they shall come,
And with consolations I will lead them back.
The one who scattered Israel will gather them,
And will keep them as shepherd a flock.
Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,
And the young men and the old shall be merry.
I will turn their mourning into joy,
I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.
I will give the priests their fill of fatness,
And my people shall be satisfied with my bounty.*

Friends, may it be so for you this Christmas season.

Grief and Lament Practice

Music/ The Arts

by Brooke Scott

If you know me, you know that I love Broadway and musical theatre. Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to see Tina Turner the Musical. I had a fabulous time singing, dancing, and learning about Tina Turner's life and experiences through her discography. As you may know, the Queen of Rock and Roll's life was one full of trauma and turmoil. I learned things I had never fully grasped about her experiences with abuse, domestic violence, and grief. The musical also reflected her glamour, fashion, and spunky personality. The performers did a great job of telling her story with an openness that included both her joys and sorrows. I was also humbled by the ways music supported her in finding strength through her pain and sorrow. There was this moment in the first half of the show when she finally gains the strength to leave her abusive husband, and the actress playing Tina Turner breaks out into the hit 1993 song "I Don't Wanna Fight." It was a massively empowering moment that made the audience feel every moment between heartbreak, exhaustion, and, finally, courage and resolve.

There was another scene later on when Tina's mom dies and she comforts her sister with the song "We Don't Need Another Hero." It is a heartbreaking scene that captures the complexity of losing someone who has also hurt you deeply. Each musical moment added new texture to what we know about Tina Turner and the pain she must have been carrying throughout her career. I was just amazed and breathless. I realized how much her music and self-expression were part of what helped her survive and find purpose in the midst of difficult circumstances.

My own love of the arts began when I was very young. Elementary school was when I started writing. I began by journaling about my personal experiences, but then I also started writing my own fiction stories. Throughout those years, I enjoyed arts and crafts and playing with painting and drawing as well. In my teen years, I began singing in school and church, and then finally took on acting and musical theatre. In my early years, art became a way for me to process the difficult experiences I was having. It gave me the opportunity to express pain, confusion, and joy in a safe way. It also allowed me the chance to make sense of what was happening to me.

My people have a deep historical connection to creativity and the arts as a way of expressing grief and lament. I am always humbled when I think about the ways the spirituals were birthed out of such deep woundedness. Sounds like the drum and the moans that accompanied songs helped people steady themselves and find hope in impossible circumstances. The spirituals created brief moments of escape from the horrors of slavery. They also became ways to resist those horrors. Enslaved people would often "steal away" when their enslavers weren't looking and sing their own sorrows and hopes. The songs would be encoded with their hopes of freedom. It would sound like they were talking about heaven sometimes, but sometimes they were talking about escape. Later on, the blues also became a way of using songs to talk about everyday life, wrestling with racism, difficult work conditions, and relationship struggles. As history went on, the tradition continued with songs like Mahalia Jackson's "We Shall Overcome" and Kendrick Lamar's "We Gon' Be Alright," which accompanied protest movements. In all these ways, the arts helped us get through what we were going through. They gave us hope for a new world.

Sometimes the arts help us communicate difficult realities. They help us express what hurts and what we want to strive for instead. Having an outlet for our pain keeps it from getting stuck in our bodies and our minds. The arts are here to help us express what is unspeakable, taboo, and complex. This week, find some artistic mode of expression for your grief and lament.

Here are some ideas:

1. Draw or paint a picture of what hurts or what you long for.
2. Write in a journal about what you are experiencing.
3. Create a story, poem, or spoken-word piece.
4. Listen to or create a song that resonates with you.
5. Dance or move your body in some way.
6. Cook a new recipe.

Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6 ~ Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14 ~ Ephesians 3:1-12 ~ Matthew 2:1-12

by Natarsha Sanders

In loving memory of my guiding light

Keisha E. Sanders

8/2/1975 to 12/17/2025

The birth of Christ had been anticipated and foretold before commandments were etched in stone, even before the weight of oppression threatened humanity's dance at the dawn of liberation. The timeless words of the prophets proclaim the arrival of One whose presence would "defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor" (Psalm 72:4). Amos foretells the restoration of David's fallen kingdom (Amos 9). Jeremiah weeps over ongoing disobedience, yet prophesies about a "Righteous Branch" from David's line (Jeremiah 23). Micah proclaims a Ruler to be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5), and Obadiah speaks of the One who will bring deliverance (Obadiah 1).

These prophetic voices teach us something important about proclamation in lament. Lament is the ways in which our spirit refuses to become comfortable with suffering. Lament is not the absence of faith or joy; lament is the presence of sorrow amid faith and joy. The prophets cried because they could feel the distance between God's vision for humanity while existing in the reality of oppression and grief. They did not pretend that the suffering was not real. They named the suffering—and proclaimed Christ's coming.

I, like these prophets, know suffering well enough to name it. I have sat in the stillness of funeral homes and in the busyness of hospital rooms, wondering if the suffering of the present time indeed compares to the promise of healing yet to be revealed (Romans 8:18). Truly, by December 2025 I had already survived enough catastrophic suffering for one lifetime. And you too. Domestic terrorism, attacks on knowledge, ethnic erasure, struggle to belong, Earth in despair and all of -isms inflamed and life, birth, marriage and death all at the same time.

Yet, each time the flame of lament helps reveal a deeper truth. Lament has become part of who I am. Until July 2025, I spent most of the year healing my mind, body and spirit after experiencing prolonged workplace harassment. However, on July 4 my attention shifted suddenly to help shepherd my community in response to a natural disaster during which over 120 people died. Neighbors in the sunset of their lives were forced to navigate insurance claims while searching for memories that were ultimately drowned in the waters of the Guadalupe River.

Amid navigating the joys and challenges of aging parents, completing a doctoral degree and life-ing in general, I talked to my friend Terrance regularly. We became fast friends at 13 years old. Our families had front row seats to our shenanigans. During our college years we started talking about life together as "ol' folk." We would tease each other in alliterative phrases like, "crying crocodile." Once we were scheduled to meet up. He was late. I called him a "late lazy leprechaun." We knew the rhythms of each other's lives. We were confident of the space shaped by one another in our lives.

In September, Terrance's husband, Marcus, called me to say that Terrance was not well. From that moment in September to October 25, we rode the roller coaster of lament complete with laughter, lab tests, and libations. Terrance's suffering body had taken priority in our lives. We had seen my friend not be well before. This time

was different. I became eerily aware of the necessity of both light and dark. Perhaps this is why lament matters so deeply: our tears can testify that something is not as it should be. Our grief can become a prayer for peace. Our longing can become a proclamation that bondage is not God's design.

When I talked to Marcus on November 7, I accepted a somber fact that I could not yet vocalize. Three days later, on November 10, we sat helpless as Terrance was admitted into hospice care. Marcus and my spouse, Lorenzo, listened as I told Terrance of how unprepared I was to do life without him. But, within was a painful knowing that Terrance's body could no longer contain his larger than life spirit. When I looked at him, I knew his soul wanted to be free from the body that had become his bondage.

It is as if the human soul was formed for freedom. The prophet Isaiah takes care to remind us that light coming does not erase the darkness we have already experienced. Instead, light enters darkness and reveals what has been hidden. This revelation gives us courage to name our pain, while we claim our experiences and lament our losses, as we move forward, carefully toward hope calling. I imagine the sojourners following a single star that promised to lead them to Mary's newborn son. I can sense the increased anticipation they experienced with every single step. I imagine their weary bodies wanting to rest, but their willing spirits urging them forward. To be sure, they started this journey depleted. For the command to "Arise, shine; for your light has come" (Isaiah 60:1) is given while "darkness shall cover the earth" (v. 2).

The light that shines in lament can absolutely reveal love in hidden places. By the time Terrance was admitted to hospice care I had a new leader at work. This leader called me in the midst of deep sorrow to pray for me. It dawned on me within the moment that I did not have to go looking for light. Light found me. That moment was an epiphany. Epiphany invites us to welcome the light of Christ—not only in moments of celebration, but also in difficulty. And again, to realize that our spirit refuses to become comfortable with suffering.

Terrance's spirit left his suffering body on November 19, 2025.

His funeral was scheduled for December 6th. The days leading to his funeral were heavy, difficult, laborious days. My mind still could not conceive of a life without a lifelong friend. I found respite during those tough days in conversation with Keisha, my sister, who, like all of my immediate family, had grown to love Terrance. She called me daily to check on me, asking basic questions like, "Whatcha eat today?" It was not unusual for us to talk everyday, but it was unusual for us to communicate multiple times a day. But, Keisha was diligent with her check-ins and persistent in her care.

Epiphany also invites us to lift our eyes and notice the light, hope, and unexpected blessings God places before us. Isaiah 60:4 calls us to "lift up your eyes and look around," reminding us that hope often becomes visible when we are willing to see differently. We can recognize that God's presence can appear in people, moments, and places we may not expect. Sometimes the brightest light shines when we search beyond our immediate circumstances and notice who has gathered around us. The command to "look and be radiant" in verse 5 is not about sight, but vision. When Christ's light reveals what darkness has hidden, our hearts are guided through sorrow with hope, teaching us to focus on the light that shines within and beyond bondage.

On the day of Terrance's funeral I stood prepared to eulogize my friend, depleted. I again imagined weary bodies longing for rest, looking for Jesus, and the single guiding star that led them forward. I scanned the congregation of people and saw my sister seated in the back pew. Keisha's presence was light and her smile lightened the burden of the moment. I did not expect to see her. Yet, there she was wearing a bright smile to match her green cardigan. I smiled back. At the end of the funeral, after the recessional, as my sister embraced me she said, "I'm proud of you. I know that was hard. I love you Boo."

I had another epiphany; the darker the moment, the brighter the guiding light.

This Epiphany, as we name the truth of where we are, may we have the hope to proclaim our own restoration like Amos, the wisdom to recognize the One who brings deliverance like Obadiah, and the faith to follow the light that leads to revelation like Isaiah.

Grief and Lament Practice 7

Nature

by Brooke Scott

The earth can be a deeply healing resource. Beyond its obvious benefits (providing oxygen and vegetation), its beauty can be a gentle, humbling companion whenever we carry painful questions, uncertainties, and laments that cannot be easily answered. Its colors, sounds, and textures want to dazzle us. Nature also teaches us that there is more to life than the individual moments we are in. It reminds us that life exists in cycles—when things are down, they can go up again. When things die, new things can emerge. When things seem dormant for a time, life starts to blossom again. The earth reminds us how connected we are to all that exists. Nature is one of our oldest friends.

If we let it, the earth is also a reminder that we are never alone. As we read in Scripture, the earth itself groans in anticipation of the promised day of redemption (Rom. 8). The trees and the waters have witnessed pain and destruction since the beginning of time. The trees know what it is to be brutalized, cut down, consumed, and misused. They have been around for unspeakable abuses in American life—trees that have been used as weapons and waters that remember carrying enslaved people across oceans. Their memory holds unfathomable stories. All of creation knows intimately what it is like to carry sorrow.

Because the earth understands, it is able to witness our grief and lament without judgment. Nature is big enough to hold our sorrows. It is unafraid of our anger. It is not overwhelmed by our grief.

There are so many ways to use nature as part of our grieving practices:

1. Go for walks and hikes through nature and parks.
2. Stargaze.
3. Be barefoot outside, lying in the grass or sand and imagining your feelings exiting your body and being released into the earth.
4. Spend time by bodies of water. Cry next to bodies of water.
5. Garden or plant something new or in remembrance. Dedicate parts of nature to the ones we love.
6. Release things into the water in honor of what we have lost (using items that are safe for the planet and non-toxic).

Writers



Liz Walker

Rev. Liz Walker is the founding director of The CAN WE TALK... Network, a nationwide collective of spiritually inspired, community-based, clinically supported programs addressing America's epidemic of post-traumatic stress and grief through the healing power of sharing personal stories. Reverend Walker took on this healing ministry full-time after retiring as pastor of Roxbury Presbyterian Church in Boston, MA. Reverend Walker is the author of *No One Left Alone: How Community Helps Us Heal*.



Abby Norman

Abby Norman lives in the city of Atlanta with two teens and her college sweetheart. She tries not to think about how close the teens are to having college sweethearts. When not writing or thinking about God, Abby spends a lot of time thinking about thinking when she works with neurodivergent learners. She has an M.Div. from Candler School of Theology, and a book about Lament available on Amazon.



Jerrod Lowry

Jerrod (pronounced "Jer-odd") serves as the General Presbyter/Stated Clerk for the Presbytery of Coastal Carolina. Prior to accepting this call in October of 2018, he served as the pastor of Community of Grace PC(USA) in Sandy, Utah for 8 years. He was first ordained in 2006 as a tentmaker in the Presbytery of New Hope. As a tentmaker he served as pastor to St. Paul PC in Louisburg, NC and Associate for Specialized Ministries for the Presbytery of New Hope. Jerrod is a proud graduate of Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary (formerly a constituent seminary of the Interdenominational Theological Center of Atlanta, GA) and currently serves as the moderator of the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance Advisory Board.

Jerrod loves football, has developed a tolerance for running, and enjoys "playing at golf". Regrettably he is a life-long fan of all professional Cleveland sports teams. Above all Jerrod is passionate about "equipping saints for the work of ministry" and has enjoyed studying St. Ignatius' Examen as a prayer practice and tool for discernment. Jerrod loves to explore, is willing to try, and is not afraid to fail at any attempt to share the good news of the Gospel.

Jerrod was married for 19 years to his college sweetheart, Molly. Together they have three kids - Kerry (24), Kaleb (20), Kendle (17).



P.J. Chavez

P.J. Chavez serves as Director of Mission and Ministry at Cleveland Clinic Mercy Hospital in Canton, Ohio, where he oversees Pastoral Care, Immigrant Health, and Mission Outreach. His ministry centers on accompanying patients, families, and caregivers through illness, grief, and uncertainty, and helping people find compassionate care and practical support. He also serves as Director of Music at Queen of Heaven Catholic Church in Green, Ohio. A musician, storyteller, and father, P.J. draws on family life and more than twenty years in ministry to explore how faith takes shape in everyday acts of love. He and his wife, Bethany, have three sons: Luca, Caleb, and Jude.



Cindy Kohlmann

Cindy Kohlmann (she/they) has served two churches as a solo pastor in Ohio and Massachusetts, and the Presbyteries of Northern New England and Boston as Resource Presbyterian. In June 2018, Cindy was elected as Co-Moderator of the 223rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and served in that role until June 2020. Their current ministry as Lead Presbyterian & Stated Clerk with New Castle Presbytery began in January 2021 and she is also currently serving on the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission of the PC(USA). Cindy's spouse, the Rev. Eric Markman, is serving as the transitional pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Easton. Together, they enjoy scuba diving, especially in warm locations, and love to travel.



Q Hailey

Quanita Hailey, affectionately known as Q, is an accomplished alumna of Union Theological Seminary, where she earned her Master of Divinity with a focus on Womanist Queer Ethics. She also holds a Master of Social Work from Touro College. Currently, Q serves as a Staff Chaplain at New York-Presbyterian Brooklyn Methodist Hospital and works as a psychotherapist specializing in LGBTQ mental health and religious trauma.

Q is a proud alumna of the Minority Fellowship Program (MFP) under the Council on Social Work Education and the recipient of their 2024 Emerging Scholar Award. She also serves on the board of the MFP Council. Additionally, Q is the founder of the Trailblazers of Color Leadership Conference at Mount Holyoke College and is an elected committee member of the Community and Belonging committee for the alumni association.

Beyond her professional accomplishments, Q is deeply devoted to her family, faith, and advocacy work. She is also the creator of Spirit Fragrances, a business that produces eco-friendly home fragrances.



Brent O'Neill

Brent Sheffer O'Neill (he/him) is a caregiver, Pastor, and Licensed Clinical Social Worker. He earned a B.A. in Biblical and Religious Studies at Messiah University, followed by a Master of Divinity and Master of Social Work at Boston University. In a full-circle moment, Brent was ordained at and currently pastors the small congregation that baptized him as an infant. He recently served as Vice Moderator of the General Assembly Relationships Committee at the 227th General Assembly.



Paul Burgess

Rev. Paul Burgess (he/him/él) recently wrapped up a three-year pastoral residency in North Carolina and is taking a “sabbatical” in Ravenna, Italy, supporting his Beloved, Maggie, as she pursues a graduate degree. Paul is a pastor in the PC(USA), a member of the board of directors for More Light Presbyterians, and a very proud uncle— and has, at various points in his life, also been a campus minister, a middle school English teacher, a Boy Scout, a Girl Scout, a soccer referee, a camp counselor, a retiree, an expat, and an actor. He cares deeply about immigration issues and de-segregating the Church, and can often be found listening to Irish music and playing board games.



Natarsha Sanders

Natarsha P. Sanders works as the Associate for Intercultural Leadership Development and Recruitment at the Presbyterian Life & Witness Agency of the PC (USA). She graduated from Hollins University and North Carolina Central University with a BA in Philosophy and History and a M.A in Teaching respectively. She earned a D.Ed.Min (doctorate in educational ministry) from Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, GA. Natarsha’s research examined the impact of white supremacy on white Christian males over 65 years old. She is passionate about education, the arts and inclusion. She resides in North Carolina with her niece, Kiana, nephew, Kaden, mother, Cynthia and husband, Lorenzo A. Watson, PhD.

Spiritual Practice Writer



Brooke Scott

Rev. Brooke Scott is a queer faith leader who is passionate about inclusive, justice-oriented ministry. She is also a licensed social worker (LSW) and part-time therapist. Along with mental health, she has experience in case and crisis management.

She has a Master of Social Work (MSW) from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a Master of Divinity (M.Div) from Duke University, and a Bachelor of Social Work from Eastern University. Pastor Brooke currently lives in Philadelphia with her partner. While not in church or in therapy sessions, she is an avid reader and a big fan of music, podcasts, and musical theater.

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