

## **Pain Is a Four-Letter Word A Congregational Lament**

**Calvin Seerveld**

Soon after September 11, 2001, I received requests from various congregations throughout the United States for permission to sing from "A Congregational Lament" in worship services. They needed a song to fit the evil besetting them. They wanted to mourn the terrible loss of life and to cry out to God for the Lord to lessen their pain somehow in what seemed so brutally destructive. As believers they wanted to sing a sad song of faith that did not pretend in Stoic fashion to take on the chin whatever happens.

They wanted a lament that would voice exasperation with what had occurred in God's world on their doorstep, while still trusting that the Lord would come through.

### **A Lament Born Out of Experience**

The text of "A Congregational Lament" was born out of experience. As an elder in our communion who visits members of the congregation regularly in their homes to inquire respectfully about the health of the family faith-life and to encourage a deepening rather than a thinning out of their Christian confession—as an elder I knew that the glad Sunday morning worship service of well-dressed propriety and order can be deceptive.

Were the truth told the gathering might be more like a meeting in the emergency room of a hospital. But how can we openly express our private pain in a public liturgical setting?

- A member of our local congregation is sent to jail. Can we sing about that together without exonerating or being judgmental (st. 2)?
- One of our congregational youth is struck with MS. How can we lift up our dismay to the Lord with psalmodic upsetness (st. 3)?
- A daughter of the church undergoes a divorce. Instead of gossiping or taking sides, we believers must lament the waste (st. 4).
- A young mother is killed in an automobile accident by a drunken driver; she leaves behind three little children and a husband. That should not happen in God's world! So we need to reach deep down into our faith and remonstrate with God about it (st. 5)—that is the nature of a believing Job-like lament.

### **A Tune Strong Enough to Carry Heavy Lament**

The text was conceived in the womb of the Genevan melody for Psalm 51. Its Phrygian modal tone (think of a scale from E to E rather than from C to C) embraces human sorrow in its long lines of regularly mixed 10 11 11 10 10 11 10 11 syllables in a way that common meter (iambic tetrameter and trimeter) cannot match. Claude Goudimel's open fifth harmonics ending the second, third, and fourth phrases evoke the empty-stomach feeling that the text speaks. And the C# following an open A

minor chord stings your ear instead of sounding major. The mournful melody is perfectly honed to the excruciating confession of David in Psalm 51: "O God, blot out all my violent sins! Don't take your Holy Spirit away from me (as you did to Saul)!" The Genevan 51 melody is wedded to crises and to facing inexplicable evil in faith.

Some may object, "But the melody is difficult and unfamiliar. Our praise team wants something more upbeat. And there are no guitar chords. . . ."

My pastoral reply would be, "September 11 was certainly not simple, and it deserves a complex response. Its horrific terror may become gradually more familiar to us in North America. Maybe the congregation needs a trained 'lament team' too, for when the hard times come. Often the best way to pray to God naked in the ash heap is without instruments. Let your choir or a strong voice lead the congregation in a haunting a cappella unison voicing of this bare lament so your sorrow has the silence to breathe."

How to familiarize your congregation with an infrequently used lament tune takes a little imaginative planning. One way a music director could teach the wonderful sadness of Genevan 51 with its underlying tincture of certain hope, to be ready for crises, is to use the melody occasionally in the weekly service of confession and assurance. Stanzas 1-3 of Stanley Wiersma's fine versification of Psalm 51, "Be Merciful, Be Merciful, O God" (PsH 51), are primed for a heartfelt pleading repentance asking for forgiveness of the Agnus Dei. Once a congregation has a rich melody embedded in its consciousness, it functions like a reference book in one's library: you may pull it out only on occasion, but its rich treasury is familiarly there when you need it.

On September 11, 2001, the world did not change. Instead, America joined the world. If we North American believing congregations want songs to match our faith to the terrible sorrows of our neighbors, we could do worse than learn the laments of the psalms sung to melodies with Genevan grit, and keep them on reserve in our library of congregational song. If our hymns be only uncomplicated and thin, we may lack the seasoned, expectant and wounded, robust faith it takes to wrestle with God for a blessing in our fearful day (cf. Gen. 32:22-32).

It is possible a given congregation needs to be weaned from its comfortable tunes and choruses to sing the tough stuff by learning to give voice to "the hard Psalms." One could practice by living into the singing of Psalms 39, 69, 130, and 141 as steps toward learning the grit for singing "A Congregational Lament." It would be good for us to be found faithful also in the range of our repertoire for singing to God when the Lord returns (cf. Luke 18:1-8).

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