

Lament: Homiletical Groans in the Spirit¹

Luke A. Powery

Perry and Georgia Engle Assistant Professor of Homiletics
Princeton Theological Seminary.

Abstract: *The expression of celebration has been the normative discussion point in African American homiletical theory to the neglect of the expression of lament. This is not to say that lament has not been practiced in the pulpit or beyond but it is to claim that lament has not been named as a viable sermonic expression as has been done with celebration; thus, lament has been silenced in homiletical discussions. In light of this, this article aims to highlight lament and argue that it is a critical manifestation of the Spirit in preaching and should be voiced alongside celebration.*

Introduction

In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine teaches about three styles of speaking—subdued, moderate, and grand—which correlatively teach, delight, and move audiences. Being taught and delighted spark applause, but Augustine claims that the grand style persuades audiences to such an extent that there is a possibility of moving them to tears. He writes, “There are many other experiences through which we have learned what effect the grand style of a wise speaker may have on men. They do not show it through applause but rather through their groans, sometimes even through tears, and finally through a change of their way of life.”² As a homiletician, Augustine is a forerunner in teaching preachers about lament, though he did not use that term but rather speaks of groans and tears. By speaking of such, he invites groans and tears to be a part of the Christian practice of preaching. In this particular statement, Augustine focuses his attention on the hearers’ response of groans not necessarily the groans or laments of the preacher. Yet, it is important to see how Augustine allows for the full expression of worship in the event of preaching, whether it is applause and celebration or groans, tears, and lament. Augustine, as homiletician, is one of the historical precedents for speaking about lament in the preaching event. Some contemporary preaching theorists also bring lament to the fore, such as Mary Catherine Hilkert and Sally Brown;³ but, this focus has not been developed substantially in homiletics in general and African American homiletics in particular.

The expression of celebration is usually the normative discussion point in African American homiletical theory to the neglect of the expression of lament. This is not to say that lament has not been practiced in the pulpit or beyond but it is to claim that lament has not been named as a viable theo-rhetorical expression in preaching as has been done with celebration. Worship or preaching is not limited to celebration nor “spoiled by tears.”⁴ The biblical witness

¹ Adapted from *Spirit Speech*, copyright © 2009 by Abingdon Press. Used by permission of the publisher.

² See Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* Book 4, XXIV (ca. 396-427; reprint, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr., New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1958), 160-161.

³ See Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997) and Sally A. Brown, “When Lament Shapes the Sermon,” in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, eds. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

⁴ Hughes Oliphant Old, *Themes & Variations for a Christian Doxology: Some Thoughts on the Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 17-21. Lament would exist under the rubric of epicletic doxology, but Old also insightfully names four other senses of doxology: kerygmatic, wisdom, prophetic, and covenantal.

demonstrates individuals and communities approaching God, not only in joy, but also in sorrow. Celebration, therefore, needs to be paired with lament, another faithful response of worship to God who should be praised in the midst of both joyful and sorrowful occasions. Lament can be an appropriate way of addressing human failure or loss before God, and celebration is an appropriate way of acknowledging God's ongoing care. In fact, just as celebration has been called a "nonmaterial African cultural survival,"⁵ it has been noted that "for African peoples everywhere the experience of lamentation is as ancient as their days of existence";⁶ thus, the counterparts of lamentation and celebration are embedded in the cultural fabric of African Americans. Because lament is usually silenced in conversations about African American preaching, this article highlights the importance of lament as a Christian expression and particularly as a manifestation of the Spirit in preaching. I will first explore some biblical and theological perspectives which link lament to the groans of the Spirit and all of creation, scripture, particularly the Psalms, and Christ; this will ground lament as a viable theological language and expression of the Spirit in preaching. Then I will discuss what lament might mean more specifically for preaching, speaking further about its nature and its relationship to celebration as doxology. The final segment will conclude with some reflections about lament's relationship to a suffering world. Through this article, it will become clear that lament is an essential and significant expression in sermons for preaching that aims to be rooted in the Spirit.

The Spirit, Groans, and Lament

If preaching is a gift of the Spirit, and if the Spirit groans, should not Christian preaching also groan, that is, lament? To begin reclaiming lament as an expression in preaching, it is necessary to explore the Spirit's relationship to groans as a way of thinking about lament theologically. The eighth chapter of Romans presents a compelling portrait of how the Spirit is linked to hope-filled suffering through the groans of creation. The Spirit does not avoid suffering or pain but actually causes a believer to suffer with Christ in anticipation of eventually being glorified with him (Rom. 8:17). In his Romans commentary in *True to Our Native Land*, Thomas Hoyt writes

The Spirit does not bring release from present suffering but propels believers into it. Present suffering prevents confidence for the future from becoming triumphalistic. But if the Spirit does not nullify suffering, neither does suffering nullify the confidence that the community may have for the future. In Paul's mind the Spirit is connected with a universal yearning to experience the fulfillment of God's purposes.⁷

The Christian community yearns for God's future but they are not alone "for the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God" (Rom. 8:19). The creation is in a "bondage to decay" and the whole created order groans in labor pains (Rom. 8:22), indicating the presence of pain in the present even while it longs for a brighter future from God. But the creation is not alone in its groaning because Paul writes, "and not only the creation, but we

⁵ Olin Moyd, *The Sacred Art: Preaching and Theology in the African American Tradition* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1995), 101.

⁶ Peter Paris, "When Feeling like a Motherless Child," in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, eds. Sally Brown and Patrick Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 111.

⁷ Thomas L. Hoyt, Jr., "Romans," *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, eds. Brian K. Blount, Cain Hope Felder, Clarice J. Martin, and Emerson B. Powery (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 262.

ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption” (Rom. 8:23). The Spirit engages believers, preachers, in honest groans. Gordon Fee argues that “inwardly” may mean “within ourselves” but he questions the use of the word “inwardly” as if the groans are not expressed outwardly.⁸ What is important here is the possibility that these groans are voiced and expressed. One cannot endure suffering and always be silent because even the Spirit speaks through Christians, those who have the first fruits of the Spirit.

Yet, creation’s groans and human groans are not enough. There is a clear sense that the Spirit, too, groans because of the travail of the world. Paul says that the Spirit “intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26). Once again, the work of Gordon Fee is insightful because he translates “sighs too deep for words” to “inarticulate groanings,” not “silent” or “inexpressible” sounds but more to do with words that we cannot understand with our own minds.⁹ This translation provides the opportunity to speak of the Spirit’s sighs also as groanings, joining the whole creation, including human beings, in yearning for the full redemption of God. *Lament connects us to the Spirit and all of creation.* It is important to realize that the Spirit articulates groans of suffering and “the Spirit participates in the yearning by assisting the believer who hardly knows how to prepare in anticipation of the future restoration. The Spirit puts a meaning into human sighs that they would themselves not have. Thus, God, too, participates in the yearning for renewal that God is now accomplishing.”¹⁰ Creation and humanity are not isolated from God during these groans of suffering but God actually fosters such truthful groaning as part of what it means to be God’s creation. This truthful groaning is an aspect of what it means to be a faithful preacher of the gospel. New Testament scholar, Emerson Powery, says “groans are enlivened by the Spirit (of God) who groans through humans. Such groans recognize, by the Spirit, the incompleteness of justice and righteousness in the land.”¹¹ For my purposes, this Spirit language of groans opens an avenue for viewing the Spirit’s speech in preaching as lament.

Lament Psalms as Voice of the Spirit

To talk about lament, one should deal with the lament Psalms in some fashion especially if one holds to the opinion of Hughes Oliphant Old who calls the Psalms “the songs of the Holy Spirit.”¹² *Lament is a way the Spirit connects us to scripture.* The truthfulness, honesty, and faithfulness of even the lament psalms are the “voice of the Spirit” crying out of humanity before God. There is precedence for this posture of lament and it is part of the language of the Spirit. Walter Brueggemann observes the full gamut of human life before God in what he calls the Psalms of orientation (descriptive hymns), disorientation (laments), and reorientation (declarative hymns). Lament, psalms of disorientation, is a stance before God.¹³ They comprise

⁸ He says, “the phrase does not ordinarily function as a mere synonym for inaudible, as over against aloud. When used with verbs of speaking it generally means “to oneself,” as over against “to others” which may be audible or not. The phrase therefore probably does not refer to whether or not such groaning is expressed, but that it is not expressed in the context of others.” See Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 574-575.

⁹ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 582-583.

¹⁰ Hoyt, 263.

¹¹ Emerson B. Powery, “The Groans of ‘Brother Saul’: An Exploratory Reading of Romans 8 for ‘Survival,” *Word and World* 24: 3 (Summer 2004), 321.

¹² Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship That is Reformed According to Scripture* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 43. Old also says, “When they sang the Psalms the Holy Spirit was praising the Father within their hearts.” See p. 44.

¹³ For more about this movement, see Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 8-16, 24.

one-third of the Psalter which demonstrates that lament is one valid way through which humans and the divine interrelate. It is a position that one may take before God thus it is a possibility in preaching. Some scholars define lament as “that unsettling biblical tradition of prayer that includes expressions of complaint, anger, grief, despair and protest to God.”¹⁴ The biblical tradition invites us to deal with our suffering openly before God without timidity. Why then is it that some preachers struggle to lament in preaching? Or, do preachers express it, but do not know what to call it? There is a full range of possible human situations, individually and corporately, out of which lament arises, but most importantly, they state that life is not right!¹⁵ Brueggemann says that these lament psalms say things are not the way they should be in the present arrangement and they need not stay this way and can be changed; the speaker will not accept the present arrangement because it is intolerable; and, it is God’s obligation to change things.¹⁶ Lament in the Spirit gives voice to the suffering and indicates that suffering is not satisfactory, and it does so in the face of God.

These lament psalms, these songs of the Spirit, acknowledge that pain is present and it can be articulated with candor but it must be addressed to God even in the imperative because God cannot be protected from trouble. Lament psalms imply that dysfunction is God’s proper business.¹⁷ For instance, in Psalm 39:1-12, the psalmist can no longer keep silent because his “distress grew worse” and “heart became hot within” him. This internal burning leads him to cry out to God, “And now, O Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in you. Deliver me from all my transgressions. Do not make me the scorn of the fool. I am silent; I do not open my mouth, for it is you who have done it. Remove your stroke from me; I am worn down by the blows of your hand . . . Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry, do not hold your peace at my tears.” In another instance, Psalm 74 says

O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? Remember your congregation, which you acquired long ago . . . Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins; the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary . . . How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever? Why do you hold back your hand; why do you keep your hand in your bosom?

In this kind of truthful speech, Israel’s discernment of God and experience of human reality converge, causing them to ask God such questions as, “How long?” (Ps. 79, 82), “Will you?” (Ps. 85), and “Why?” (Ps. 2, 43). We hear the “why?” most poignantly in Jesus’ cry of dereliction, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps. 22, Matt. 27:46) God is interrogated and indicted in these prayers of the Spirit but the psalmist never breaks off the relationship with God. When Jesus cries out in deep despair, he still says “my God.” In fact, the laments glorify God because the psalmist turns to God with his or her pain. Even in anger and accusation the

¹⁴ Kathleen Billman and Daniel Migliore, *Rachel’s Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* (Cleveland: United Church, 1999), 6.

¹⁵ For instance, there are laments about public national disasters. See Psalms 44, 58, 74, 79, 80, 83, 89:38ff, 106, 123.

¹⁶ Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 105. This section is just a brief overview of the lament biblical genre as a viable option for doxological speech in preaching. I do not aim to be exhaustive about the lament psalm but suggestive enough to indicate that lament is nothing new for followers of God but has always been a part of the Judeo-Christian tradition. For further study about lament, particularly in the Psalms, please see Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (John Knox Press, 1981), Patrick Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Fortress Press, 1986), 48-63, Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms* (Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 51-77.

¹⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Israel’s Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 141.

relationship is never severed, confirming what Mary Catherine Hilkert says—“anger is a mode of relatedness” to God.¹⁸

Furthermore, Patrick Miller notes that in these psalms or songs of the Spirit, question and trust, protest and acceptance, fear and confidence are conjoined.¹⁹ God may be angrily questioned but God is also trusted to deliver from harsh circumstances. Womanist scholar Emilie Townes notes that lament appeals are “always to God for deliverance.”²⁰ This trust in God leads to the hope found in most lament psalms. As many people have observed, laments have a dialectical movement from plea *almost* always to praise.²¹ For example, Psalm 22 begins with “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?” but shifts to “You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him all you offspring of Israel . . . before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him” (Ps. 22:23, 29). The one who laments is not satisfied with living in lament forever. There is hope that “trouble don’t last always” because there is a God who can do something about the trouble. These psalms are a “scandal in the church, because they cannot be prayed to a god who does nothing. . . .”²² When the cry rings out to God in Psalm 85, “Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations?” the speaker concludes with “The Lord will give what is good and our land will yield its increase.”²³ In the midst of hellish situations, hope arises due to faith in a God who can help. Lamentation is thus faithful speech because it is pronounced with faith in God. Biblical lament requires the presence of God thus to lament is to embrace this God’s reality. Moreover, lament cannot be resolved and answered by God unless it is first spoken. Thus, it is a theological act and because it is theological it not only has to do with our human laments but with God’s lament and groans in the Spirit. These lament psalms, these songs of the Spirit, can also be heard resonating through the lament of God in Christ.

Lament of Christ in the Spirit

Lament is a way the Spirit connects us to God’s own lament in Christ. Lament has to do with God not only because it is a posture taken before God but because God is one who in Christ

¹⁸ Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 117.

¹⁹ See Patrick Miller, “Heaven’s Prisoners: The Lament as Christian Prayer,” *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, eds. Sally Brown and Patrick Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 19.

²⁰ Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 23.

²¹ I say “almost always” because there are some Psalms such as Psalm 39 and 88 which seemingly do not resolve in praise. Despite this fact, the very turning to God in lament glorifies God because even in lament humanity does what it was created to do – turn to God (i.e. conversion in its literal sense). For more about the dialectical movement of hurt to joy, death to life in the Psalms, see Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 67-83.

²² Brueggemann, *Israel’s Praise*, 140.

²³ I am also fully aware that praise may be in the form of what Brueggemann calls “glad self abandonment” as seen in Psalm 100 and 150. These psalms do not necessarily explicitly or implicitly name troubled times like “the Pit” but are just a glad praise for being alive. In this article, I am particularly interested in seeing the places where lament and praise are tightly interwoven, thus this does not encompass all praise psalms. However, these psalms of glad self abandonment also give the Church reason to praise in an abandoned way so when speaking about doxology, which consists of lament and praise, these “exuberant” praise psalms reveal the doxological possibilities for humanity. In *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, Brueggemann lists eleven theses about the nature of praise. He says praise is a liturgical, poetic, audacious, “basic trust,” knowing, doxological, polemical, political, subversive, evangelical, and useless act. See his explanation of all of these points on pp. 113-123.

laments and suffers in the Spirit. Though as Moltmann says, “There was no time and no period of his life when Jesus was not filled with the Holy Spirit”²⁴ the Spirit does not make Jesus Christ a “superman.”²⁵ Jesus endures the shame of the cross and laments “my God, my God why have you forsaken me?” Jesus weeps. Jesus sheds tears of blood. Jesus suffers. Jesus dies. The crucifixion is not a figment of the Christian imagination thus in the full expression of what it means to be a Christian preacher empowered by the Spirit, there is room to suffer and lament. The Spirit is there in death. The cross keeps our lives in the Spirit connected to the real suffering of God’s creation and to the suffering experienced within the very being of the triune God. The suffering of the cross gives us sufficient reason to lament.

It is at the cross where we remember God’s passionate love as suffering love and voluntary fellow-suffering which suffers in solidarity with the suffering, groaning creation, even the groaning Spirit.²⁶ The suffering love of the passion flows through the Spirit and continues in the sighs of the Spirit, yet, the Spirit also opens up a hope for new life through the future of the coming of God to the world. This love of the Spirit allows creation, us, to fellowship with the sufferings of Christ as well as experience the new life to come. The lament and the pain of the cross are in the Spirit but so is the joy of new life through the resurrection. Though this article just focuses on the lament, it is important to stress that the lament of Christ in the Spirit does not end in despair but is very much like the songs of the Spirit, the biblical genre of lament, in moving towards praise and hope and celebration; but, this hope is grounded in lament, pain, and suffering. As Amy Plantinga Pauw has said, “the resurrection does not erase from Christ’s hands and feet the wounds of the crucifixion.”²⁷ The marks of suffering are always present and lament acknowledges this. Lament embraces who God is even in divine suffering.

Thus far, it has been noted that lament has to do with humanity and also divinity, not just in terms of God being the object of our lament but God as One who in Christ actually laments—lament *before* God and the lament *of* God, all expressing the groans and laments of the Spirit. Lament embraces God and human suffering *simultaneously*, which captures the divine-human communication that is worship and preaching. Christ’s life is the “epitome of liturgy,” according to Melva Costen in *African American Christian Worship*, thus any liturgical act (e.g. preaching) must embrace lament if it is to be truly Christological, pneumatological, and doxological.²⁸ If there is space for lament in creation, scripture, and God, our sermons should also make space for this posture of worship. These biblical and theological musings lead to further exploration of the nature of lament as a manifestation of the Spirit in preaching.

Lament of the Spirit in Preaching

In African American preaching, lament is one specific manifestation of the Spirit that has not been treated adequately in the academic study of homiletics, though it is fruitful as an avenue for speaking about the Spirit in relation to preaching. Homiletical lament is an expression of the

²⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 81.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 50-51.

²⁷ Amy Plantinga Pauw, “Dying Well,” *Practicing our Faith*, eds. Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 170.

²⁸ Melva Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 127.

Spirit who groans and sighs through humanity as indicated above.²⁹ Sermonic lament of the Spirit takes its cues from the insights of biblical lament in that it too not only directly and concretely names life's harsh realities (plea), but anticipates God's intervention in faith and hope (praise) because of the belief in the reign of God. Direct speech in preaching lament is necessary as a means to exposing life's harsh realities as the psalms indicate. This approach assures that lament is linked to real life issues and experience and is not a figment of one's own imagination. This idea of the importance of direct speech for lament parallels Charles Campbell's advocacy for direct speech in exposing the deathly powers present in the world.³⁰ Being explicit and direct about hope in God is also vital for as noted, lament appeals are "always to God for deliverance."³¹ Homiletical lament is no different; it is a sermon form that begins with the truthful declaration of human pain but moves towards hope because of a firm belief in the presence and power of God. At times, the anticipation of hope is evident through the interjection of statements of good news while painting the picture of bad news. Lament is faith speech, implying that all preaching assumes a measure of faith in God; thus, one should not preach against God in a sermon. One may be angry with God but even this implies a relationship with God that does not seek the demise of God. If one preaches against God, then one can necessarily presume that what occurs is not in fact Christian preaching nor the lament of the Spirit which one finds in the suffering Christ's cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Ps. 22)

In addition, lament is important for all homiletical cultures because of the travail of the world in which we live. War, genocide, famine, and child-trafficking are just a few of the serious problems pervading the global society, and African American communities in particular are burdened with issues, such as the high rate of imprisonment for black males, a high percentage of people with AIDS, and the ongoing struggle against racism. The language of lament is vital for African American preaching communities because it links to the particular reality of pain and suffering experienced by African Americans in the past and present. A denial of lament is a denial of African American history, the Holy Spirit, and the history of Christ. I would even assert that a denial of lament is a denial of what it means to be human; but, the embrace of lament is an embrace of the Spirit of Christ and historical memory. In many ways, the concept of "trouble" articulated in the work of Paul Scott Wilson is a homiletical precursor to homiletical lament. Trouble is sin or brokenness experienced by humanity which places a burden on people; according to Wilson, this trouble serves as part of the deep grammar of sermons. Trouble is the existential context for the response of lament.³² However, trouble does not necessarily link to the work of the Spirit explicitly nor does it point to human expressions of the Spirit (e.g. lament) in preaching. Lament implies human activity, not passivity, before God in the Spirit during the preaching event. Lament is something one does in preaching and not about which one simply speaks. Moreover, lament anticipates the eventual overcoming of vast

²⁹ For a Spirit who groans and sighs, see Romans 8:22-23, 26. Romans 8:22-23 says, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies." Romans 8:26 says, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

³⁰ See Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 107-110.

³¹ Townes, 23.

³² For more about trouble, see Paul Wilson, *The Four Pages of a Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), pp.73-154, and his overview of trouble in *Preaching and Homiletical Theory* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 87-100.

trouble. Lament echoes Samuel Proctor's "antithesis" in his sermon method. Antithesis is the "woe is me" sermon section that is not the final answer of hope, though it anticipates it. Proctor describes antithesis as the following:

It could be an error that must be corrected, a condition that must be altered, a mood that must be dispelled, a sin that cries out for confession and forgiveness, some ignorance that needs to be illumined, a direction that has to be reversed, an idolatry of worshiping things that are corruptible that should cease in favor of praising an incorruptible God, some pain and hurt that await the balm of Gilead, or some lethargy that needs to be replaced.³³

Antithesis raises the need as does lament, but lament also actively longs for God's answer to the particular struggles. Lament has a Godward direction and it is important for preaching because it keeps God in focus, not to the neglect of humanity. Lament coincides with the "hermeneutic of God" discussed by Cleo LaRue in his approach to Black preaching in that lament can function as a hermeneutical approach to scripture that implies faith in a powerful God while simultaneously naming difficult circumstances. LaRue says that the "hermeneutic of God, the mighty sovereign who acts mightily on behalf of the powerless and oppressed, is the longstanding template blacks place on the scriptures as they begin the interpretive process . . . Blacks historically and to this present day believe God is proactively at work on their behalf. This is what they bring to scripture, see in scripture, and preach from scripture."³⁴ Furthermore, lament, in its naming of reality, nurtures truthfulness and anger, two key virtues of any preacher, according to some homileticians.³⁵

As mentioned in the earlier statement by Peter Paris, lament as an expression of African Americans is not novel because it is embedded in black cultures and has been a part of the experience of oppressed black people across the world. In particular, studies on the spirituals have been performed, stressing the struggle and lament of African Americans.³⁶ However, lament in sermons has not been discussed in-depth within African American homiletics or within Euro-American perspectives, as cited earlier. Barbara Holmes, in her work, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, shares a concern that people in general, but African Americans in particular, "have forgotten how to lament"³⁷ though she realizes that some churches engage in this practice, even if they do not recognize it. She attempts to reclaim lament as a viable avenue of contemplative doxology. She acknowledges that the atmosphere in most black churches are joyful but contends that even the moans on the slave ships of the Middle Passage were generative and "the precursor to joy yet unknown." She poetically writes "on the

³³ Samuel D. Proctor, *The Certain Sound of the Trumpet: Crafting a Sermon of Authority* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1994), 28.

³⁴ LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 112. Similarly, Warren Stewart says that God is the point of departure in the hermeneutical process for African American proclamation. See Stewart, *Interpreting God's Word in Black Preaching* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1984), 14-15.

³⁵ Charles Campbell says that truthfulness, anger, patience, and hope are key virtues of any preacher. See *The Word Before the Powers*, 169-188.

³⁶ For such studies on the spirituals, see James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), Howard Thurman, *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1975), and Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, *Exorcizing Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997).

³⁷ Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 95.

deck after evening rations, lament danced and swayed under the watchful eyes of the crew.”³⁸ I would assert that African Americans have not forgotten how to lament in most settings, but just have not named the phenomenon in preaching as lament as has been done with celebration. The magnification of homiletical lament as a manifestation of the Spirit in this essay is not only to reveal its significance in and of itself for preaching in the Spirit, but to realize its vital and necessary partnership with homiletical celebration. To speak of lament as manifestation of the Spirit apart from celebration would be insufficient and inadequate to a discussion about the full breadth and depth of expression in African American preaching traditions.

Albert Raboteau, religious historian at Princeton University, notes that African American spirituality intones a “sad joyfulness”³⁹ and it is this mixed texture that represents the relationship of lament and celebration in preaching. This mixture of sorrow and joy is already emphasized in the singing of African Americans. William McClain writes

In our melancholy, our songs are not always mournful songs. Most often, they are joyous, lifting the spirit above despair. Yet, our sad songs sometimes come in the midst of our joy, in moments of jubilation and celebration. Without warning caution emerges to remind us that songs of joy must be tempered by the stark realities of the plight of our people. In the midst of our joyful singing the soul has not forgotten depression, pain, and expressions of hopelessness on the faces of our young. Laughter turns to tears and our glad songs into laments. But we refuse to give up or give in. There is a God sense that has become a part of the fabric of the race. We refuse to let God alone, and we know God has never let us alone! At the moment of our deepest despair we sing, ‘sometimes I feel like a motherless child a long way from home.’ Then, in the midst of our sadness, we sing with assurance, ‘I’m so glad that trouble don’t last always!’⁴⁰

This same pattern is present in much African American preaching. Though it has not been emphasized in homiletics, it has been recognized. James Cone says the Word “arises out of the totality of the people’s existence—their pain and joy, trouble and ecstasy.”⁴¹ James Earl Massey recognizes there is a “trouble-glory” mixture in black praise, even though he emphasizes the festive nature of black preaching. He says black preaching “majors in the celebrative aspects of faith even as it sings of the troubles nobody knows.”⁴² James Harris notes “Black preaching is indeed exciting and jubilant, but it is also sad and reflective. It represents the ebb and flow of the Holy Spirit that correlates with the ups and downs of life. It reflects the reality of context and experience. Additionally, it is a creative interplay between joy and sorrow, freedom and oppression, justice and injustice. . . It reflects the power of the church in the presence of the Holy Spirit.”⁴³ Harris is important because he makes an explicit pneumatological link to the “sorrowful joy” of preaching. Moreover, Evans Crawford in his book, *The Hum*, says the

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁹ Albert Raboteau, *A Sorrowful Joy* (New York: Paulist, 2002), 50.

⁴⁰ William B. McClain, *Come Sunday The Liturgy of Zion* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 13.

⁴¹ James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1975), 19. Also, see Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992).

⁴² As noted by Evans Crawford, *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 68-69.

⁴³ Harris, *Preaching Liberation* 52-53.

sermon pitch and voice of the preacher “can sound life’s laments and its laughter, its grief, and its glory.”⁴⁴

Even Teresa Fry Brown captures this relationship between lament and celebration in the experience of Black preaching with her notions of “weary throats” and “new songs.” In her work, *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God’s Word*, Fry Brown hints at the dialectic of lament and celebration undergirding the preaching of African American women in particular. She refers to the resistance to the call of women to pulpit ministry as the “weary throats,” indicating the weariness of women due to their struggle for full access to the pulpit; the weary throat is reason for lament. The “new song” is the support given to black women preachers, even if the support is only from God; the new song is reason for celebration. She says of her own homiletical history

My throat was sometimes parched due to human machinations, but I was able to sing a new song when God’s word coursed through my marrow. There was life on the other side of the church restrictions. There was a light in the tunnel of discrimination. There was energy in the midst of fatigue. There was an ‘anyhow’ in the gift of preaching. There was a dialectic balancing of the weary throat and the new song.⁴⁵

Brown’s work is not only significant because of her recognition of the close relationship between lament and celebration, but because she reclaims women’s voices as potential conduits of the Spirit in the pulpit and not solely on the main floor of churches when testifying, as has traditionally been the case in many black churches. This homiletical balancing act of lament and celebration permeates the preaching of men and women in African American traditions, though lament is not the coined term for this homiletical stance embedded in many sermons.

Furthermore, Harold Dean Trulear argues that the preacher “fashions that trouble into a litany in which every sentence of sorrow is punctuated with an exclamation point of God’s care,” sorrow balanced with joy. He notes that the “drama” of black preaching moves from crucifixion (sorrow, lament) to resurrection (joy, celebration), rehearsing the crucifixion-resurrection motif rooted in Jesus Christ.⁴⁶ Trulear’s perspective on African American sermon movement coincides with Paul Wilson’s understanding that the sermon should move “*from trouble to grace . . . from the exodus to the promised land, from the crucifixion to the resurrection and glory.*”⁴⁷ One does not have to agree with the idea that all African American sermons move from crucifixion to resurrection in order to embrace the observation that both lament (crucifixion) and celebration (resurrection) are present within the preaching discourse of many African Americans. In one sense, lament and celebration may be viewed as a grammar of the Spirit underlying preaching.

If sermons do move from lament to celebration, this homiletical movement of the Spirit echoes the lament psalms. As indicated earlier, lament psalms generally move from plea or cry to praise or celebration because of hope in God for present and future deliverance and intervention. The linking of lament to celebration and viewing it as a sermon movement,

⁴⁴ Crawford, 69-70.

⁴⁵ Teresa Fry Brown, *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God’s Word* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 16. For more about the preaching ministry of black women in the 19th and early 20th century see Chanta M. Haywood, *Prophesying Daughters: Black Women Preachers and the Word, 1823-1913* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003).

⁴⁶ Harold Dean Trulear, “The Sacramentality of Preaching,” in *Primary Sources of Liturgical Theology: A Reader*, ed. Dwight W. Vogel (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2000), 266-272.

⁴⁷ See Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 98.

parallels law/gospel, trouble/grace, antithesis/thesis, exposing/envisioning sermon patterns propagated by others.⁴⁸ Also, uniting lament and celebration is similar to the stereoscopic apocalyptic homiletic espoused by my colleague James Kay who suggests that from the vantage point of the cross, preachers should proclaim the gospel through a “bifocal” lens of Paul’s “old creation” (reason for lament) and Paul’s “new creation” (reason for celebration).⁴⁹

Moreover, the juxtaposition and unity of lament and celebration in preaching may be called doxology because as a unified tensive pairing these linguistic traces of the Spirit in preaching represent the full glorification of God during times of joy and sorrow. If expressing lament and celebration, preachers are at “full stretch” as *homo adorans* before God, capturing the breadth of worship stances before God. “Full stretch” is an idea liturgical theologian Don Saliers propagates when speaking about humanity coming before God in times of joy and sorrow, in the entire scope of human pathos. He writes, “Christian liturgy without the full range of the Psalms becomes anorexic—starving for honest emotional range.”⁵⁰ Speaking in the Spirit requires a full range of expression that will keep our preaching honest. Gordon Lathrop believes that the juxtaposition of lament and celebration, or what he calls beseeching and praise, along with other biblical juxtapositions, compose the heart of the liturgical *ordo*, grammar or pattern of Christian liturgy. Thus, what is presented here about preaching is also present in liturgies.⁵¹

This is to say that doxology implies neither the negation of lament or celebration but the unified balanced linking of the two. As noted earlier, preaching is not limited to celebration nor “spoiled by tears.”⁵² Weeping and rejoicing unto God are both acts of worship in the Spirit. Lament cannot be omitted from the homiletical toolbox nor can celebration. If either language of the Spirit is missing, then a sermon performance loses its Christological grounding by neglecting either the crucifixion (lament) or resurrection (celebration). The challenge is to maintain a balanced relationship between these two expressions of the Spirit because the “‘yes’ of the gospel does not instantly make the ‘no’ of human doubt and struggle disappear.”⁵³ Without lament or celebration in a sermon, the sermon loses its doxological nature because doxology, as defined here, is the juxtaposition and unity of lament and celebration. The two exist in tension and doxology is a third identity that is produced because of their union; it is what they are together, an act of fulsome praise, that puts life into perspective before God. Doxology entails both languages of the Spirit thus *lament is a way the Spirit moves us toward robust doxology*. Said another way, the juxtaposition and unity of lament and celebration as doxology functions as a sermonic metaphor in that “the tension or energy generated between the poles” of lament and

⁴⁸ For an overview of law/gospel perspectives and its contemporary manifestation in the trouble/grace homiletical school, see Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 73-100. For antithesis and thesis as part of a sermon method, see Proctor, *The Certain Sound of a Trumpet*, 28, 53-92. For the ethical impulse of exposing and envisioning as sermon movements, see Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers*, 105-127.

⁴⁹ James F. Kay, “The Word of the Cross at the Turn of the Ages,” *Interpretation* 53, no. 1 (1999): 51. Kay also notes that this lens of “old age” and “new age” is “perceived not simply sequentially and not simply spatially, but both at once, as if looking through two lenses *simultaneously*.”

⁵⁰ Saliers, *Worship as Theology: A Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 120-121.

⁵¹ For Lathrop’s enlightening liturgical perspective, see his *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

⁵² Old, 17-21.

⁵³ Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 157. In a similar vein, Paul Wilson notes, “Grace does not cancel the reality of human sin and the need for change. Easter does not obliterate Good Friday, although it puts it in a different perspective. Both are true—they exist in a tension, the final outcome of which has been determined.” See Wilson, *Four Pages of a Sermon*, 22.

celebration “produces a third identity (or spark)” which in this case is doxology.⁵⁴ This is a tense relationship that does not diminish or erase any one of the variables or poles, but maintains the integrity and identity of each. Doxology through the Spirit upholds the truthfulness about the grace and power of God while preserving the truthfulness about human reality. To disregard the reality of human existence in its full breadth is to live a doxological lie or to be homiletically dishonest. As Sally Brown notes, “news of grace and resurrection rings hollow disconnected from daily realities of loss, dispossession, and yearning for justice. Testifying to the God of Easter requires the language of lament.”⁵⁵ Doxology, as I have defined it, is nonoptional for preaching and life, therefore lament is essential, especially if one is serious about engaging the suffering world.⁵⁶

Lament and Suffering’s Tears

I have shown thus far that lament is an expression of the Spirit that connects us to the groans of the Spirit and all of creation, scripture, and Christ, while moving us towards doxology in preaching as a partner of celebration. As we consider the mission of the Church and the role of preaching in it, it is important to also realize that *through the Spirit, lament in preaching can act as an impetus to social justice ministry which serves a suffering world*. With the proliferation of the so-called prosperity gospel churches where there is great stress on personal health, wealth, and blessings from God, this language of lament is extremely important as it has the potential of moving us out from our narcissistic selves. Nicholas Wolterstorff notes that “Liturgy and justice are joined by cords twined out of suffering’s tears.”⁵⁷ Liturgy, one aspect of which is preaching, has to do with the meeting of human and divine suffering. Justice has to do with aiding those who are suffering. Lament is the voice of the suffering; thus sermonic lament is a bridge from the liturgy to the liturgy after the liturgy, that is, ethical living in the world. Lament declares life is not right. It reveals dissatisfaction with the current order of social affairs. It does not sit in the pew of passivity but participates in resilient resistance that anticipates future change. It does not acquiesce to the status quo but can serve as an impetus to socio-political action. By giving voice to lament in our sermons, we enter solidarity with those who are suffering as we are called to suffer with those who suffer. If lament is not present in our preaching, then one is saying that life and society are fine as they are, despite the plethora of pain. But if it is present and practiced in preaching, one is saying that things must change not only in my life but in the world. If we create socio-theological worlds through our liturgies, including preaching, the use of lament will give us a vision of an unjust world and urge us to seek ways to act along with God on behalf of those in trouble. Through the lament of the Spirit, the present world order begins not only to be challenged, but to crumble in the face of doxological opposition. Our preaching is only authenticated by living out God’s justice in the world—all of life is a liturgy, all of life is a sermon. As Elsie McKee says about Reformed

⁵⁴ For this understanding of metaphor as it relates to preaching, see Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 92-93.

⁵⁵ Sally A. Brown, “When Lament Shapes the Sermon,” in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, eds. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 28-29. Her basic argument is that lament psalms can function as a hermeneutical lens to interpret present realities of grief, loss, and suffering. There are four ways lament can shape sermons: provide a hermeneutical “map”, provide lament rhetoric in the form of pastoral lament, critical-prophetic, theological-interrogatory.

⁵⁶ Sally Brown calls lament “nonoptional dialogue with God.” See Brown, “When Lament Shapes a Sermon,” 30.

⁵⁷ See Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Liturgy, Justice, and Tears,” *Worship* 62/5 (1988): 386-403.

worship, “In some instances, love of neighbor may be better evidence for the actual faithful worship of God than are liturgical or devotional practices.”⁵⁸ Sermonic lament can help move us in that direction of concrete loving action towards our neighbor.

There is much fruit to be born from the practice of lament as a manifestation of the Spirit in preaching. Not only does lament keep preaching pointing in a Godward direction but it leads the Church to embrace this God who is present in all circumstances of life and ministry. It gives depth to our preaching, liturgies, and lives before God and allows us to voice our tears, moans, and groans, so that they are no longer silent. We do not need to be afraid of lamenting because God can handle it; in fact, God desires it because God is welcomed and worshipped by it. Some have tried to kill it. Others have attempted to muzzle it. But lament is a love-song in the Spirit that will continue to live, if not in our sermons or congregations, then on the streets of groaning inner cities for what Justo and Catherine Gonzalez say is right: “The word of the gospel today, as in the times of Jesus, . . . comes to us most clearly in the painful groans of the oppressed. We must listen to those groans. We must join the struggle to the point where we too must groan. Or we may choose the other alternative, which is not to hear the gospel at all.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Elsie McKee, “Context, Contours, Contents: Towards a Description of the Classical Reformed Teaching on Worship,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 16/2 (1995): 182.

⁵⁹ See Justo and Catherine Gonzalez, *Liberation Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 65.