

“Crying out to God, the Lament as a Liturgical Form for confronting the Phenomenon of Vanishing and Extinguished Species” by Rev Roger S. Burkhart, former pastor in Deer Isle, Maine, and chair now of the Spirituality and Earth Stewardship Committee of the NH Conference

As pastors confronting loss and sorrow in the lives of our people, we have need of places to mourn, to lament, to name the injustices inflicted upon us, and to cry out for vindication. It comes to us most directly in loss of a family member. We want a wailing wall, a time in our sanctuaries to weep and mourn. And we have historic forms for this, but they are not well known or often used. There is the book of Lamentations and in the Psalms, there are sixteen individual and seven corporate Psalms of Lament. Out of 150 songs and prayers in this ancient prayer book-hymnal, twenty three of them or almost one sixth is Psalms of Lament. One sixth of our prayer time might well be spent in lament. What would it mean if we recovered this ancient prayer and liturgical form?

We certainly do enough complaining to one another! ...about the weather, about city hall, about corporate malfeasance, about in-laws, about bureaucracies. You name it. But the complaining is not the same as lament. The lament is addressed to God. Complaints are addressed most often really to no one. We just want someone to overhear. There is a certain satisfaction in getting it out, even if it goes nowhere. But the lament moves from complaint or the naming of our tribulation or pain, to appeal to and then trust in God to deliver us. It lays the burden down, and lets it rest there, as a plaintiff leaving one's case before impartial judge and jury.

The lament is a six stage process. First is the address to God, speaking a word or words that bring us into the presence of the Holy One. Each of us varies the language here, given our traditions and life experience. Secondly, the complaint is given, the injury, the loss, wound or injustice is named. Three is confession of trust, that God, being God, is ready to hear our complaint. Four is petition. What do we want God to do about it? Five is assurance, expressing confidence that God hears our prayer. And six is praise: the offering of thanksgiving for what God will do.

I think of the mother with a wayward son, who often met him at the door with reprimands and disapproval in her voice and manner. Then one night in her prayers, she realized that such an approach indicated she had not truly prayed for her son, and believed God's promise to answer her prayers. So she again made her petition to God, acknowledging her own faults, as she then moved on to thanksgiving that God would bring her son to sanity and salvation. The son noticed the change in his mother, and though change in his behavior did not follow immediately, it was something, as he said later; he could not but be moved by and eventually act positively upon.

Walter Bruggeman, Hebrew Bible scholar, has much to say about the loss of the lament form in our prayers and liturgical practices. When our prayers are only that of praise and adoration or even petition and thanksgiving, it means that the second party to the covenant (us) has become voiceless. We are not laying before God the full extent of our need. If we compare it to the political process, it is like a president or employer who will not allow criticism, who surround themselves only with yes men and women. Or it is

like an infant whose gestures of need are rarely responded to by the parents. How can the child develop any ego strength if his or her wants are not considered/

Now certainly as we approach to stark facts of vanishing and extinguished species, lament and expressions of sorrow and grief are not the only actions that will make a difference. Extolling of the beauty and wonder of the created order, of the exquisite complexity and variety of fauna and flora, and awe at the immensity of the cosmic order is the flip side. It is our love of specific plants and animals that will lead to the care and husbanding of them. But when there is loss the extent of our grief is in some measure an indication of the quality of that love. What did God hear among the Hebrew slaves in Egypt that led to the calling of Moses? It was their crying. And what was heard among American slaves that led to the civil rights movement. It was again weeping. It was weeping combined with courage and ego strength before God. This permits acts of hope, expectant imperatives, and an insistence that things be changed before it is too late.

Here then is a lament for vanishing and extinguished species which may be said both personally and communally, and which may be added to or amended until we feel we have entered the fuller dimensions of this diminishment in our lives and world.

Holy One, eternal and present companion, who dwells in light unapproachable, who abides with those of contrite and humble hearts, whose goodness and mercy endure forever, whose creation has undergone great devastation: hear now our cry.

How lonely are our meadows and forest glades, our ponds and river estuaries, our ocean expanses, wave enfolded sea shores and marsh inlets..., for we no longer hear the sound of the Red Sea Swallow, the Bourbon Crested Starling, the Bachman's Warbler, the Tawny-headed Mountain Finch, the Heath Hen, the Italian Grey Partridge, the Carrier Pigeon, the Westerman' Eclectus Parrot, the Virgin Island Screech Owl, the Javan Buff-rumped Woodpecker, the Dusky Seaside Sparrow and a myriad other bird species up to one third heard just a century ago. It is like an orchestra without the woodwinds or one half of the violins or like a painters canvass without the colors burnt sienna, scarlet and cadmium yellow.

How like a widow or orphan our gardens and soil have become, no one married to the land, absentee landlord and owners, corporate entities filling the soil with herbicides, pesticides, GMO and commercial fertilizers, robbing and pillaging the multitude of organisms: earthworms, and ants, bacteria and slime molds, toadstools and ameba that inhabit and give it life. She that was a fruitful wife and mother has become a computerized automaton, fed in numbers and giving out numbers, devoid of soul, a slave, a vassal, a purchased chattel who can no longer protect her own, no longer regenerate because her life is sucked out of her.

The land mourns. The breezes become strong winds that wail and bring devastation. Ice storms become more frequent and crush mighty trees, their vulnerable

limbs shattered and at risk of disease. As warmer weather moves north faster than animals and trees can adapt they succumb to new pests and predators. The mighty grey-green Spruce tree is turned brown by the budworm; the Hemlock and the Oaks by outbreaks of caterpillars. But most harmful is the chainsaw and a caterpillar of human invention, the tractor, reducing our forest and jungle, the lungs of the planet, by millions of acres a year. Our breath comes not as easily and for some not at all. There is asphyxiation.

What was once a wilderness has become great expanses of desert and gone are the Toolache Wallaby and the Desert Rat-Kangaroo, the Balearic Shrew, the Puerto Rican Flower Bat, the Red Gazelle, the Bluebuck, the Sea Mink, the Bali Tiger, the Mexican Grizzly Bear, and the Syrian Wild Ass. And almost extinct is the African Elephant, the Right Whale, the Hybrid Spider Monkey, the Gorilla, the Red Wolf, the Florida Cougar, the Giant Panda and the Black Rhinoceros. These and thousands of others, rodents, mammals, reptiles and fish.

And this does not begin to describe the loss of plants yet unmentioned which color our dooryards, provide habitat for the animals and insects, serve as both food and medicine for our hunger and ailments, absorb CO₂ along with the trees and ocean expanses, and serve as template of the spiritual in their infinite variety and complexity.

How do we begin to fathom this great extinction and its yet ill considered consequence? When will our artists and seers help us finally to see and to hear and to understand?

And where are you in this, O Lord? Would that you would see, and enable us to see. Yes, you are in this degraded land. You are in these compromised and exploited animals. It is your face that is disappearing in the extinction of species. You are suffering in the poisoning of the water and air. Have we looked and seen? Is there any sorrow to compare with the sorrow of the degraded land, loss of wilderness and its consequent misery of the poor of the earth?

Forgive us, O God, forgive us..., that we do not regard your creation with reverence and recognize the integrity of each life form. You speak in pestilence, in windstorm, flood and fire. And if we cannot read the signs of the times in these, then you speak in prophetic voices of scientists and naturalists, poets and musicians, preachers and housewives.

So speak, O God, and most of all in the still small voice of conscience, of our essential oneness and connection with all life, our radiant potential of spiritual and physical wholeness, created in your image.

Praise be to you, Great Spirit, Redeeming and Cosmic Christ, Eternal and Holy One, Supreme Attractor to Intersubjective Communion..., who brings life from death, joy from mourning, the dance of hope and bliss with the struggles of justice making and peace. You will move us and are moving us from a predatory mind to an ecological

consciousness. We will see that if that honey bee and the frog and the prairie grasses do not thrive neither will we. We will countenance the songbirds with a new ear, the encroaching desert with a new eye, and the produce of the land with a new palette. We will align our actions with the welfare not of quarterly reports but up to the seventh generation. We will know that our individual salvation is integral to the shalom of all things.

Yes, the wilderness can blossom again like the rose, the threatened species returned to viability, the water and air purified, the conservers and fighters for sustainability and help for threatened life forms be given hero status. We will take from forest and ocean, from river and land in respect and reverence, giving back even as we take, and again celebrating in community. Praise be to you, O Holy One.