Voices from the Ragged Edge

How the Psalms can help us process pain

Tragic as this massive suffering is, the tragedy is compounded by the church's paralysis. As a people called by God to respond in compassion to the pain of others, we find, if we are honest, that we lack the energy for this mission. We are too spent just coping with the ordinary crises of life to give much of ourselves to others. So we pull back self-protectively into a defensive posture, avoiding even eye contact with the street person, unable to bear such exposure to the world's wounds.

I believe that the roots of our paralysis lie in the church's own pain that has never been adequately processed. We find ourselves, like the psalmist in Psalm 30, remembering the comfort and safety of a past which we no longer have access to:

When I felt secure, I said, "I will never be shaken." O Yahweh, when you favored me, you made my mountain stand firm. (v. 6-7a)

But this memory of God's favor is pervaded by a profound sense of loss. The psalmist tells of the withdrawal of God's presence and our disorienting fall from the heights into the abyss. "But when you hid your face, I was dismayed" (v. 7b).

Like the psalmist, many in the church have experienced the absence of God and are consumed by a sense of betrayal, having neither hope for the future nor energy for mission. Although some of this pain is undoubtedly caused by family or personal crises, much of it is the result of the accumulated frustrations of a life which does not seem to work out as it's supposed to.

Our typical response to this pain is to repress it. Like the writer of Psalm 39, our first impulse is to silence. Voicing our pain honestly in public, and especially to God, would certainly be inappropriate. This psalmist decides to keep quiet about his suffering and "muzzle" his mouth since "the wicked" are around (v. 1). He says, in effect, "My pastor always told me that a truly spiritual person should speak only nice, edifying words." Presumably he does not want to display a lack of trust in the presence of unbelievers.

But when I was silent and still, not even saying anything good, my anguish increased. My heart grew hot within me and as I meditated, the fire burned. (39:2-3)

Like many in the church, this writer bottles up his pain until it grows into a raging fire within and he is ready to explode.

"Then, I spoke" (v. 3). But it doesn't come out all at once. Perhaps he's not sure what God can handle. So he tests the waters, musing in a general way about human mortality and asking a safe, disinterested question about how long he has to live (vv. 4-6). God doesn't strike him down. So he gets bolder. From safe musings and disinterested inquiry, he moves to an honest admission of need. "Now, Lord, what do I look for?" Not "How long am I going to live?" What do I really hope for? "I hope for you!" (v.7) And he pleads for deliverance ("save me").

Why couldn't the psalmist have started with this? What held him back?
In his new-found honesty, he tells God, "I was silent; I would not open my mouth, for you are the one who has done this" (v. 9). The problem is that his pain came from God; he perceived his suffering as God's fault and was understandably slow to voice this. But whereas Psalm 30 faults God for abandonment, Psalm 39 goes considerably further. "Remove your whip from me; I am overcome by the blow of your hand" (v. 10). The psalmist accuses God of violence against him and pleads for an end to the pain because he can't take it any more.

Now, it certainly isn't "theologically correct" to accuse God of doing evil, as this psalmist has done. This is a statement made in extremity, out of desperation. But it is not unique in the psalter. There are many psalms of lament which make similar statements. From Psalm 22, which Jesus prayed on the cross ("My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"); to Psalm 88, which of all the psalms seems most bereft of hope ("I have suffered your terrors and am in despair"); we are bombarded with voices from the ragged edges of life that articulate pain honestly to God. These abrasive prayers all complain about suffering as intolerable and implore God for deliverance. Indeed, many lament psalms, along with portions of Jeremiah and Job, are prayers in which life is experienced as so raw and so fickle, where the pain and suffering are so massive, that the supplicant ultimately experiences God as fickle and dares to voice this in prayer.

I submit that the church can learn from the honesty of the psalmists. For when the pain and disorientation are that great, we have only three options: 1) We can bottle it up inside, nursing it until we self-destruct and the pain explodes into violence and abuse against those around us, especially our spouse and our children. I believe that a great deal of abuse is rooted in accumulated suffering which, instead of being articulated, is kept within and has nowhere to go. And when we have nowhere to direct our pain except at those around us, we can't even perceive, much less begin to respond to, the suffering we inflict. 2) Or, we can piously deny the pain and maintain the theologically correct status quo. We can sing glib hymns of praise in church and say, "God is good," though we don't, in our bones, believe a word of it. And then we become numb to our pain, and numb to God. And we certainly become numb to the pain of others. 3) Or, following the lead of the psalmists, we can take our anger, our doubt, all the dismay and the terror of life and put it at the feet of the Most High. We can bring our pain to the throne of God and say, "You're supposed to be faithful, but I don't see it! You're supposed to be good, but I don't experience it."

Contrary to appearances, that desperate voicing of pain to God is redemptive. Prayers of lament are radical acts of faith and hope, because they refuse, even in the midst of suffering, to give up on God. The fact is that silence will not get us through the pain. Only speech addressed to God gets us through. Speech which summons God into our suffering, which says to God, as the writer of Psalm 30 did, "Hear, O Yahweh, and be merciful to me; O Yahweh, be my help" (v. 10). Or, even as the writer of Psalm 39 did in his impropriety, "Look away from me, that I may rejoice again" (v. 13). It doesn't have to be theologically correct speech. But it has to be gut-honest speech.

When we have the audacity to lay our pain at God's feet, to summon the Most High into our suffering, something remarkable happens. God comes. Lament psalms have their roots, ultimately, in the exodus, the central and founding event of the Old Testament, when Yahweh delivered the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. Central to the story as it is told in the Bible is the Israelites' primal scream of pain to God. Between centuries of accumulated suffering and God's decisive intervention, we find this remarkable statement:

The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them. (Exodus 2:23-25)

This agonized cry of pain at the heart of the exodus echoes resoundingly throughout the psalms of lament.

Lament is redemptive, therefore, not simply because the supplicant clings to God in desperate faith, but more fundamentally because lament is rooted in the very pattern of the biblical story, at the hinge between bondage and deliverance. This is true both in the Old Testament and in the New. For as the Gospels tell it, three days after Jesus' own lament—his cry of abandonment on the cross—God acted decisively, defeating the power of death and raising him from the grave.

But more than this, the cross itself was God's response to the lament of all creation. For creation itself, says Paul, is groaning in its bondage to decay, subject to futility, and yearning eagerly for redemption (Romans 8). And we ourselves groan inwardly, says the apostle. I submit that our articulation of these groanings into prayer, even ragged prayers on the boundary of propriety, has the potential to unleash the power of the resurrection in the church, contributing to a renewal of hope and compassionate outreach in our day.

Silence about pain in the church conveys the message that God simply doesn't care about suffering. Too many parishioners think they have to suppress their pain in order to sing glib hymns of praise and thanksgiving, when they really need is closer to a primal scream of rage. And hurting visitors are effectively excluded from participation in worship by invocations which call the congregation to put aside their problems to come and worship God. But if the church took seriously the psalms of lament as model modes of speech in its communal life and processed the pain of its members in public worship, it would convey the quite radical message that our suffering matters to God. Indeed, it matters so much that he bore it in his own body.

And if our suffering matters to God, then we might begin to believe—and feel—that the suffering of others matters too. Voicing our pain to God might then be redemptive not only for ourselves, but ultimately for the world. As that which unleashes the power of the resurrection, lament has the potential to generate genuine thanksgiving for the grace of God, thus energizing the church in its vocation in a suffering world.