

GRIEVING WITH GRACE

SHERARD EDINGTON

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-14, 3:16-19

One year ago, on October 29, 2018, Lion Air flight 610 took off from the airport in Jakarta, Indonesia. Only a few minutes into the flight, the crew radioed for permission to return to the airport. A few minutes after that, thirteen minutes after takeoff, the plane crashed into the Java Sea killing everyone aboard—189 people. This aircraft was brand new and had only been in operation three months.

Five months later, on March 10, 2019, Ethiopian Airlines flight 302 took off from the airport in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It crashed six minutes after takeoff killing all 157 people on board. That aircraft had been put into service just four months earlier.

Both of these aircraft were the 737 Max 8 manufactured by the Boeing Company in Seattle, Washington. The Max 8 is the latest generation of Boeing's 737 family. As a result of these two crashes—which killed 346 people—all 737 Max 8 planes have been grounded.

What exactly caused these planes to crash is still largely unknown. The U.S. government, through its National Transportation Safety Board, is leading an investigation into these accidents. I imagine they eventually will conclude that a combination of factors were at play to cause these incidents.

But that is not what I want to address today. On Tuesday of this week, several executives from Boeing, including the CEO, were called to testify in Washington, DC, before the U.S. Senate's Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee. The purpose of this hearing was to discuss the 737 Max 8—its development and future. During the hearing, in the committee chamber, sitting directly behind the CEO, were over a dozen family members of those who had died in the two crashes. These people sat quietly, holding poster-sized photos of their loved ones—the ones who had died in these crashes.

Why were these people there? Attending a congressional hearing certainly wasn't going to bring their loved ones back. I believe they were there to put a face on the statistics, to remind the people from Boeing, as well as the senators, that real people had died—beautiful, living people with families and friends and jobs and communities. They wanted to emphasize to Boeing and the government that actions have consequences. Those family members didn't travel to Washington to disrupt the hearings. They simply wanted their presence to be felt. They wanted to give a voice to their loved ones.

There are different words to describe what these people were doing that day. You might call it protesting or demonstrating, striking, dissenting, rallying, picketing. But I want to apply a biblical word to describe their actions. I would like to say that they came to Washington as an act of lament.

In biblical language, to lament is to express deep regret, grief, or sorrow. Lament can be communicated through words or actions. A lament is not simply lashing out blindly in anguish or anger like a toddler throwing a tantrum. A lament is focused. A lament is directed at God.

Those families of the air crash victims were not lamenting to God (although some probably were). Instead, they were directing their grief at another higher power. In this case, it was the U.S. government. In taking their lament to the government, they were saying, “We recognize your ability to right an injustice, to prevent this from happening again.” A lament to God says essentially the same thing. A lament is where people (or nations) pour out their grief to God confident that God will hear them.

Our holy scripture is full of occasions when people come to God in lament. For example, in the psalms we read, *Out of the depths I cry to you, Oh Lord; Lord hear my voice* (Psalm 130). There is an entire book in the Old Testament named Lamentations written in response to the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus, on the night before his crucifixion, prayed to God in what can only be described as a lament: *Abba, Father... all things are possible for you. Take this cup from me* (Mark 14:36).

Today, I am reading from the book of Habakkuk. This book can be found among the Minor Prophets at the back of the Old Testament. Habakkuk is brief—only three chapters long. It consists of a series of conversations between the prophet and God.

The book begins with a lament, *O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?*

We don't know the specifics of what Habakkuk is lamenting to God. We do know that he is deeply concerned with the presence of the Chaldean army marching toward Judah—his land. Because of this, his people live in fear. They fear that war is just around the corner. It probably is. It is for this reason that Habakkuk makes this lament says to God,

*How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?
Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save?
Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?
Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. (NIV)*

In times like these, as Habakkuk cries, the norms of our society disintegrate; the law becomes *slack* and justice never prevails. They call upon God to restore order.

God confirms that yes, the Chaldeans are at their doorstep. And their army is fierce and terrible. They will bring destruction. The people should be afraid.

Habakkuk then appeals to God arguing that his people have tried to remain righteous. Habakkuk demands to know, Where is God's mercy?

In chapter 2, Habakkuk uses the language of a soldier standing guard. He says that he will remain at his post waiting until God replies. God says to Habakkuk, "I will give you an answer. I will give you a message. And I want you to write this out on a tablet in large letters so that it is clear to all."

God does answer Habakkuk, but God answers in God's own time. We approach God in grief—we want action now—but there is a powerful likelihood that we may have to wait. God works in God's time, not ours.

As I said earlier, a lament is different than a simple cry of anguish. A lament is directed towards God. A lament is recognition of God's presence and power in our lives, of God's ability to make consequential change. The families of those air crash victims went to Congress because of their hope and belief that Congress might enact meaningful change so that this accident would not happen to anyone else. The faithful call upon God in their grief precisely because they are faithful. It is possible to be angry at God and still lean on God for change.

This week I asked you to share with me the questions that you bring to God in those times that push you to the edge—times of loss and pain and fear. I received a number of thoughtful responses. One of you said that their question of lament is, "Will you please not leave me?" For another, the question is, "Why me?" Another said that their lament is not a question but a request for strength to endure the loss and pain. This person gets to the heart of lamenting saying, "If I didn't think God had a Big Plan, and that everything was somehow part of that plan, then I'd really be lost." Another says that their question of lament is, "What do you want from me?" This person asks this having survived great trials and understands now that God is always present.

Some of you might not feel comfortable lamenting to God. You may say that it is wrong to challenge or question God. But we can bring our laments precisely because we have a relationship with God.

On this Sunday of All Saints, we remember all those in our lives who have gone before—that great cloud of witnesses who lead us, guide us, and encourage us in our lives and our faith. Today, we remember especially those who have died this year—those we knew, those we loved. With them our grief is fresh, our laments are loud.

Because of them, we cry out, “How long, O God? My soul is struck with pain; I am languishing.” Or as we read in Habakkuk: *Rottiness enters into my bones, and my steps tremble beneath me.* God will reply and God will answer us, but in God’s time. We may have to wait.

We all seek God as we seek security. We call on God to watch over us and protect us. But then, there comes some unexpected event that shakes our world and throws our faith into disarray. It is times like that that we appeal to God in lament—when we are lost, when we are angry, when we are afraid. It is through our grief and lament that we can reorient and rebuild our relationship with God. The result is that our relationship becomes stronger.

The book of Habakkuk concludes with a prayer. In this prayer, the prophet doesn’t promise that all will sunshine and candy. No. Life will continue to be marked with challenging moments and trying circumstances—events that test our being. Yet Habakkuk proclaims that his faith will always remain strong.

*Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold
and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.
God, the Lord, is my strength.*