

# Lament: Women Bearing the Weight

BY JOYCE MACKICHAN WALKER

For use with Lesson Three of the 2020–2021 PW/*Horizons* Bible study, *Into the Light: Finding Hope Through Prayers of Lament* by P. Lynn Miller



## Scripture: Jeremiah 9:17–21

Beginning in June of this year, in the United States, our cities’ streets have been packed with protesters, many of whom are young people. Young black men have held megaphones and led chants. Young black women have waved signs held high: “Black Lives Matter,” “Black Trans Lives Matter.” Determined, tired protesters have marched down crowded streets, chanting “No justice, no peace.” White allies have walked and chanted alongside and amongst them. We’re all in this together. We see you. We hear you. We stand with you. We say the names of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and those of other Black people killed by the pandemic of racism. June 2020 in the United States of America was one gigantic, society-rocking wail of community lament.

Where were the mothers? Some joined the protests, some stayed home, some continued to work; all were waiting to know their children were home safe. The experiences of some mothers were qualitatively different. For the mothers of black children, this was one more day of bearing in their bodies the emotional and physical burden of the trauma of being a parent of a black youth. Or as writer and activist A. Rochaun Meadows-Fernandez reflects, “As Black mothers, we are living in an especially troublesome time—sandwiched between the current public health threat of COVID-19 and the longtime reality of police brutality. We are trapped in a double-bind of racism.”

A. Rochaun describes the stress a racist society pushes on mothers of black children, citing a study published in early 2020 that suggests children’s exposure to discrimination can harm their mothers’ health. “[M]others of children reporting moderate or high levels of

acute discrimination were up to 22 percent more likely to face a decline in their health between age 40 and 50 than mothers whose children did not. . . . [R]acism and racial inequality have substantial consequences on the health of Black women and mothers—with the clearest manifestation being the ‘never-ending hyper-vigilance’ that we need to survive in a society that was founded on our subjugation.”<sup>2</sup>

Add to this daily fear the increased risk of a pandemic in which “Black Americans are dying of COVID-19 at a rate nearly three times higher than white people,”<sup>3</sup> and you have an agonizing new time for a modern-day Jeremiah,

Women, hear the LORD’s word.  
 Listen closely to the word  
 from [the LORD’s] mouth:  
     teach your daughters to mourn;  
     teach each other to grieve.  
 Death has climbed through our windows;  
 it has entered our fortresses  
 to eliminate children from the streets,  
 the youth from the squares.

—Jeremiah 9:20–21, CEB

Take some time to pause and get in touch with your feelings about the injustices and public responses in the past few months. For each of the prompts, consider how your race, the color of your skin, gender and your other social identities contribute to what you experienced and how you have been processing.

I saw \_\_\_\_\_.

I said \_\_\_\_\_.

I wanted to say \_\_\_\_\_.

Two things I especially lament about this time are \_\_\_\_\_.

Something I think might be unique to a woman's lament in this time: \_\_\_\_\_.

This is how I grieved: \_\_\_\_\_.

This is how I taught my daughter, or my children, to grieve: \_\_\_\_\_.

In my memory of this time, I despair for \_\_\_\_\_.

In the present, I despair for \_\_\_\_\_.

Lesson Three of our study shows us that, "In scripture and tradition women have carried much of the burden of lament for society" (29). This year is giving us plenty to lament, and women's faces have borne much of that story to us—nurses on the front lines holding the hands of the dying; single mothers juggling care of the home, supervising virtual schooling for their children, and working from home; essential workers in low-paying jobs facing the risks of hours at a checkout counter; women laid off in numbers far greater than men<sup>4</sup>; and Black women experiencing even deeper job losses.<sup>5</sup>

So much grief and loss to lament; so little time for life, much less lament!

God calls us all to the work of caring for one another. While bearing the burden of deep lament, we move toward hope by trusting God to use our growing empathy and willingness to dismantle white supremacy to contribute to a more just future. Here are some starting places:

- The PC(USA) offers some beginning steps in educating ourselves in "Dismantling structural racism,"<sup>6</sup> which contains a 21-Day Racial Justice Challenge.

- "Talking Race with Youth: Ferguson, Eric Garner, and #blacklivesmatter"<sup>7</sup> provides guidance for conversations with youth in groups and families.
- Children's books are wonderful conversation starters,<sup>8</sup> beginning at a very young age.
- And "Talking with our children about race,"<sup>9</sup> a blog post, offers a wealth of strategies for beginning these important conversations.

The journey is hard, but God has called women to this work from the beginning of time. The lament is real, but so is the hope. After God led the Israelites through the sea, it was Moses' sister Miriam who led the women in a victory song and dance (Ex. 15:20). We are not yet ready to celebrate the victory, but song can join our lament and our deep longing for justice with God's promise of a new heaven and a new earth. "We Shall Overcome" has long both sustained and inspired the Black community, and it is surely fitting for such a time as this. Allow the beautiful rendition by the Aeolians Alumni 2020 choir from Oakwood University, Huntsville, Alabama,<sup>10</sup> to accompany our steps.

In what ways are you as a woman in 2020 carrying the burden of lament for society?

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What small steps might you take to empower your lament with hope for this new generation?

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**Notes**

1. A. Rochaun Meadows-Fernandez, "The Unbearable Grief of Black Mothers," *Vox*, May 28, 2020, 2–3; [www.vox.com/first-person/2020/5/28/21272380/black-mothers-grief-sadness-covid-19](http://www.vox.com/first-person/2020/5/28/21272380/black-mothers-grief-sadness-covid-19).
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. Danielle Chemtob and Gavin Off, "A Huge Burden: Women in Charlotte Disproportionately Hit by COVID-19 Job Loss," *Charlotte Observer*, May 30, 2020; <https://news.yahoo.com/huge-burden-women-charlotte-disproportionately-100000525.html>.
5. Marguerite Ward and Tyler Sonnemaker, "All the Visceral Ways Black Women in America

- Have Been Hurt by the Coronavirus Unemployment Crisis," *Business Insider*, June 1, 2020; <https://news.yahoo.com/visceral-ways-black-women-america-172500619.html>.
6. "Dismantling Structural Racism," Presbyterian Mission Agency, PC(USA); <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/matthew-25/racism/>; accessed August 31, 2020.
  7. Princeton Theological Seminary, "Talking Race with Youth," *Engage*; <http://iyim.ptsem.edu/resources/engage/talking-race-with-youth/>; accessed August 31, 2020.
  8. Autumn Allen, Krista Aronson, Megan Dowd Lambert, "20 Picture Books: Readings to Embrace Race, Provide Solace and Do Good," *EmbraceRace.org*; [www.embracerace.org/](http://www.embracerace.org/)

- [resources/26-childrens-books-to-support-conversations-on-race-racism-resistance?fbclid=IwAR2qRGkLLSpDPS5A6mWGddJ2na60atmp7fsodc1v0f49G2Yg7FO2aRjGI9U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBtmPiCgToI&fbclid=IwAR0bSuKYaj7O4-wdnQri84nxotra4BU7zhRLcPaRREgVl6JegG3tdIoqk); accessed August 31, 2020.
9. Wendy Claire Barrie, "John Lewis Walks with Our Children," *Faith at Home* (blog), July 30, 2020; <https://wendyclairebarrie.com/?fbclid=IwAR1B2UTiE5WbtXWfYfvbfj-VBekF-gHUUieP13SuguNCZWDRRA-i8sNnEQ>.
  10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBtmPiCgToI&fbclid=IwAR0bSuKYaj7O4-wdnQri84nxotra4BU7zhRLcPaRREgVl6JegG3tdIoqk>.

# Lament: Death Cries Out for Lament

BY JOYCE MACKICHAN WALKER

For use with Lesson Four of the 2020–2021 PW/*Horizons* Bible study, *Into the Light: Finding Hope Through Prayers of Lament* by P. Lynn Miller



**Scripture: John 11:28–37**

Death is all around us. Yes, COVID-19 time burned into our mind images of many sensational, news-worthy deaths: a nurse holding a woman’s hand, delivering messages of love from her children and grandchildren who were not allowed to visit; a bus driver dying of COVID-19 after being coughed on by an unmasked passenger; a Wuhan doctor dying from the virus after his warnings about COVID-19 were ignored; family members visiting at the window of their dying grandmother’s room in a nursing home; nurses and doctors whose deaths came after serving on the front lines with inadequate safety equipment. All poignant and tragic.

But I suspect we all know someone personally who has died. Among others, I knew Freda Gardner, PC(USA) Woman of Faith Awardee in 1994, a member of my congregation and mentor, former moderator of the 211th General Assembly (1999), and, as a pastor friend referred to her, “the grandmother of Christian education.”

Who did you know? Say their names.

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In *Into the Light*, Lynn Miller writes, “It is possible to mourn without lamenting. Mourners don’t ask for God to act and change the situation. Lamenters do” (39). COVID-19 deaths have captured our focus for months. Cries of mourning that expressed grief and loss have risen like incense every day, from every corner of the world and from every crevice of our anguished and aching hearts. Laments have risen that

included pleas to God to act through those who worked on vaccines; those who showed compassion; those who worked long, tense shifts, even at the risk of their own health and safety; those who had the power to keep workers on, find protective equipment, feed the newly hungry and displaced, comfort the dying and bereaved. The list seems endless.

Mourning and lamenting death is not limited to extraordinary times and circumstances. While the world has been laser-focused on a pandemic, in our own private worlds and homes we have quietly observed and absorbed the “ordinary, everyday” deaths of elderly parents who lived long and healthy lives; sisters and brothers and children who died of heart conditions, malignant tumors, brain and respiratory diseases, diabetes, Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, accidents, suicides and murders. Our daily lives—beside the out-of-the-ordinary events of the world—carried on.

Death has kept coming, but in many cases, restrictions on travel or face-to-face visits have denied us the opportunity to say goodbyes and give our last expressions of love. Death has kept coming, unobserved in the usual public funeral or memorial service. Due to restrictions on gatherings, celebrations of life have been virtual or postponed, bereft of hugs and comforting arms around shoulders, and large family meals of remembrance and embodied prayers. It may have felt as if our sorrow and suffering and grief, so beautifully accompanied by our faith communities in other times, was unobserved. How could it be that our loved ones were not upheld by the proclamation that this child of God was “. . . a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming, received into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the

glorious company of the saints in light"? It may have felt as if our grief, even our beloved's life, was passed over, lost in the great void of "social distance" and masked anonymity.

Whose deaths do you mourn from this time, unrelated to the pandemic, whose names are on your lips and whose memory remains in your heart? Say their names.

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What feelings surround your experiences of these more private losses and deaths at this time?

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Sometimes we are tempted to go too quickly to the familiar words of proclamation, the affirmation of resurrection and new life, without sitting in the silence and despair of grief. Those who mourn deeply are quick to resist bland platitudes and too-familiar promises. Mourning takes time. Ritual and community and surrounding relationships help. I wonder, might the absence of those have made us more aware of the depth of our love and loss? Might there be a sweetness in holding it close and having time to do our own recalling and reliving of the deep connections we have known?

Lament is our friend here. "Mourning and lamenting have sorrow, suffering and grief in common" (page 39). But lament takes another step. Lament gives us permission to ask something of God, to call on God to act. What in the world can God do for us in our grief?

And how in the world, when we are immersed in the shock and the loss, can we know what to ask of God for this lost relationship? "Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad" (Matt. 5:4, CEB). Lament cries out, not yet! I am not yet glad! Lament asks of God, give me time; give me patience; grow in me some sense of comfort; remind me of the trust I have known. Hear my longing; understand my anger; stand by me as I take my first steps without my loved one. Lament trusts that God hears, and God will act.

Wash me in your promises. Make me glad in you, and in your Son, Jesus the Christ.

Death has been swallowed up by a victory.  
Where is your victory, Death?  
Where is your sting, Death?

—1 Corinthians 15:54b-55, CEB

Laments I have offered to God in times of grief and loss:

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Promises I am eager to hear:

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Thank you, God, for \_\_\_\_\_.

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**Notes**

*\*Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2018), 793.

In 2019, Anna and Jerry Bedford generously established a \$100,000 endowment to support Presbyterian Women's Bible study and related resources. This department has been renamed in honor of Anna, who nurtured the PW/*Horizons* study for many years as editor, then served as a Bible study leader for many years, and whose generous gift will offer support materials for this year's Bible study and beyond!

Anna invites you to build the corpus of her endowment so that Bible study helps like this one will continue to enlighten and inspire. Learn more or give (<https://endowments.presbyterianfoundation.org/fund/10312000011>) or contact Kym Vaughn of the Presbyterian Foundation, 502/569-5005; [Kymerly.vaughn@presbyterianfoundation.org](mailto:Kymerly.vaughn@presbyterianfoundation.org).