

both sides now

Where is Our Hope?

by Nancy Raabe

“**t**o lament is to hope.” Our laments in these days are broad and deep. Where is our hope?

In fact, lament and hope reside together in our lives in Christ. Together they encompass the entire human experience of faith.

Open to any of the psalms of lament (even Psalm 88, for at the dark conclusion the psalmist is still speaking to God) and this truth springs from the page: “Save me, O God, for the waters have risen up to my neck,” Psalm 69 begins. “I am sinking in deep mire, and there is no foothold.” And then, after pouring out a litany of suffering: “As for me, I am afflicted and in pain; your help, O God, will lift me up on high. I will praise your name, O God, in song. ... For the Lord listens to the needy” (Psalm 69:1-2a, 29-30a, 33a; *ELW*).

There can be no lament without hope, nor hope without lament. When the heart is emptied of pride and only the chasm of loss remains, that is when we cry out: “Save me, O God!” Hope lives within that cry—the confidence that God hears and answers, the

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conviction that God’s promises of mercy and steadfast love are true, and the assurance that new life always emerges from death.

We see this truth playing out in our lives every day.

For months now in the congregation I serve I have been asked, “When can we go back to normal?” The answer continues to be “not for the foreseeable future.” This doesn’t mean forever. It just means that we can’t see ahead to that time when things will be the way they were. Crowding together as we enter the sanctuary, clustering to chat beforehand, lusty singing, heartfelt praying, coffee and fellowship: None of this is on the horizon. Even when we do “go back inside,” people must remain masked, mute, distanced, and coffee-less.

I have noticed two general responses. One is a life-draining heaviness of heart that increases as resistance to this reality grows and cries for a return to normalcy

become more anguished. The other is a life-giving lightness of spirit that emerges from the acknowledgment (lament) that life must be lived differently. Within this acknowledgment, previously unimagined possibilities for how we may worship God spring up (hope), and how, even in our separate spaces, we may be powerfully woven together as the body of Christ.

In our small-town church, who would have thought, for example, that every week we would be enjoying vibrant outdoor worship in our sprawling parking lot and on the surrounding grass, with a powerful and fully equipped PA system which even includes the wonder of an FM transmitter? The possibility for this always existed, but not until we were lamenting the loss of our indoor service did the idea for this new form of worship bubble up. (We do continue to offer a separate weekly online

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“sanctuary” service.) I have gotten to know people in new ways by visiting with them outside from their lawn chairs or with car windows rolled down. New patterns are emerging: This family parks here, that family gets out and sits by their cars there, and this other family always clambers to the top of the hill for a bird’s eye view.

A similar expression of hope born of lament came to life in a live Facebook hymn festival, “Beloved: A Celebration of Women in Ministry.” Organized by ALCM member Emily Bruflat and hosted by the Southwestern Minnesota Synod (ELCA) and First Lutheran Church of St. Peter, MN, it premiered on August 9, 2020, and can still be viewed on Facebook at shorturl.at/biAMN.

In person this would have been a noteworthy local event featuring a handful of local pastors and musicians, but the impossibility of the original concept gave birth to something much more galvanizing. Emily extended the invitation to dozens of women to submit videos recorded in their own contexts. This allowed viewers to get to know each of them in a much more intimate way and to enjoy the dazzling variety of styles and expressions.

“I have a list in my office of future hymn festival ideas that I add to from time to time,” Emily wrote to me not long ago, “and ‘Women in Ministry’ went on the list a couple years ago. When we received our pastoral intern last August, we identified 2020 as a good year to celebrate women in ministry, so I tentatively had it in the back of



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my mind that we would do a local hymn festival. Then, COVID-19 happened, and none of us were sure what church would look like the following Sunday, much less months down the road.”

As the pandemic progressed, Emily learned to use video editing software. “As I gained (mediocre) experience with that as a non-tech person, I thought it might be fun to reach out to Saint Peter pastors and a few others in the region to put on a virtual festival,” she continued. “When I invited a woman who works in our SWMN Synod office to participate, she told me she hadn’t heard of any churches doing this and thought I should try to reach more people.

“Fortunately, my time at Luther Seminary (2010-2012) introduced me to many future pastors and church leaders, many of whom are women working ‘in the field’ right now. I messaged a dozen or so, and it took off from there. At roughly ten days before the program is scheduled to premiere on Facebook, I have 33

women signed up and maybe a few others joining! Who knew?! These women are singing, playing instruments, preaching, reading, and celebrating the fact that they *can* be women in ministry!”

To lament is to hope. As the truth of the risen Christ brings us new life with every passing breath, let us open our hearts to new horizons of hope in the midst of our lament.

What though my joys and comforts die?
The Lord my Savior liveth.
What though the darkness gather round?
Songs in the night he giveth.
(“My Life Flows On in Endless Song,”
ELW 763, st. 3)



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PHOTOS COURTESY THE AUTHOR.