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"INCLINE YOUR EAR TO MY CRY" (PSALM 88): WALTER BRUEGGEMANN'S THEOLOGY OF LAMENT IN/AND THE (POST)PANDEMIC WORLD

Maverick Angelo M. Pelayo

Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically disrupted the usual course of doing things by which the world and individuals are accustomed to and it continues to do so as many individuals and, five years on, sectors are still reeling from the multi-faceted effects of the pandemic. It is on this account that this contribution seeks to offer the role and relevance of lament when people and communities face various forms of crises. This contribution explores how the practice of lament according to Walter Brueggemann's theology can be understood, applied, and appropriated in difficult times like this as exemplified in Psalm 88, considered as the saddest psalm. In this paper, I will first present the key themes of Brueggemann's understanding of the psalms, specifically the lament psalms. Then, I will explore the words and actions of the divine and the psalmist in Psalm 88 and discern how the psalm characterizes them. Finally, I will draw some faith and praxis implications of Brueggemann's theology of lament and Psalm 88 in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic world.

Keywords: COVID-19, Walter Brueggemann, lament, psychospiritual health

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Introduction: The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Call to Cry

"Today, facing a world that suffers so much, in which so many people suffer the consequences of this pandemic, I ask myself: Am I capable of crying as Jesus is now?"[1] These words from Pope Francis during his homily in a private yet livestreamed Holy Mass[2] at Casa Santa Marta highlight the significance of weeping during the unprecedented time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Needless to say, the COVID-19 pandemic has truly caused a global crisis, generating a series of social, economic, and cultural effects while also having long-term impacts.[3] In particular, the pandemic has exposed, exacerbated, and even solidified existing inequalities in society in addition to the ever-worsening impact of climate change. The health crisis has also made some individuals and groups living in particular places and communities even more vulnerable than before, as seen in the death

[1] These words were taken from the homily of Pope Francis during the Fifth Sunday of Lent on March 29, 2020 at the Vatican. See Courtney Mares, "Pope Francis Prays for Those Who Weep from Coronavirus Loneliness or Loss," *Catholic News Agency,* March 29, 2020, https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/44026/pope-francis-prays-for-those-who-weep-from-coronavirus-loneliness-or-loss.

[2] Because of health protocols imposed in Italy at that time, Pope Francis started celebrating Mass privately without a congregation, with the Vatican Media livestreaming the liturgy on social media. See Mares, "Pope Francis Prays."

[3] According to a World Bank report, global extreme poverty rose for the first time in 20 years because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic recession, pushing an estimated 150 million more people into extreme poverty. See Clare Duffy, "The Pandemic Could Push 150 Million More People Worldwide into 'Extreme Poverty'," *CNN*, October 7, 2020, https://edition.cnn. com/2020/10/07/ economy/global -poverty-rate-coronavirus/index.html. In the Philippines alone, the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) reported that more Filipinos could slip into poverty and joblessness until 2021 due to the pandemic, particularly those in the capital region and other megacities. See Melissa Luz Lopez, "Pandemic May Keep More Filipinos Poor, Jobless until Next Year – NEDA," *CNN Philippines,* September 20, 2020, https://www.cnn.ph/news/2020/9/10/NEDA-poverty -unemployment-2021.html.

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toll, the long COVID illness and associated conditions, as well as the mental health crisis that ensued.[4] Recent data from the World Health Organization reveals that globally, "one in eight individuals is living with a mental health condition"[5] as a result of the pandemic. In the Philippines, the study shows that 73% of Filipino Gen-Zs "indicate that they are more likely to experience mental health conditions than the average Filipino."[6] These statistics highlight the profound and ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and other contemporary challenges, especially on mental health.

Given the COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting situations described above, and Pope Francis' invitation to question one's ability to cry during these times, the role of weeping in understanding important matters in life takes a unique and deeper sense as it challenges people to draw meaning out of life's harsh realities. Nevertheless, such ability to cry or weep in the face of extremely difficult situations seemed not to be given much emphasis among Christians. Federico Villanueva, a Filipino Old Testament scholar, attributes such inability to weep or even the fear of crying to the understanding that "God is in control and all things work together for good."[7] Hence, the expected

[4] While mental health-related disorders in the Philippines have been around even before the pandemic, the National Center for Mental Health (NCMH) reported an increase in the number of Filipinos facing mental health issues due to the pandemic, "receiving an average of 30 to 35 calls daily from March to May 2020 compared to 13 to 15 calls daily from May 2019 to February 2020". See Anna Malindog-Uy, "COVID-19 Impact on Mental Health of Filipinos," *The ASEAN Post*, July 19, 2020, https://theaseanpost.com/article/c ovid-19-impact-mental-health-filipinos.html.

[5] Dolly Dy-Zulueta, "A Silent Epidemic Emerging: The Rising Mental Health Concern," *Philstar.com*, January 12, 2024, https://www.philstar.com/lifestyle/health-and-family/2024/01/12/2308964/silent-epidemic-emerging-rising-mental-health-concern.

[6] Dy-Zulueta, "Silent Epidemic."

[7] Federico Villanueva, "Preaching Lament," *Reclaiming the Old Testament for Christian Preaching,* ed. Kent Grenville et al. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 65.

response to any situation must always be that of praise, "in blessing and in suffering, in noonday light or in darkness."[8] In another work, Villanueva highlights that while a lot of biblical texts urge believers to rejoice, it becomes problematic when texts like "rejoice in the Lord always" (Phil 4:4) and "I will bless the Lord at all times" (Ps 34:1) are absolutized in all situations.[9] It is no wonder that even in the context of the global health emergency, Villanueva observes how such reasoning is behind statements like "God is in control.", "God is telling us something. Listen!" and "This, too, shall pass!" as if impressing that it is unacceptable to fear and to be worried about the situation.[10] When someone dies, family members are thought to be consoled with words such as "She is now in heaven," as if relatives should not be affected by the reality of death.[11] By denying pain, stifling sorrow, dismissing doubts, and suppressing anger, one may miss experiencing life as it is and confront such difficulties head-on. This is why Pope Francis' invitation to cry or weep serves as an avenue to bridge the gap in the way Christians respond to the most pressing realities, like the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, such an invitation is a call to ponder one's capacity to honestly express and articulate one's feelings in the face of such limit situations, for certainly something is lost when these emotions and experiences are denied.

Walter Brueggemann's Theology of Lament

The American Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, following other scholars in the field of the Book of Psalms,[12] advocates

[8] Villanueva, "Preaching Lament," 65.

[9] Federico Villanueva, *It's OK to Be Not OK: The Message of the Lament Psalms* (Manila: OMF Literature, 2012), 91.

[10] Federico Villanueva, "Lament in A Time of Pandemic", April 4, 2020, https://omflit.com/blog/2020/4/2/lament-in-a-time-of-pandemic.

[11] Villanueva, "Lament in the Time of the Pandemic."

[12] See Brueggemann, "Necessary Conditions of a Good Loud Lament." On pages.20–21, Brueggemann gives a detailed and systematic presentation of the

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for the recovery of the lament psalms for the "subsequent use of the church" as these do have "an important function in the community of faith"[13] especially when faced with extreme human experiences. Considered as one of the most influential and widely-read Bible interpreters in contemporary times, Brueggemann explores the role of the Psalms in the ancient faith of Israel and their relationship to the LORD. He accentuates that the Psalms do "function as voices of faith in the actual life of the believing community"[14] as they carry within them "the most remarkable and reliable sources for many situations"[15] the community may be faced with.

Psalms of lament have evocative power. They are expressed in cries that question God, such as "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Ps 13:1-2a). Using such expressions, "believers are given the chance and the words to express raw feelings of anger, hopelessness, discouragement, and weakness to and against the sometimes silent God."[16] Maintaining how laments "can provide important resources for our contemporary work of theology and ministry,"[17] Brueggemann observes that though

efforts of biblical scholars in recovering the lament psalms, attributing such initiative, first and foremost, to Hermann Gunkel, a German Old Testament scholar, whom he regards as the great founder of the modern study of Psalms. Brueggemann likewise acknowledged Claus Westermann, who published *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (1977), the fifth edition of his earlier work entitled *Praise of God in the Psalms* (1961), as well as Erhard Gerstenberger and Rainer Albertz, both of whom were Westermann's students.

[13] Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 11, no. 36 (1986): 10.

[14] Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 1984), 10.

[15] Walter Brueggemann, "Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 5, no. 17 (August 1980): 5.

[16] Ma. Maricel S. Ibita, "Learn How to Weep." *Louvain Studies* 41, no. 4 (2018): 379.

[17] Walter Brueggemann, "From Hurt to Joy, From Death to Life," 3.

occupying one-third in the Book of Psalms, the lament psalms have been "totally excluded from man's (sic) relationship with God with the result that it has completely disappeared above all from prayer and worship."[18] Consequently, one's understanding of faith was also considerably affected. Brueggemann explains,

> I think that serious religious use of the lament psalms has been minimal because we have believed that faith does not mean to acknowledge and embrace negativity. We have thought that acknowledgment of negativity was somehow an act of unfaith, as though the very speech about it conceded too much about God's "loss of control."[19]

It is this notion of the lament psalms as an expression of unfaith that Brueggemann wishes to correct by accentuating how lament, though seen as a cry of desperation or even protest, is an "act of bold faith."[20] To prove this claim, he employs form criticism in his study of the lament psalms.[21] He identifies lament as a particular genre in Israel's religious poetry that arises and develops from their actual life experiences. Brueggemann explains,

> The faith of Israel, like all human experience, moved back and forth between the polar moods of deep anguish and misery to profound joy and celebration. In this back-and-forth movement, she worked

[18] Claus Westermann, "Role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament," *Interpretation* 28, no. 1 (1974): 25.

[19] Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms,* 52.

[20] Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms,* 52.

[21] Walter Brueggemann's theology of lament is developed through the lens of form criticism. In fact, in his very first article on lament, he asserts that "the study of lament is best pursued by the method of form criticism" ("From Hurt to Joy," 5). Consequently, in his masterwork *The Message of the Psalms,* he also acknowledges form criticism as the basis of his organizational structure (9). Form criticism which looks at the various forms of speech and its life setting builds upon Hermann Gunkel's biblical scholarship which Brueggemann has consistently turned to in his writings. By applying form criticism in his engagement on the lament psalms, Brueggemann believes that such method will lead one to an understanding of "both how Israel's faith understood and experience hurt and how it interpreted it in the context of its faith" ("From Hurt to Joy," 6).

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> out the power and limits of her faith. In the process, she also worked out a pattern of rhetoric which shaped her anguish and brought it to expression so that it could be dealt with.[22]

In describing Israel's faith as such, Brueggemann recognizes how it is lived out within the people's daily experiences, such as in anguish, misery, joy, and celebration, therefore forming a certain pattern of rhetoric. Conversely, he describes that this pattern of rhetoric shaped Israel's faith as well. This certain pattern of rhetoric, which Brueggemann refers to, is the lament that articulates Israel's experiences arising from "raw and unfeigned emotion."[23] He asserts that it is the lament that actually "preserves Israel's most powerful and eloquent statements of the effort both to survive and to be transformed as people of faith."[24] Hence, he sees lament as intimately linked to Israel's daily struggle to live out her faith amid all their experiences in life.

Commenting further on Israel's experiences, Brueggemann perceives how "life, as it comes, along with joys, is beset by hurt, betrayal, loneliness, disease, threat, anxiety, bewilderment, anger, hatred, and anguish."[25] In its totality, Israel confronts the fact that "life is not always great" as it can be "disoriented and messy."[26] This recognition and reception of life's distressing realities lies at the heart of Israel, as it is primarily the people's experience of oppression in Egypt that prompted their "cry of distress" to God.[27] Out of their cry, God's power was evoked and seen in God's interventions to alleviate their

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[22] Brueggemann, "From Hurt to Joy, From Death to Life," 3.

[23] Donald F. Fredenburg, "The World-Making Power of the Psalms," 1.

[24] Brueggemann, "From Hurt to Joy, From Death to Life," 3.

[25] Brueggemann, "From Hurt to Joy, From Death to Life," 4.

[26] Lori Glenn, "Crying to the Lord: The Psalms of Lament," 18.

[27] Westermann, "The Role of the Lament," 21.

situation of distress, God initiated the contest of plagues, and God eventually delivered them from their oppression in Egypt.[28]

Israel, therefore, is no stranger to human suffering as the Exodus story shows. Whenever the people are faced with similar crisis situations, the memory of the Exodus event is brought forth. Immersed with distressing realities, the people would readily bring them to God as they did before. They believe that this God understands what is happening and has the power to transform it.[29] For Brueggemann, Israel's lament gives form to the worst experiences of the people's life, which are placed "in the presence of the one who alone can address a decisive word to those who suffer."[30] As Israel handles such challenges realistically, it conversely sees them as opportunities to evaluate their faith. Brueggemann explains,

> Israel characteristically met the hurtful dimensions of existence head-on, of course viewing them as faith crises, times of wondering about God and his fidelity, but also as faith opportunities, times to articulate again their expectations and assumptions, times to reformulate their position vis-à-vis the world of hurt and the God of faithfulness.[31]

One can see here that even the hurtful and painful dimensions in life are viewed in light of Israel's faith in God. Against the background of these experiences that God's people face squarely, they were able to all the more recognize the role of God in their lives as these circumstances are brought before God. Even in hurt and in pain, the people of Israel are deeply interconnected with God; they "have to do with God and he has to do with them."[32]

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[28] Walter Brueggemann and Tod Linafelt, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 80.

[29] Walter Brueggemann, "The Formfulness of Grief," *Interpretation* 31, no.3 (1977): 263.

[30] Brueggemann, "The Formfulness of Grief," 263.

[31] Brueggemann, "From Hurt to Joy, From Death to Life," 4.

[32] Brueggemann, "From Hurt to Joy, From Death to Life," 4.

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Brueggemann, however, cautions that this whole process of pain-embrace requires "not only deep faith it requires faith of a new kind."[33] For him, this faith involves a "fresh hunch about this God" who himself "does not want to be an unchallenged structure" but actually "one who can be frontally addressed."[34] Since the outcome is still unknown, as one's response could have been possibly taken "as irreverent, disrespectful disobedience," Israel is seen as truly risking their faith with a God known by the legitimated structures of the day.[35] Nevertheless, as Brueggemann suggests, it is only through such risk that "a new mode of faith between God and Israel" can emerge.[36] Such faith is the very stuff of the lament addressed to God, received "not as disobedience, but as a new kind of obedience."[37] To this end, Israel's lament, as enabled by pain-embrace, pushes God's recharacterization as "the one who must take account of the trouble."[38]

Only on account of this dialogic character of the lament that Israel is enabled to "vent her greatest doubt, her bitterest resentments, her deepest anger" before God. They believe that God will seriously consider his part of the exchange. By transferring such troubles to God, they can wait for his response. As Israel cries out of the depths, describing their deep embrace of pain, they also convey their unwillingness to settle for that situation. They challenge the legitimated structures in place and push the matter forward to the LORD, whose listening ear and deliverance have been proven and tested throughout Israel's history. Constantly jumping from the heights of joy to the depths of pain, Brueggemann observes how Israel has struggled to live with such tension, maintaining that in all the seasons of life, nothing

[33] Walter Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 24, no.1 (2002): 401.

[34] Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II," 401.

[35] Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II," 401.

[36] Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II," 401.

[37] Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II," 401.

[38] Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II," 402.

falls outside God's active intervention. Individual and communal disorientation can be transformed by God, who pervades all of life's realities. Lament works as individuals' and communities' emotions rage, as pain creeps through, and as the desire for such experience to be altered and transformed is longed for. Brueggemann's theology of lament is built from the very experiences of Israel with their God, who has revealed himself as one who listens and hears the cry of his people.

Psalm 88: Characterization of the Psalmist and the LORD God

Moving on to the second major part of the paper, let us discern Brueggemann's theology of lament and the images of the psalmist and God in Psalm 88, the saddest psalm.[39] Known for its continual lament with response yet to be delivered, such a psalm opens us to the reality that it is not always the case that God's listening ear saves the day. To carry out this task, David Rhoads' method of characterization will be employed.[40] Characterization is mainly a method in narrative criticism that centers on the speeches and actions of the biblical character as well as those that the character "actively or inactively interacts with."[41] For Rhoads, understanding biblical characters paves the way for

[39] See Tony Ash, "The Saddest Psalm in the Psalter," Leaven 4, no. 1 (2012): 13–15; Ernst R. Wendland, "'Darkness Is My Closest Friend' (Ps 88:18b): Reflections on the Saddest Psalm in the Psalter," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37, no. 1 (May 25, 2016): 7, https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v37i1.1543; For Klaas Spronk, "Good Death and Bad Death in Ancient Israel According to Biblical Lore," *Social Science & Medicine* 58, no. 5 (2004): 989, the psalmist is in "total despair"; For Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms,* 78, the psalm is an "embarrassment to conventional faith."

[40] See David Rhoads, "Narrative Criticism and the Gospel of Mark," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50, no. 3 (1982): 411–34.

[41] Ma. Maricel S. Ibita, "Rejoice with Me: Preaching the Joy of the Gospel as Cornerstone of the Parish Community Life," *Pamisulu* 5 (2018): 38.

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comprehending the text.[42] While others may insist that the psalms are written as poetry, Robert Alter argues that an unfolding plot is also present in poetic texts, or what he calls "narrativity," the narrative development of a metaphor.[43] When characterization is applied to the narrativity of Psalm 88, the psalmist's self-characterization in Psalm 88 will highlight what the psalmist says and does, what others say to or about the psalmist, and what others do to, for, or against the psalmist. Likewise, the psalmist's characterization of the LORD God in Psalm 88, which details the psalmist's understanding of who God is based on what God says or does not say and on what God does or does not do, is also worked out. By these considerations on characterization, Psalm 88 is read closely to discover "minute details or bigger patterns from where one can theologize."[44] Hence, by employing characterization of the psalmist and the LORD in Psalm 88, this part features how the psalmist's loud lament in Psalm 88 is unexpectedly met by a stark silence on the LORD's end, showing that God's response of deliverance is yet to come.

Who is the psalmist in Psalm 88? It can be seen how the psalmist exhaustively utilizes the lament tradition of Israel in coming before God identified as the psalmist's LORD (88:1). Clearly, it is the psalmist who is the initiator of the exchange with the LORD, operating within the dialogic character of the covenant relationship established by the LORD with his people. Against this background, the psalmist painstakingly employs all possible ways and plausible means to prod the LORD's attention to the petitions, even by overstating them. These means include the daily and nightly crying (88:1, 9, 13), the graphic articulation of the complaint replete with varied allusions to death (88:3–8, 10–12, 14–18), the use of recurring "motivations" in the form of rhetorical questions (88:10–12) the calling attention to one's sorry

[42] Robert Alter, "From Line to Story in Biblical Verse," *Poetics Today* 4, no. 4 (1983): 615–37, https://doi.org/10.2307/1772317.

[43] Alter, "From Line to Story."

[44] Ibita, "Rejoice with Me," 39.

physical state (88:9), and even the invoking past experiences from his youth (88:15).

Based on the many references to death that the psalmist describes, the reader can sense how the psalmist is not only in a helpless but distressing situation. The psalmist reaches the point of identifying oneself as not only close to death but even experiencing death itself (88:5). The psalmist's courageous acceptance of the deathly situation is expressed by the various allusions to it. The relinquishment of one's old state is also shown here as the psalmist admits the present situation of disorientation. While not explicitly mentioning what accounted for such experience, the psalmist directly points to the LORD himself as the cause of the predicament expressed in a series of blatant accusations hurled against the LORD (88:6–8, 14–17). Brueggemann is right in saying that "Psalm 88 is a direct, forceful accusation against God, in which the speaker not only names the trouble but places the trouble at the door of YHWH."[45] These accusations are also the psalmist's way of earnestly appealing to the LORD, who is in a position to transform the psalmist's condition. The change of state is not only for the benefit of the psalmist but also for the LORD's praise. The psalmist's rhetorical questions appeal to God's honor: "Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise you? Selah. Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon? Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness? (88:10–12).[46] Suffering physically and spiritually (88:3) as a result of the isolation from one's friends (verses 8, 18) and the withdrawal of the LORD's presence (verse 14), the psalmist describes the situation through unsuppressed emotions of anger and dismay, articulating it with unfiltered language of candidness and boldness. Willingly crying out of the depths (88:1, 9, 13) and stretching out one's hands (88:9), the psalmist fully embraces pain and clings to the LORD even through the sole companionship of darkness (88:18).

[45] Walter Brueggemann and Patrick D. Miller, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 56.

[46] Unless otherwise stated, biblical quotations come from *NRSV*.

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While the seeming inaction to aid the psalmist portrays an unresponsive, silent, or even an absent God, "the unanswered plea does not silence the speaker."[47] Though disoriented by the situation, the psalmist remains patient yet unyielding, relentless in lament, even exploring all the means to prod the LORD's attention. For Brueggemann, "the speaker never entertains the possibility of withdrawing from conversation with God, never considers the prospect that such talk is futile or that help must be sought elsewhere."[48] The psalmist remains steadfast until the longed-for salvation comes and transforms the situation. Such is the psalmist's faith—one that is marked by resoluteness and decisiveness. Perhaps, this faith is what sustains the psalmist in disorientation until a new orientation comes.

Who is the LORD God in Psalm 88? It should be noted that throughout Psalm 88, the LORD God invoked by the psalmist neither appears nor speaks. It is only through the psalmist's cry for help, the voicing of petition, and the articulation of situation addressed to the LORD that we can picture the character of this LORD. As early as 88:1, the psalmist regards the deity as the LORD (verse 1), his sovereignty fully acknowledged. By attaching the attribution "God of my salvation" (88:1), the psalmist indicates and invokes the LORD's saving power. The certainty of the LORD's saving help, however, is far from coming, given the persisting distressing situation of the psalmist as the psalm progresses. As the psalmist claims, such a situation is even intensified by no less than the LORD himself, whom the psalmist unabashedly accuses as responsible for the situation of suffering from the very start. According to the psalmist, the LORD has put him to the inescapable Sheol (88:6), placed his wrath (chēmāh) over him (88: 7, 16), which crushes him like disastrous waves (88:7, 17). What is worse is that the LORD has withdrawn his presence from the psalmist (verse 14) and deprived him of his friends' companionship (88:8, 18). Worst of all, it is the LORD's seeming abandonment of the psalmist that is taken as the prime reason behind the psalmist's personal despair and the desertion of others. Had the LORD been mindful and honored the

[47] Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms,* 79.

[48] Brueggemann and Miller, *Psalms and the Life of Faith,* 56.

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terms of the established covenant by immediate reciprocation and presence, the psalmist would not have been left wallowing in this experience of disorientation.

These aforementioned reasons justify the psalmist's complaint of the LORD's apparent reneging on the covenant, while the psalmist claims that he has not defaulted on the covenant from his youth. From the LORD's end, however, there is no single response or explanation despite the psalmist's accusations and rhetorical interrogations. Only silence. Given this silent response from the LORD, if such can really be qualified as one, the psalmist nevertheless persistently invokes the LORD. The psalmist appeals to how the LORD has been characterized through time, and to whom the LORD is for him. This presentation of who the LORD is recharacterizes the LORD's silence. The unresponsiveness of the LORD does not connote absence, as the LORD is someone capable of receiving one's pain, just as God manifested God's self to Israel through time. The psalm firmly upholds the belief that the LORD cannot be confined to the legitimated structures, as the LORD is ever involved in the deep distresses of the covenanted people who continue to cry out for help. This memory of who the LORD is fuels the psalmist's faith and lament. The reader is given the understanding that, though the LORD is silent all throughout the psalm, as long as the LORD can be frontally appealed to just as what the psalmist is doing, the LORD "is there and must be addressed."[49] Besides, the reality of the LORD's silence amid humanity's anguish only envisages how "life is like that,"[50] that there are no quick and easy answers in explaining life's predicaments. Yet as lament psalms "intend to speak of all of life,"[51] one is encouraged to voice out one's pain, without yielding to the present situation of distress. Psalm 88 depicts that no matter how one is met by the LORD's silence and deprived of God's immediate response, the covenant relationship stands.

[49] Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms,* 79.

[50] Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms,* 80.

[51] Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms,* 80.

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In the meantime, the psalmist's continual lament amid continued experience of disorientation testifies to his utter refusal to remain in such a situation until the longed-for salvation and new orientation come. From the outset, the psalmist does not forget that salvation has already taken root, given his acknowledgement of the past history with the LORD, the God of his own salvation. The psalmist's insistence, through and through, that the LORD is present in one's life is seen even in such a death-dealing situation. Such a depiction only proves how lament can be very dynamic even amid the air of total despair. As exemplified in Psalm 88, the most dynamic laments ever raised are the ones articulated during the most intense experiences of disorientation. They can foster an even renewed relationship with this LORD, whose saving presence in the past far surpasses his seeming absence in the present. Psalm 88 also proves that the LORD's presence pervades in such difficult experiences and bears witness to the LORD who is "present in, participating in, and attentive to the darkness, weakness, and displacement of life."[52] In a way, Psalm 88 reinforces this assurance to present-day readers whose distress resonates with the psalmist. Brueggemann is truly right in asserting that Psalm 88 is "a resource as precious as it is peculiar."[53] Psalm 88 speaks to and engages the contemporary life of faith marked by crisis situations. Psalm 88 clearly shows that "wrestling with God has value even when we fail to find the answers."[54]

Conclusion and Implications: Lament and the Post-COVID-19 World

Looking back at the COVID-19 pandemic, understanding Walter Brueggemann's theology of lament, and exploring Psalm 88, we are presented with a valuable resource in dealing with distressing situations. In times of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, its immediate aftermath, and its long-term effects in various aspects of individual

[52] Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms,* 52.

[53] Brueggemann and Miller, *Psalms and the Life of Faith,* 8.

[54] Villanueva, "Preaching Lament," 78.

and communal life,[55] delving deep into the realm of spirituality is vital. These circumstances ultimately call for such a kind of prayer that cries out to God for help, conveying one's unwillingness to remain in such an experience of disorientation. Brueggemann underlines that laments do play "an important function in the community of faith"[56] and that they "can provide important resources for our contemporary work of theology and ministry."[57] Lament is, therefore, vital today as it was before. After all, amidst this continued season of disorientation, believers can lament more courageously and boldly express the hope for a God who extends his helping hand and inclines his listening ear to those who cry out of the depths because this is the same saving LORD as before. Now, what implications on faith and praxis can we gather from this exploration?

1. The capacity to lament in critical times transforms the person and the person's faith.

It was described above how lament speaks of the believer's audacity to face and accept squarely the present situation one is in. It enables one to face the present reality as it is without denying or covering up the feelings that arise from it. Israel, in all their varied life experiences, managed to go through the tensions of life by courageously facing such realities head-on, especially the challenging and upsetting moments of their life. What is crucial during this time is the vulnerable relinquishment of the known, settled way of living to pave the way for the new, emerging one. Distressing as it may be when tortured seasons do come, the believer's capacity to embrace

[55] See, for example, Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE), "Global Map"; Calonzo, "Why the Philippines"; Calonzo, "Why the Philippines Is Once Again the Worst Place to Be in Covid"; Bettinger-Lopez and Bro, "A Double Pandemic"; Brower, "The Mental Health Crisis Generated By COVID-19"; Fallesen, "How COVID-19"; Costa et al., "Mental Health"; Ceballos, Hernandez, and Paz, "Covid-19 and Extreme Weather."

[56] Brueggemann, "Costly Loss of Lament," 57.

[57] Brueggemann, "From Hurt to Joy, From Death to Life," 3.

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such realities is needed so that one can ground oneself and brave through the present disorientation. The psalmist in Psalm 88 was able to articulate the symbolic experience of death itself by admitting one's present situation of disorientation (88: 3-9), by relinquishing the old state or situation (88:5), and consequently, pleading for the LORD to actively intervene in this situation (88: 1, 9, 13), no matter the delay on the part of the LORD.

Appropriating these insights to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its immediate and lasting effects in various aspects of social, cultural, economic, and political realms of societal life,[58] lament shatters the disillusionment of the life pre-pandemic and enables people to accept the difficult and challenging realities that resulted from it. This will be possible if the person honestly expresses their feelings, courageously accepts that the life one used to know before, albeit imperfect, is already gone, and yet willfully insists that this present, upsetting situation may be altered. It is along this process where one's faith is also worked out and deepened.[59] As with Israel's faith, which was all the more emboldened during the move from a settled orientation into an experience of disorientation as articulated in their lament, the move from the life pre-pandemic to the present situation opens an opportunity for one's faith and person to be transformed. Certain crises inevitably come in life. Only in facing such life's realities with unsuppressed emotions that one discovers that even those

[58] See, for example, CSSE, "Global Map"; Baum and Hai, "Hospitality, Tourism, Human Rights and the Impact of COVID-19"; Farley, "Prostitution, the Sex Trade, and the COVID-19 Pandemic"; Freedom House, "Democracy"; D'Adamo, *Assessment*; Borio and Vora, "G20"; Hartwell and Devinney, "Populism"; Jones, Palumbo, and Brown, "Coronavirus"; Donovan, "Conflict"; Bollettino et al., "COVID-19-Related Mental Health Challenges and Opportunities Perceived by Mental Health Providers in the Philippines"; Baraka, Ramadan, and Hassan, "Predictors of Critical Care Nurses' Stress, Anxiety, and Depression in Response to COVID-19 Pandemic"; Ostadtaghizadeh et al., "Gender-Based Violence Against Women During the Covid-19 Pandemic."

[59] See, for example, Francesco Chirico, "Spirituality to Cope with Covid-19 Pandemic, Climate Change and Future Global Challenges"; and "Faith."

unwelcome disturbances are proper arenas for faith to be deepened and transformed, so one can navigate life anew.

2. Lament shapes one's understanding of God.

With Israel's straightforward dealings with the LORD and the psalmist's unfiltered address to the saving God of Psalm 88 (vv. 6–8,14–17), the LORD is characterized as someone "who can deal with our difficult questions and accept our humanness in all its fullness."[60] Therefore, it is possible and even encouraged that people and communities go before God with questions, complaints, hurts, and doubts, especially the various feelings generated by the devastating effects of crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The dialogic character of lament flows from the dynamic covenant relationship established by God with Israel.

As seen in Psalm 88, the psalmist employed all possible means in the lament to recognize and articulate the disorienting reality one is in and the unsuppressed emotions that come along with it. The psalm includes expressions of anger against and disgust with God. These emotions are all presented to the LORD. The psalmist's recharacterization of the divine shows that the LORD is capable of receiving such a cry and could possibly be moved to action because of the speaker's painful experiences. By articulating the hurts and pains, the psalmist expects that God will also embrace such pain himself, make it his own pain, and thereafter be involved in transforming the speaker's situation for the better. Again, though there is a delay in God's response in Psalm 88, the psalmist's insistence that the LORD is present though silent and that the LORD is active though seemingly unresponsive, makes the psalmist confident in the address to God, expressed with one's inmost emotions and feelings.

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, even after five years, provoked people to ask questions like, "Until when, LORD?"; "Why the death of my son?"; "Why all of these

[60] Ma. Maricel S. Ibita, "The World and God's Word: Of COVID-19, VUCA World, and Visions for the Future," *Landas* 34, no.2 (2020): 149.

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difficulties, Lord?"; "Don't you care about us anymore?" One should not think that complaining before God is prohibited because "God is God".[61] We should not "shy away from asking God serious questions, raising concerns about injustice, betrayal, and perceived abandonment of the divine."[62] God can handle these emotions and complaints, as attested by Israel's faith and as what the psalmist in Psalm 88 insists and believes in.

3. Lament gives words to one's authentic prayer.

At first reading, Psalm 88 seems to be shocking to the reader as the speaker hurls down protests and complaints before the LORD (vv. 6–8, 14–17), even accusing the divine of being the very reason for one's harsh predicament. However, a closer reading of the Psalm, especially through the characterization of the psalmist and the LORD, shows that such words are necessary for the psalmist to fully enunciate his distressing situation and painstaking desire for the LORD to take heed of the petition for help. The psalmist in Psalm 88 truly embodies the covenant of God with Israel as he continues to be a dialogue partner of the LORD. No amount of continued distress and even the further delay of the LORD's deliverance can preclude the psalmist from this continual lament in Psalm 88. The psalmist persists in holding on to the covenant and resists doubting the God of his salvation. The psalmist continues to prod the covenant partner in this plea so the LORD can respond and alter the psalmist's situation.

On account of the necessity to keep the dialogic character of lament, where the one praying truly pours out one's heart before God through one's unfiltered words, Brueggemann underlines how costly it is to lose the necessity to lament.[63] Ma. Maricel Ibita affirms Brueggemann's observations by explaining that the

[61] Ibita, "The World and God's Word," 149.

[62] Ibita, "The World and God's Word," 150.

[63] Brueggemann, "Costly Loss of Lament," 60–65.

> (1) inability to lament waters down our being covenant partners of God because we have ceased to be dialogue partners and have only become yes-people of a seemingly punishing or absent god; (2) it stifles questions of theodicy or raising questions when evil things happen to good and innocent people and when we fail to legitimately question matters of injustice and oppression; (3) we forget that words in our Jewish-Christian faith have world-making capacities and, therefore, can help us articulate and construct new realities; and (4) our inability to lament diminishes our being made in the image and likeness of God who upholds justice, peace, integrity, and sustainability of all creation.[64]

These losses show how lament gives words to one's prayer. For Villanueva, laments allow us to pray "when we just don't know what to say, or when we feel like our own prayers may not be right because they are too painful or may hurt God."[65] Through lament, one's prayer becomes authentic; one has a voice and genuinely interacts with God, no matter what one feels. As a result, lament enables the one who prays to not only cope with the present distressing situation but also opens one to the task of raising vital issues with God. In terms of the COVID-19 pandemic, concerns including the well-being of both human and beyond-human members of the creation community were included as they, too, were also greatly affected by the global health crisis.[66]

4. Lament enunciates one's suffering and invites one to be in solidarity with the suffering of others.

As the words articulated in laments depict one's sufferings, the move to bring these complaints before God also empowers the believer

[64] Ibita, "The World and God's Word," 151.

[65] Villanueva, "Preaching Lament," 240.

[66] See Brower, "The Mental Health Crisis"; Costa et al., "Mental Health"; Bollettino et al., "COVID-19-Related Mental Health Challenges"; Cheval et al., "Observed and Potential Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Environment"; Armitage and Nellums, "Water"; Cheval et al., "Observed and Potential Impacts"; Rume and Islam, "Environmental Effects of Covid-19 Pandemic and Potential Strategies of Sustainability."

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to cope with them and allows one to be in solidarity with the suffering of others. This moment is best expressed with one's capacity to cry or weep, just like the challenge Pope Francis mentioned at the beginning of this contribution. By weeping or crying, the pain and suffering we are in are expressed. The covenant between the enslaved Israelites and the LORD commenced when they cried. "God heard their groaning… God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them" (Exodus 2:23–25). This pivotal experience of Israel solidly attests how the people's cry from the depths, understood as their embrace of pain and articulation of their suffering in Egypt, impelled God to hear their cry and act on their situation by liberating them from slavery.

This memory of salvation is what also animates the psalmist in Psalm 88. At the beginning of the lament, the psalmist already acknowledges the previous saving presence of the LORD (88:1), even if it seems that God is starkly silent throughout the rest of the psalm. Expressed with one's intensified daily and nightly crying (verses 1, 9, 13), the psalmist brings out the experience of pain and suffering through tears presented to the LORD. The psalmist even mentions that the weeping has resulted already in the swelling of the eyes, signaling how one has been used to suffering, even to the point of identifying one's situation as that of destruction and death. Through these tears that have become one's "bread day and night" (like Psalm 42:4), the psalmist envisages his full acceptance of the situation and unyielding resolution to rouse the LORD to alter such a situation. Likewise, these tears also speak of what the psalmist holds dear and which are unavailable right now—his life, his friends, his LORD. By weeping, the psalmist shows what he mostly valued and firmly upholds amidst the surrounding total darkness and the experiences of death. Therefore, tears can reveal what we value most. Weeping bridges us to the cries of others. Lamentations "attune our senses to our own emotions, they make us also sensitive to the need and suffering of others."[67] One's experience of suffering leads one to be in solidarity with the suffering of others.

[67] Ibita, "Learn How to Weep," 389.

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To conclude, having discovered the implications of recovering the practice of lament during disorienting situations like the COVID-19 pandemic, its aftermath, and its lingering effects five years on, we are led to the realization of this great gift of lament that we inherited from our ancestors in faith, born out of God's covenantal relationship with them. Grounded firmly in this partnership, the LORD fosters an intimacy with his people by way of a dialogical encounter with them. Through lament, the individual and the community are enabled to embrace the reality they are in, to use one's voice and tears to pour out the inmost contents of the heart amidst a disorienting situation, to lend one's voice to others who find themselves in the same situation, and to discover the silent accompaniment of the God who also embraces the same reality where one is. These implications truly point out how, through lament, **it's OKAY to be OA**, to be overacting! In the face of hard-pressing realities, one cannot be nonchalant in facing and embracing them. As seen in Psalm 88, the speaker exhausts all ways and means to persuade the God revealed as an OA God, *an overactive* and *ever-active* God of salvation.

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About the Author. **Fr. Maverick Angelo Mangalino Pelayo,** a young priest from the Archdiocese of San Fernando, Pampanga, was ordained in 2022. His first pastoral assignment was as University Chaplain at Angeles University Foundation in Angeles City. His presentation at the CBAP was taken from his graduate thesis at the Mother of Good Counsel Seminary, also completed in 2022, which was mostly based on his pastoral experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. He is currently completing his licentiate studies at the Loyola School of Theology.