

This Advent, Why It's OK for You to Grieve During Worship

By Elizabeth Nance-Coker, December 5, 2018

Advent is now and not yet – songs and groans, comfort and joy.

In this Advent season of waiting, as we inhabit the now and the not yet, I invite you to lament during worship.

Make space to bring experiences of pain, loss and brokenheartedness to God.

Come alongside those in your faith community who need to voice complaint, anger, grief and despair in prayer. Hold onto hope alongside those who are barely holding it together.

For many of us, making it through December is a daily struggle of personal grief. We remember those people who are lost to us; we walk in frustration at the realization of what we thought we would have overcome by now or feel exhausted by challenging circumstances.

We may think we are alone in our sadness and may be reluctant to come to worship because we simply cannot manufacture enough reliable happiness to make it through that hour of joy.

We need to weep but we feel conspicuously sad when surrounded by everyone else's brightness, so the stark contrast makes our depression go deeper.

Or maybe your life is perfectly shiny in the no-more-tears zone: Consider lament as an opportunity for spiritual accompaniment.

Theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff, reflecting upon the support of the faith community in the months after his son died, says, "Your tears are salve on our wound, your silence is salt."

We lament as a way of being with others, and as a means of hospitality, a way of weaving ancient spirituality into modern living.

The ancient "O Antiphon" we sing as "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" pleads for the "Bright and Morning Star" to turn our darkness into light: This is the voice of hope.

The Psalms of Lament show us an ancient way of praying, a way to express all our emotions before God, and a way to bear one another's burdens.

How does this work? The psalmist speaks complaint to God, gives sorrow to God, asks God for help and pledges to trust God based on what God has already done.

When we include lament in Advent worship, we are giving space for sharing emotions, calling upon God for help and placing our hope solidly upon the rock of our salvation.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann frames a healthy lament process as moving from orientation, through disorientation and into reorientation.

The Advent lections for our Sundays of Advent contain bookends of lament passages, helping us frame our disorientation with Scripture.

"To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame," from Psalm 25, read on the first Sunday in Advent.

Moving into reorientation, hear the hope of a fresh start in Psalm 80, for the fourth Advent Sunday, "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved."

God's Spirit works in us and through us to breathe prayers of lament for life situations of grief and despair.

In these laments, we pray on behalf of the bereaved, hungry, oppressed, humiliated, refugees, homeless, abused, poor, lonely and betrayed.

We, the created ones, bring the groaning of creation to Creator God in whose image we are made. Lament carries the freight of protesting the situations in life and leads into hope.

The Advent season gives us time to breathe these prayers, to have difficult conversations and to inwardly digest the difficult passages of Scripture. "The hopes and fears of all the years" are met in Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.

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Three C's for Holiday Grief

For those who are grieving, the holidays can be unfamiliar terrain. Whether you celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah or Kwanzaa, this time is filled with fond remembrances of loved ones who are on your mind yet absent from your traditions and rituals. Acknowledging the difficulties of holidays after loss does not make a potentially difficult time any easier, but preparing for the holidays by tapping into helpful coping strategies may provide some much-needed help.

Follow these “three C’s” recommended by HFA grief expert Kenneth J. Doka, PhD, to help navigate your way through this difficult time.

CHOOSE

During the holidays, it’s easy to drift into activities that have the potential to increase your pain. You have choices. Decide what you want to be part of, who you want to be with, and what you want to do. After her husband died, June was invited—and felt pressured—to join her sister-in-law for Hanukkah celebrations. She decided that she would retain the freedom to choose where she wanted to be until that morning. “I never know how much energy I’ll have or how I’ll feel until that day,” she explained. She decided to eat dinner with a few women she knew through a widow’s support group. She chose to go to her sister-in-law’s house for dessert.

You may also want to consider how to mark your loss during the holidays. During the holidays you may feel the presence of that person’s absence. Finding ways to recognize and acknowledge that individual can bring a positive focus to your grief. This may be done in a number of ways. Lighting a candle, creating a ritual, placing a memento on a tree, holding a moment of silence or a holiday toast are simple ways to acknowledge the losses felt so keenly this time of year.

COMMUNICATE

Discussing your choices with others, especially those affected by them, is important. They have needs as well. Their ways of dealing with grief may be different. June, for example, talked with her sister-in-law, explained her feelings and asked if she could make a decision that day. Once her sister-in-law understood June’s feelings and needs, she understood June’s need for flexibility. Traditions may come into play because they involve choices. Communication about them is important. The Smith family, for example, had a long discussion about how to handle the Christmas tree following the death of one of their children.

COMPROMISE

Each person deals with loss in his or her own particular way and therefore has different needs. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Leaving space for compromise is important. For example, some people in the Smith family saw the Christmas tree as an important tribute to their late son and brother. Other family members felt it was disrespectful. They talked through each point of view, and decided to have a small tree—not in the central living room, but in the family room. Those who wanted to help decorate could, but those who chose not to would also be respected.

Nothing changes the fact that the holidays can be especially difficult while grieving. But if you choose your actions, communicate your choices to others, and find suitable compromises, you may find that they become bearable and that you have renewed strength and hope.