

# Suffering, Lament, and Spiritual Care

by Argrow “Kit” Evans

This past year I worked as a chaplain intern at Kaiser Hospital in California. I worked with patients and families facing many issues including making end-of-life decisions, facing death and dying, grieving and loss, life crisis, and many other harsh realities. After several months I realized that it was important for me to understand this question: As a Christian minister, how do I truly provide spiritual care to patients and families who are suffering?

A few months ago I met a patient named Ms. Jones. Ms. Jones was a 68-year-old African American woman from Oakland. She had several health conditions but was hospitalized because of numbness in her leg. Her legs had randomly given out on her and she could not walk. She had experienced several surgeries because of this issue. Ms. Jones expressed these realities in her life, but after each comment she spoke about her faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. She would quote Scripture, reference a gospel song or Negro spiritual, reflect on what God and Jesus Christ had done for her in the past, and refer to church sermons and prayer. She talked about getting to heaven with Jesus and the peace she would experience. Every time Ms. Jones would start to lament and share her tension, anxiety, and fear, there was a super quick shift for her. She would not speak about the “bad things,” as if she was consciously trying not to feel the hurt of her present and past suffering. Referring and acknowledging her faith and trust in God and Jesus Christ seemed to assist Ms. Jones with coping.

Hearing Ms. Jones made me think about my immediate family, my own church family, and myself. Members of my family and also my church community have embraced a theology where our faith in God overpowers our suffering in the present and past. Our focus is on what Ms. Jones called the “sweet by and by.” The songs sung are about getting to heaven and the sweet paradise. The biblical Scripture embraced is centered on suffering with Jesus Christ and reigning with Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> Personal pain is acknowledged briefly, but then faith and trust in God and Jesus Christ is what is focused on. Ms. Jones and I have traditionally embraced an “eschatological hope” that is so deeply embedded within our contexts. This hope is dependent on the future and making it to this paradise in heaven, which seems to give us some immediate peace in our present suffering. In *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation*, James Cone supports the notion that Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection seems to set us free of our pain and suffering in the present, offering an imaginative response to suffering.<sup>2</sup>

This reality makes me ask the question: In the Christian community is lamenting and speaking about the suffering amongst an individual and community seen as bad? Often, if lament does take place it is only for a short period of time. I feel as if my own theology tells me in the midst of my suffering to suck it up, God has my back, and to look to the light of Jesus for help. And though this may be helpful for some, what happens when someone speaks about the death of their child, the rape of their daughter, and their struggle with cancer without acknowledging the goodness of Jesus and the sweet paradise of heaven that we will get to one day? How do we as ministers provide spiritual care when that is a person’s reality? Could it be acceptable for a

person to boldly lament and speak about his or her suffering and pain without referring to God as light and Jesus Christ never putting more on us than we can bear?

I had to wrestle with these questions as a chaplain intern. When I first started to provide spiritual care for people, I noticed that I did well with being a compassionate presence for patients. I was able to actively listen and explore the feelings and needs that arose in patients who were dealing with challenges. But, I had one big problem. In my listening, I would always listen to hear what the person's loving support network was, how their relationship with God, Jesus, spirit assisted them in their healing, and/or what gave them light in the midst of their suffering. Instead of being fully present with them in their suffering, I was continuously looking to find the good in the midst of their bad situation and I always verbally reflected this good back to them. This deferring to the good in bad situations was obviously a consequence of my own theological beliefs. And when there seemed to be too much bad happening in the patient's life I would unconsciously pray with the person, refer them to a Bible verse, etc.

Over the last few months I have learned a very important lesson. Though my faith may be centered in embracing a type of Christian-based eschatological hope and its connection to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, I must meet people where they are. When providing spiritual care to patients who are suffering, do I tell them to look to the light of Jesus Christ and he will make things better? I now understand the importance of providing a safe space for lament.

Recently, my pastor mentor referred me to Psalm 88. It reads:

O LORD God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before thee:

Let my prayer come before thee: incline thine ear unto my cry;

For my soul is full of troubles: and my life draweth nigh unto the grave.

I am counted with them that go down into the pit: I am as a man that hath no strength:

Free among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, whom thou rememberest no more: and they are cut off from thy hand.

Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps.

Thy wrath lieth hard upon me, and thou hast afflicted me with all thy waves. Selah.

Thou hast put away mine acquaintance far from me; thou hast made me an abomination unto them: I am shut up, and I cannot come forth.

Mine eye mourneth by reason of affliction: LORD, I have called daily upon thee, I have stretched out my hands unto thee.

Wilt thou shew wonders to the dead? shall the dead arise and praise thee? Selah.

Shall thy loving-kindness be declared in the grave? or thy faithfulness in destruction?

Shall thy wonders be known in the dark? and thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?

But unto thee have I cried, O LORD; and in the morning shall my prayer prevent thee.

LORD, why castest thou off my soul? why hidest thou thy face from me?

I am afflicted and ready to die from my youth up: while I suffer thy terrors I am distracted.

Thy fierce wrath goeth over me; thy terrors have cut me off.

They came round about me daily like water; they compassed me about together.

Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness.<sup>3</sup>

This Psalm expressed a person's petition to be saved from death. It speaks about the darkness that sometimes comes when someone is experiencing suffering, terror, and death. As my mentor and I reflected on this Psalm, my mind automatically went to Jesus is light. Jesus will give peace and God will give peace to whoever is in need. But before I could reflect, my mentor said something extremely profound to me: "Sometimes the best care we can give is to be present with people in their suffering. People who are suffering, dying, and in terror need a presence. They feel alone. People often need someone to simply listen to their lament without assumption and without judgment. When people are in the pit and there is no way out one of the most important things you can do as a chaplain is simply be present with people in their suffering." We talked about how people can downplay another's suffering by not listening or acknowledging a person's pain. By focusing so much on "the light" one can discredit a person's personal experience in the pit of darkness. Sometimes simply being a peaceful presence and showing someone that he or she is not alone is what truly shares the peace of God with a person in his or her situation. Giving space for lament, to authentically share testimony, is sometimes spiritually and emotionally transformative.

After much reflection, I believe that continuous reference to Jesus as light, trust, and faith in God has helped Ms. Jones, me, and so many people within my family and faith community get through extremely intense and traumatic situations. As Cone's writing supports, Christ did suffer, die, and was resurrected so that we could be set free of our pain and suffering in the present. However, I know that we still experience pain, suffering, death, and illness on earth. Because of this it is imperative that there be a safe space for lamentation, and as spiritual leaders it is important for us to be a compassionate presence for people in the midst of their pain and suffering.

### **Notes**

1. The Holy Bible, King James Version (New York: American Bible Society, 1999), 2 Timothy 2:12.
2. Cone, James H. Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968–1998 (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 38–39.
3. The Holy Bible, King James Version (New York: American Bible Society: 1999), Psalm 88.