

**“I POUR OUT MY COMPLAINT BEFORE HIM;
I TELL MY TROUBLE BEFORE HIM.” (Ps. 142:3)
PSALMS OF THE LIVING¹**

Kerstin Menzel

1. Living Psalms I: Klagezeit Leipzig in winter 2021

The starting point for my presentation is the experience of a liturgical format that we as churches in Leipzig started in January 2021, at the height of the second wave of Covid-19, as a hybrid format, and then celebrated weekly for three months until Good Friday 2021: “Klagezeit / Time of Lament. Listening, Silence, Prayer in time of Pandemic”. I want to begin with that experience: please come with me to a Friday in January 2021: a woman stands at the lectern of St Peter’s Church in Leipzig and says:

“God, when I left the office in March, I took strength in the hope that it would only be for six to eight weeks. It was now ten months ago. I hoped, like many of us, that we would soon be able to return to normality. But it can never be the same as before. The colleague with whom I had lunch almost every day has left the company in the meantime. I couldn’t even say goodbye to her properly. No last lunch together, no personal farewell, no last hug. Just a phone call without seeing each other. In the last few months, there were only six meals when I did *not* sit alone at the table. All other meals I had to eat alone. No cooking together, no eating together, no shared meals either at work, or at home. [...] From one day to the next I was sitting at home alone. I haven’t seen a single colleague in person for ten months. No greetings on arrival, no goodbyes on leaving. No seeing and no being seen. [...] God, what path are you trying to guide me on with this? What are your plans for me – that I have to be so alone?”

Her words are followed by a shared moment of silence and then, in alternating voices, by the leader and the congregation (seated with social distancing or joining online): ‘Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.’ Earlier, we had heard from a social worker who spoke about the situation of some of the families in her care. Families in which difficult situations prevailed, where lack of money, lack of space, mental illness or overwhelming demands were exacerbated by the pandemic. After these two laments of the present, there followed a part of one of this year’s psalms, Psalm 142:

¹ This lecture is based on three longer texts: Kerstin Menzel, “Zeug:innen des Leids: Beteiligung von Betroffenen in Gottesdiensten angesichts von Krisen und Katastrophen”, in: Stephan Steger / Martin Stuflesser / Marco Weis / Stephan Winter (Hg.), *Liturgie und Ekklesiologie: Reform des Gottesdienstes als Reform der Kirche*, Regensburg 2023, 282-300; idem, “Spannungen inszenieren und halten: Gottesdienste in Pandemiezeiten”, in: Alexander Deeg / Christian Lehnert, *Krieg und Frieden: Metaphern der Gewalt und der Versöhnung im christlichen Gottesdienst*, BLSp 34, Leipzig 2022, 101-130; idem, “Viva vox – Stimme des Lebens: Die Bibel im Kontext von Berichten über gegenwärtige Erfahrungen in Gottesdiensten”, in: Anke von Legat / Michael Schneider (eds.), *Große Botschaft in kleinen Texten: Bibelauslegung in und durch Medien der Gegenwartskultur*, Biblische Argumente in gegenwärtigen Debatten 2, Paderborn: Brill Schöningh 2022, 221-230.

“With my voice I cry out to the Lord;
with my voice I plead for mercy to the Lord.
I pour out my complaint before him;
I tell my trouble before him.
When my spirit faints within me,
you know my way! ...
I cry to you, O Lord;
I say, ‘You are my refuge,
my portion in the land of the living.’” (Ps. 142:2-4, 6)

Two weeks later: A staff member of a community café for refugees describes the situation of those she has accompanied, with language difficulties over the phone and a general lack of perspective. She concludes: “But what about those we don’t reach, who don’t respond to our calls and messages, who aren’t able to ask anyone?”

“Hear my prayer, O Lord;
give ear to my pleas for mercy!
In your faithfulness, answer me in your righteousness!
Therefore my spirit faints within me;
my heart within me is appalled.
I remember the days of old;
I meditate on all that you have done;
I ponder the work of your hands.
I stretch out my hands to you;
my soul thirsts for you like a parched land.
Answer me quickly, O Lord! My spirit fails!
Hide not your face from me.” (Ps. 143:1, 4-7a)

A funeral manager shares the story of picking up a man who died of Covid-19 from a nursing home, then picking up his wife two weeks later. She speaks of hard goodbyes, over-regulation and the fear of doing something wrong. She asks, “What do you do when ten people are allowed at the cemetery and the eleventh is standing at the door?”

“You have fed them with the bread of tears
and given them tears to drink in full measure.
Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved!” (Ps. 80:6, 8)

Over the course of three months, 24 people have spoken. A restaurant owner and the director of a home for the elderly, a mother and a student, a Long Covid sufferer and a singer, the mayor and a mentally ill person. The format was born out of the observation that it was hard for people of faith, as well as for pastors, to endure the powerlessness and sense of futility associated with the pandemic; that with the desire to provide comfort and hope, lamentation and silence invariably received too little attention.² The idea was to listen carefully and to endure the paradoxes that tore life apart in the two heaviest waves of the pandemic. The message of this format of public pastoral care was meant to be: we as churches listen listen to, and pray for, the people of the city.

The “decisive aspect of faith”, as we had learned from Henning Luther, “does not lie in the calming comfort of a stabilising security of life. The consolation of faith consists far more in constant unease and alienation from our world. It is not the assertion that everything is ultimately and somehow all right that gives comfort [...]. What gives comfort, rather, is the liberation of not having to lie any longer, of not having to gloss over and defend anything. There is more honest hope in lament and despair than in affirmations of meaning and security of life. Mourning maintains

² Cf. Ulrike Wagner-Rau, “Schwierige Ohnmacht”, 26.3.2020, <https://www.feinschwarz.net/schwierige-ohnmacht/> (15.4.2021); Kerstin Menzel, “Nur wer klagt, hofft’: Die ‘Lügen der Tröster’ in Zeiten der Pandemie”, 14.1.2021, <https://www.feinschwarz.net/nur-wer-klagt-hofft/> (15.4.2021); Alexander Deeg, “Gottesdienst in Corona-Zeiten: Drei Variationen zum Thema ‘Präsenz’”, in: *Evangelische Theologie* 81 (2021) 2, 136-151, 150f.

loyalty to the Other, to the Better, to the end of suffering, which the affirmations of existence have long since betrayed. Only the one who laments hopes.”³

And then, together with the present-day laments, excerpts from the lament Psalms. We chose words from Psalm 13, Psalm 69, Psalm 77, Psalm 80, Psalm 142, Psalm 143 and, on Good Friday, Psalm 22 (together with a reading from the Passion narrative). The liturgy we found for these hybrid ecumenical services was very much characterised by the immediate resonance of descriptions of contemporary experience with the biblical texts.⁴ The testimonies of very different people in the face of the crisis opened up a space that gave the biblical texts a specific intensity. “Living psalms”, someone said at one point.

2. Psalms of the (still) living – Lament Psalms in liturgies after disasters

In a collective situation of distress and crisis, biblical texts prove to be more easily understandable and relevant, especially where they relate to actual experiences. This can be traced back to the structural analogy of these situations to the socio-historical context of many biblical texts. Kay-Ulrich Bronk has demonstrated this for the peace prayers in East Germany in the 1980s– also a worship format – though in a completely different way and context – in which “testimonies of the affected”, information and reports were an essential element, alongside biblical readings, meditations, and intercessions,. In his evaluation of the Wittenberg Prayers for Renewal, he concludes that “[t]he grammar of those situations which the biblical texts describe or presuppose and the grammar of the historical moment [...] were full of analogies”.⁵ The effort spent in interpretive communication in the meditations and sermons was small in the political context of oppressive restrictions on freedom and injustice: “The simple retelling of the biblical text could connect faith and politics. [...] In order to bring text and situation into conversation, in some cases one only needed to hold them side by side.”⁶ The Psalms in particular “brought one’s own situation and one’s own feelings relentlessly and drastically to the fore and at the same time offered a perspective beyond the experience”.⁷

Behind the Psalms lies individual and collective hardship and distress, which can also be experienced in a completely different, but analogous way in political distress, a natural disaster or a pandemic in the 20th or 21st century. At the same time, as prayer forms, they are so open that different experiences can be connected with them.

³ Henning Luther, “Die Lügen der Tröster. Das Beunruhigende des Glaubens als Herausforderung für die Seelsorge”, in: *PrTh* 33 (1998), 163-176, 170.

⁴ The Introduction that we started with every week also sounded rather biblical:
“For everything there is a time under heaven.
In these times when suffering has so many and varied faces.
In these times when helplessness sometimes leaves us speechless.
That is when we believe it is time to lament.
Time to listen carefully to what makes the present situation difficult.
Time to seek expression for our helplessness and to borrow the words of the Bible for that.
Time not to resolve the contradictions and tensions, but to hold them up to –and against – God.
In the hope that there is strength in listening to each other.
In the hope that being silent together before God already transforms things.
Listening, being silent, praying in time of pandemic.
For everything there is a time under heaven.
A time for Lament. Our time is in God’s hands.”

⁵ Kay-Ulrich Bronk, *Der Flug der Taube und der Fall der Mauer: Die Wittenberger Gebete um Erneuerung im Herbst 1989*, Leipzig 1999, 248.

⁶ Bronk, *Der Flug der Taube*, 248.

⁷ Bronk, *Der Flug der Taube*, 266.

Because they are survival literature themselves, the Psalms of Lament have a firm place in services in the wake of disasters. They are taken up in songs and pieces of music as well as in the liturgy (only not so far, in my opinion, as a sermon text). Using three psalms as examples, I will give a brief overview of how they are integrated and used. Because the civil-religious context of worship services, in Europe alone, differs considerably from country to country, I will confine myself to the German context. Until recently, a paradigm of celebration had been established here that closely bound together the secular act of state, with one or more speeches by state representatives, and the religious service (usually ecumenically organised by the two main churches). The celebrations usually followed each other directly and took place in the same room, mostly in church buildings. In recent years, interreligious participation, especially by Jewish and Muslim representatives, has become more common, but is usually limited to the prayer parts of the service.⁸

Psalm 69: Relatively similar selections from this psalm were used in a TV service that was changed at short notice after the tsunami in 2005, after the attack in Nice in 2016 and immediately after the attack on the Christmas market on Breitscheidplatz in Berlin in 2016. The strong image of drowning in floods of water is used, appearing in verses 2-4 (lament) and 14-16 (petition). The second part of the lament and the second part of the petition, which use different metaphors, were omitted. More general petitions from verses 17-19a, 30b were also included. This compilation corresponds to the selection in the Hymnal of the German Protestant Churches. In the service after the tsunami, verses from Psalm 69 and other Psalms were placed in a collage of accounts of the experience and a Kyrie call, with Psalm 69 forming the framework.

Psalm 13: Here I need to introduce the context a bit. In Germany, in April 2021, in the same context of the second and third waves of the pandemic – the waves with the highest numbers of casualties – a state commemoration took place, preceded by an ecumenical service. Both ceremonies were broadcast on TV, but they abandoned the usual connection of the state and the church ceremony happening in the same place; they were only connected by the presence of the identical group of participants, which was, in view of the ban on gatherings, strictly limited to members of the German constitutional bodies and ten relatives of victims. However, the relatives spoke in the state ceremony, and for the first time the central rite of candle-lighting took place there, that is, in a secular setting. The service tried to look beyond the relatives of the deceased to other people affected by the pandemic: A journalist who was marked by a severe course of the disease, an intensive care worker and an artist spoke. Psalm 13 began the introductory part of the service, spoken almost in its entirety by the Orthodox archpriest Radu Constantin Miron. Here too, lament (vv. 2-3) and petition (vv. 4-5) are taken up. The insistent, fourfold “How long?” was closely connected to such a commemoration – an otherwise rare event – in the midst of an ongoing crisis.

Psalm 77: Like Psalm 69, this Psalm (in selected verses) is also interwoven with a Kyrie-call and – in this case – an open prayer in the introductory part of a service: the funeral service after the crash of an aeroplane in the French Alps, which turned out to be an extended suicide of the co-pilot. On the plane was a school class from the German town of Haltern. Here, too, verses from the lament section are primarily chosen, as well as the exhortation of the pray-er to him- or herself to remember God’s earlier deeds. By inserting prayers related to the specific situation and the Kyrie of the congregation, the text of the Psalm gains in impact. I find it different in the service that took place after the shooting rampage in a school in Winnenden, Württemberg. Here, the entire Psalm is spoken responsively with the congregation. Without any specific reference to the current events (beforehand there was only a rather general greeting, framed by two musical settings of “Out of deep distress I cry to you” from Ps. 130), the Psalm sounds rather conventional

⁸ Interestingly, the only Psalm recitation I have encountered by a Jewish representative is Psalm 6 in the service after the flood (see section 3).

and detached here; the cosmological and Exodus-related recollection of history, in particular, seems detached or far-fetched compared to the terrible events at the school.⁹

All three Psalms are used primarily in the opening part of the service, using a selection of the lament and petition sections. It may be argued that the remembrance of God's salvific action in the past, and the reassurance of his promise, are implicit in other parts of the service, so that the services as a whole reflect the structure of the lament Psalms.¹⁰ One could ask, nevertheless, whether the other parts of the respective psalms could not also be taken up in the course of the services and made more transparent in their connection to the lament at the beginning.

An interesting contrast is the State Act of Remembrance for those who died in the pandemic. Like the church services, the music was classical, but with a higher recognition factor than the choral pieces in the church. In particular, the reports of the relatives were framed by Brahms' German Requiem, in a specially staged version of the 1st and 2nd movements, pre-recorded and then projected into the whole room. Director Jochen Christian Sandig had already attracted attention at home and abroad a few years earlier with the scenically staged "Human Requiem" with the Rundfunkchor. Brahms' Requiem is not exclusively church music – the humanistic focus and the lack of reference to redemption in Christ already had a provocative effect at the time of composition – but the powerful images of hope from the Bible, such as the confidence of Ps. 126:5-6 or Is. 35:10, were surprising for such a civil-religious celebration.

It is worth noting, that the inclusion of the lament and petition verses in the opening section strengthens the testimonies of the respective events and places them in a different framework. Using another psalm as an example, I want to explain what biblical psalms closely connected with contemporary lament texts, or modern psalms of lament formulated in biblical language and form, can contribute to these services. This psalm links contemporary life and biblical language even more closely.

3. Living-Psalm II: The Ahr-Psalm

On 14 and 15 July 2021, a once-in-a-century flood occurred due to heavy rainfall, especially in North Rhine-Westphalia and Rhineland-Palatinate. More than 180 people died, many were traumatised by the speed of the floods, there were highly dramatic rescue operations, many experienced fear of death. The events were most horrific in the Ahr valley. Large parts of towns were swept away by the water. People with mental disabilities were not rescued in time from a residential home; twelve died. Under the impact of these events, the priest Stephan Wahl, who came from that area and now lives in Israel, wrote the so-called Ahr-Psalm. It was taken up several times in the central memorial service, in a touching reading accompanied by projected pictures, as well as in a musical setting, composed especially for the service. In this text, biblical expression and present-day speech blend into one another in a barely discernible way. To put it another way: present experience is expressed in biblical language. With an effect that certainly explains why it became the central element in the funeral service.

⁹ Furthermore, Ps. 77 was also used in the service in the cathedral after the tsunami, but I do not know the specific verse selection.

¹⁰ So the proposal by Andrea Bieler, "Psalmengottesdienste als Klageräume für Überlebende sexueller Gewalt: Poimenische und liturgische Überlegungen", in: *Eth* 60 (2000) 2, 117-130, 128ff. For example, in the service for those who died in the pandemic, the song following Psalm 13, "When we are in the greatest distress", with its emphasis on the consolation that already lies in the invocation of God, could be understood as an implicit substitute for the missing verse 6. Towards the end of the service, the choir also intones statements of trust from Ps. 31. In other services, the readings of the encounter of the risen Christ with the disciples on the road to Emmaus or of Romans 8 ("nothing can separate us from the love of God") can be understood as fulfilling analogous functions.

"I want to cry out to you, God, with a wounded soul,
 but my words freeze on my tongue.
 It is cold inside me, as if all feelings have died,
 My eyes gaze blankly on my broken world.
 The brook, which I loved from the days I was a child,
 its rippling sound was like music,
 became a deadly beast,
 its ravenous floods devoured without mercy.
 Everything was taken from me. Everything!
 Washed away what I called my life.
 All that was left was my shirt, cold and wet clinging to my body,
 Without shoes, I crouched on the roof.
 For hours I screamed for help,
 and all around me the raging waters."¹¹

The churches are asked to organise ritual services after disasters, because they are trusted to *give language to the horror*. Disasters change the lives of those affected in an upsetting, often traumatising way; they also leave people not directly affected speechless. Carolin Emcke has pointed to the fact that the dehumanisation experienced by victims of violence and natural disasters finds a counter-strategy in narrative and speech, in which those affected can reassure themselves of their subjectivity.¹² According to Bronk, the salvaging of one's own experience in words that refer to an earlier event already has a comforting character, "because it corrects and thus relieves the fantasy of finding oneself in a unique crisis without analogy".¹³ Moreover, when the testimonies are framed by the Psalms, the direction of speech changes. The lament is addressed to God. What exceeds human capabilities is entrusted to God, mutual accusation finds its way into shared lament.

"Where were you God, Eternal One?
 have you forsaken us for ever?
 Have you long been building a new earth?
 somewhere far away in your infinite vastness?
 With deadly speed, muddy waters filled the houses,
 gruesomely drowning people in their own rooms.
 Don't you care about any of this, incomprehensible one?
 You are all-powerful, the snap of your fingers would have sufficed.
 The zealots who think they know you say,
 you wanted to teach us a lesson, a clear lesson,
 a portion of the Flood to punish us for our crimes,
 for our crimes against nature, against your creation.
 May their chattering mouths be closed forever,
 never again shall they take thy name in vain,
 for their foolish sophistry, their biting judgment
 with uplifted forefinger, bigotedly concealed.
 Never will I believe that, never,
 you are not a cruel idol of misery,
 You send no sorrow, no merciless calamity
 and take no pleasure in our pain."¹⁴

Wanting to give comfort in the face of human suffering is quite understandable. But where this effort sidesteps our own powerlessness, one sometimes finds bland, merely positive images of God. But it is not enough just to assert God's goodness and love. On the contrary, sometimes this

¹¹ Stephan Wahl, *Erwarte von mir keine frommen Sprüche: Ungeschminkte Psalmen*, Würzburg 2022, 11.

¹² Cf. Carolin Emcke, *Weil es sagbar ist: Über Zeugenschaft und Gerechtigkeit*, Frankfurt/M. 2013, 99.

¹³ Bronk, *Der Flug der Taube*, 249.

¹⁴ Wahl, *Erwarte von mir keine frommen Sprüche*, 13-14.

one-note churchy rhetoric becomes a toxic positivity¹⁵ that leaves little room for doubt and questions. From the biblical psalms, the Ahr-Psalms have learned to take suffering profoundly seriously and to reflect it back to God. In the struggle over the image of God in view of the interpretation of the events, *theologically more demanding images of God* are opened up. Where one can only hold on to God against God, both faith and what has happened are really taken seriously.

“But you make it hard for me
to really believe this.
I know we are not blameless in many a misery,
too easily we abuse our freedom.
But why do you stand by, why do you not intervene?
Why do you not save us from ourselves?
Your silence torments my soul,
I almost cannot bear it any longer.
How mud and rubble pile up metres high,
in the ruined streets and alleys
whose beauty can no longer be recognised,
so desperately does my soul yearn for your light.
My usual prayers fall silent
I cannot manage to put my hands together.
So I throw my tears to the sky
my anger I hurl at your feet.
Do you hear my lamentations, my desperate stammering,
is that also a prayer in your eyes?
Then I am more pious than ever,
my heart overflows with such prayers.”¹⁶

Just as *complex* as the images of God are the *emotions* that resonate in the texts. Feelings such as anger are also expressed, which are not obvious at first glance, and are sometimes perhaps even considered taboo. These too may be brought before God.

“Yet do not let me sink into my dark ruminations,
Remind me of your closeness in times past.
I want to be grateful for the help that is given to me,
for the comforting shoulder to lean on.
I look up and see helping hands,
which are there now, without applause, just like that.
The many who come now and stay,
who soothe pain, heal wounds
of the body and of the soul,
with long breath and much patience.
Even though you are mysterious to me, God,
even more incomprehensible now, infinitely distant,
nevertheless, I want to believe in you,
Resisting, defying, no matter what the odds.
Let the scoffers laugh at me cynically,
I will hope for your nearness at my side.
If only you would finally break your silence,
But I bear it and bear you, O God.
Bear with me! And bear me,
O Eternal one, bear me!”¹⁷

¹⁵ Cf. Alexander Deeg, “Das geschlachtete Lamm: Die toxische Positivität und die heilsame Ambiguität der Liturgie”, in: *Heiliger Dienst* 75 (2021), 258-274.

¹⁶ Wahl, *Erwarte von mir keine frommen Sprüche*, 13-14.

¹⁷ Wahl, *Erwarte von mir keine frommen Sprüche*, 14-15.

Both with regard to the image of God and with regard to the description of the events, the Psalms of the Bible and of the present succeed in maintaining the tension and not dissolving one-dimensionally into hopeless despair on the one hand or into a hopeful sidelining of the suffering on the other. Hope does not come as an insistence that “it will all be fine” but comes from the memory of God’s goodness on the one hand (in the briefest terms) and the experience of human care on the other. Both the event and God’s promise are taken seriously, held together in a “defiant nevertheless”.

Psalms of the living, survival literature – where concrete experience and biblical texts are closely combined liturgically, human experience in crisis situations is expressed in all its depth and, simultaneously, taken beyond its own limited horizon.¹⁸ Liturgically, services in the wake of catastrophes have found interesting ways of doing this in recent years, which are worth building on and developing further.

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Gefördert durch:



Bundesministerium
des Innern
und für Heimat

EVANGELISCH-LUTHERISCHE
LANDESKIRCHE HANNOVERS



aufgrund eines Beschlusses
des Deutschen Bundestages

¹⁸ Cf. Jürgen Ziemer, “Die Bibel als Sprachhilfe: Zum Bibelgebrauch in den Kirchen während der „Wende“ im Herbst 1989”, in: *Pastoraltheologie* 81 (1992) 7, 280-291, 282f.