

PART THREE - SESSION SEVEN

God Works with Our Broken Hearts: Grief, Repentance and Reckoning

Payton Hoegh

At the conclusion of this session, participants will:

- Articulate the centrality of lament, repentance, and ritual as a faithful response to climate anxiety and as a necessary part of the work of creation care.
- Express their own stories of grief amidst climate crisis.
- Outline how rituals of personal and communal lament can be opportunities for truth-telling, repentance, and calls to action for creation care and engagement.

Please review the primary resources, guiding Scripture, and reflection and discussion questions prior to the small group gathering. Optional resources are available for a deeper dive.

PRE-GATHERING PREPARATION

Find these resources online at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/creation-care/love-god-love-gods-world-curriculum/session-seven/>.

Primary Resources:

- Film: “Why Grief can be Strength in a Warming World” | Dan Sherrell | TEDx - YouTube (13 minutes)
- Poetry: “After the Fire” | Ada Limon
- Podcast: “An Obituary for the Land” - The New York Times - The Daily

Optional Resources:

- Essay: “The Pall Of Our Unrest” by Terry Tempest Williams in Mountain Journal

GUIDING SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 9:10; 17-20 (NRSV)

Take up weeping and wailing for the mountains
and a lamentation for the pastures of the wilderness,
because they are laid waste so that no one passes through,
and the lowing of cattle is not heard;
both the birds of the air and the animals
have fled and are gone.

Thus says the Lord of hosts:

Consider and call for the mourning women to come;
send for the skilled women to come;
let them quickly raise a dirge over us,
so that our eyes may run down with tears
and our eyelids flow with water.

For a sound of wailing is heard from Zion:

“How we are ruined!
We are utterly shamed
because we have left the land,
because they have cast down our dwellings.”

Hear, O women, the word of the Lord,
and let your ears receive the word of his mouth;
teach to your daughters a dirge
and each to her neighbor a lament.

SMALL GROUP GATHERING

Facilitator or volunteer can use the prayer below to open your time together.

OPENING PRAYER

By Payton Hoegh

Loving Creator,
You are a God who weeps.
Your face has felt the touch of tears and,
Because of the breadth and depth of your love,
You know the sting of brokenness and suffering.
In this time of uncertainty and loss,
As we face the fearful consequences of a changing climate,
Grant us the courage to acknowledge that we have not loved as you called us to love.
Teach us how to mourn so that we might remember how we are called to care.
Give us the strength to grieve so that we might be moved to change.
May our broken hearts, our tears and lament,
Steel in us a commitment to repentance and guide us forward
On the path to renewal, healing, and wholeness.
Amen.

CHECK-IN

Facilitator leads the group through brief check-ins from each participant.

REFLECTION

Group can choose to read the reflection out loud together or go directly to discussion questions depending on timing and how many participants were able to do the reading prior to the gathering.

I still remember the panic I felt from the knock on the door that night.

Through eyes blurred with sleep, I took in the strange scene outside. The sky was dark, but it was streaked with an eerie orange glow. Twisted trees were haunting silhouettes, and a haze of smoke veiled the air. Window panes shook as helicopters roared overhead. The message from a kind neighbor relaying orders from the sheriff's office was brief and frank: Pack a bag, take only what you need. Get out quickly.

In 2017, the Creek Fire raged through the canyons around our home. It burned over 15,000 acres and leveled dozens of houses and structures. For over a week, my wife and I watched the news and checked

our phones. We became anxious experts at analyzing maps that traced the fire's spread. When we were finally able to return to our little house, the structure still stood, untouched. But just beyond it, mere feet from its foundation, the hillside was charred black, all the brush and vegetation burned away. From the street just above ours, you could still smell the smoke from homes of families who weren't so lucky.

As I stood in the driveway reeling with the mixed emotions of that moment, I felt my throat clench and my body begin to tremble. A desperate realization settled in my mind: *Nothing would ever be the same.*

As a global community, we are facing this same fearful anticipation of change. All around us is striking evidence of loss. We are bearing witness to increasingly devastating wildfires, droughts, hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes - all part of a steadily unfolding pattern of more prevalent and powerful climate-related disasters. In just the past 50 years, over 2 million people have lost their lives in such catastrophic events. Whole communities have been displaced, homes erased by shifting sea level or unexpected cataclysm. Whole species of wildlife have been lost to extinction, and, with populations dwindling, 42,000 more could soon face the same fate. The scientific community warns that all of this is likely to grow worse.

So profound is this moment of upheaval that a new word has been coined to describe it: "solastalgia". Coined by Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht, this term combines clashing roots denoting "comfort" with those for "loneliness" and "pain" to name the unique emotional toll of climate crisis. Solastalgia seems singularly suited to that numb, hollow feeling left in the wake of rising tides erasing whole islands, amidst swirling ashes and haunting quiet where trees and homes stood, laughter and joy once echoed.

"We have to figure out a way to access our grief about climate change to wrap our hearts around it," Dan Sherrell explains in "Why Grief can be Strength in a Warming World." "Emotional processing is going to make us braver, more resilient, more able to cope and to act."

In this time of change, our grief can carry us forward. For people of faith, it always has.

The voice of Jeremiah echoes across generations proclaiming: "I will weep and wail for the mountains and take up a lament concerning the wilderness grasslands... Teach your daughters how to wail; teach one another a lament..."

Our rites and rituals of mourning allow us to sit with our broken hearts. We are present in our pain and, in our lament, we acknowledge that nothing can return to the way it was. We must see and feel the wounds of the world because this opens us to the reality of our personal and collective hurt, to our responsibility for and from this pain, and to the hope that can be born of our brokenness.

As environmentalist and social activist Terry Tempest Williams explains in a moving obituary for the land:

Grief is love... To bear witness to this moment of undoing is to find the strength and spiritual will to meet the dark and smoldering landscapes where we live. We can cry. Our tears will fall like rain in the desert and wash off our skins of ash so our pores can breathe, so our bodies can breathe back the lives that we have taken for granted.

I will mark my heart with an "X" made of ash that says, the power to restore life resides here.

As Christians, we are called to this courage and boldness. Love demands nothing less.

What would it look like for us to join the God of Jeremiah in weeping and wailing for the mountains? For us to open our eyes to the wounds of the world like Thomas placing his hands in Christ's broken body?

What would change if each time we saw the cross hanging in our sanctuaries and around our necks we thought of an "X" marked upon our hearts proclaiming the restoration of life, rebirth, and resurrection as we transform the way we live?

Our selfishness and short-sightedness have led us to this painful moment. If we are to rise to the challenge of our time, if we are to honor the gifts we have been given and live once more into God's call of care and relationship with this Earth, we must grieve, repent, and change. In doing so, we can change the world.

Discussion questions

Facilitator guides the group through the discussion questions.

1. What do you care enough about that you would change your life for it?
2. Grief and anxiety are so prevalent and specific in this time of climate crisis that a new term has been created to name it: Solastalgia. In "Why Grief Can Be a Strength in a Warming World," Dan Sherrell suggests that "solastalgia exists in some form in all of us. We just have not figured out a way to make space for it." What role can the church play in responding to the increasing prevalence of eco-anxiety and climate-grief? What could this look like in your congregation or community?
3. In her "Obituary for the Land," Terry Tempest Williams writes, "We have been living a myth. We have constructed a dream. We have cajoled and seduced ourselves into believing we are the center of all things... This is a lethal lie that will be seen by future generations as a grave, a grave moral sin committed and buried in the name of ignorance and arrogance." What does repentance look like when applied to such a grave moral sin and an issue as broad as climate change? How do we engage such repentance communally?
4. The prophet Jeremiah's lamentation calls for grief and weeping before conveying God's vow in Chapter 31: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me..." How can we honor the need for grief and mourning in this time of loss *and* the urgent call for action to mitigate the consequences of climate change so we might see the hope of God's promise in this fearful time?

CLOSING CHECK-OUT & PRAYER

What word describes how you feel right now? After you've shared, please invite another person to go.

After all have offered a word, the facilitator or volunteer can pray a simple prayer bringing together the hopes and prayers of the whole group.

ACTION OPPORTUNITIES

These are activities and engagement opportunities to explore different ways to get involved and learn more.

- Read "[Words for a Dying World: Stories of Grief and Courage from the Global Church](#)" or "[Solastalgia: An Anthology of Emotion in a Disappearing World](#)." Reflect on your own stories and those of your community that demonstrate grief and courage in the face of climate crisis.
- Visit a site that is open to the public which has been impacted by environmental degradation or climate catastrophe. Be present in this space, be attentive to evidence of loss, and reflect on what emotions arise. Offer a prayer for restoration and healing: for yourself, for this place, and for the

Earth. Create a plan on how you and your congregation might be active in bringing about such restoration.

- Organize a service, ceremony, or ritual that provides space and opportunity for your community to reflect on the impact of climate change, to lament and repent together, and to commit to change that will honor God's call for us to care for and be in relationship with all of creation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



***Payton Hoegh** is the program director for the Center for Spirituality in Nature. A postulant in the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, he is passionate about community weaving, ecology, environmentalism, agriculture, justice, and equity. He holds a Master of Divinity degree from Claremont School of Theology. Hoegh has worked as chaplain and director of a faith-based young adult service program as well as a communications professional specializing in creative digital design and storytelling for church and nonprofit partners. He also founded All Wanderers, an interfaith community that gathers in nature to hike, break bread, and engage what it means to be a spiritual being in the contemporary world. Hoegh lives with his wife, Jazmin, and cat, Zooey, in a tiny home near the Angeles National Forest in California.*