

The land mourns

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Critical Essay

Hosea testifies to an earth that laments with its people.

by Andi Lloyd
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(Sources images: Getty and Unsplash)

In 2005, Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht published a paper naming a new emotion: solastalgia. The word describes the pain we feel when we see environmental change in the places we call home. In justifying his decision to make up a new word, Albrecht pointed out that English has very few words that connect emotional and environmental states. Albrecht found plenty of examples of solastalgia: among Australian farmers during lengthy droughts, residents of Louisiana following Katrina, and survivors of the tsunami in Southeast Asia in 2004.

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In the years since, environmental scientists and environmental psychologists have honed the concept further, arguing that what we feel in this time of climate change is outright *grief*: a grief unique enough and pervasive enough to have its own name. Ecological grief, or climate grief.



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Climate grief is a new name for what is, for me, a familiar emotion. Before I was a pastor, I was a scientist. For nearly 25 years, I studied the effects of a warming climate on the forests of the far north: the Alaskan boreal forest, the Siberian taiga. I knelt in front of trees, measured them, and counted their growth rings to learn their histories. I listened to their stories of life in a time of climate change: stories that spoke of an imperiled landscape, of an imperiled world.

Back then, I never spoke my grief out loud. In paper after paper and grant after grant, I'd write some version of the same sentence. "If current trends continue," the sentence would begin, followed by a description of what would happen if current trends continued.

Well, current trends continued. And now, here we are. Awash in grief. I've been wondering what would have happened if I had found room in the language of science for the language of lament. As a pastor, I now know that the language of lament has power.

The prophet Hosea knew that power. Hosea's is an ecological lament. His world, like ours, is awash in grief. All of creation is grieving, or languishing, or outright perishing. "Therefore the land mourns," he says, "and all who live on it languish" (4:3).

The land mourns. It's an assertion that hits our 21st-century ears strangely. What are we to make of it? The temptation is strong to glide right past that verb or to set it aside as mere literary device. But in *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics*, Mari Joerstad invites us to be curious about such strangeness. She invites us to take such sentences seriously—not literally, but seriously.

Mourning is an outward expression of inward grief, but it is also an assertion that grief is not a private affair but a communal concern. For the ancient Israelites, mourning entailed public lament, marking oneself with ashes and torn clothing. Those outward signs spoke the truth of loss. They invited compassionate response and neighborly solidarity—standing with those whose lives were passing through shadowed valleys.

In the Hebrew Bible, mourning is an expansive practice. The people mourn, of course, but so do the land, the pastures, and the deep springs. Even gates and walls lament. The Hebrew verb *abal*, translated here as “mourn,” also carries the meaning “to dry up, to wither.” Where a widow might put ashes on her head, the land and pastures and springs mourn by withering and drying up—all ways of speaking aloud the truth of inward grief.

Therein lies the power of lament: to speak the truth that all is not well. Walter Brueggemann writes that grief, spoken aloud, is “the counter to denial.” Lament is prophetic speech. It bears faithful witness to all that is not right with the world and to all that is not right with ourselves. To take the land’s mourning seriously is to ask about its grief—to wonder what truth the land’s grief spoke to the people in Hosea’s day and what truth it might speak to us now.

Hosea gives us a glimpse with the first word of the sentence, “Therefore the land mourns.” *Therefore* points us to what comes just before this verse. The land mourns because the people have gone astray, in all the familiar ways:

There is no faithfulness or loyalty,
and no knowledge of God in the land.
Swearing, lying, and murder,
and stealing and adultery break out;
bloodshed follows bloodshed. (4:1–2)

The *therefore* that follows deepens the strangeness of verse 3: the land isn’t mourning solely for its own sake. This is not an ecological lament in the way we might think about such a thing these days; the land does not grieve pollution or strip-mining or any material injury to itself. The land’s lament, to which Hosea gives voice, is wider than that.

The land’s lament speaks a foundational ecological truth: when one part of creation goes awry, the whole suffers. The land’s grief at what the people have done points to the fundamental reality of our interconnection. Perhaps it is the boundedness of our bodies that makes it so easy to overlook the truth of our connectedness. We appear so discrete, so unitary, but we are not.

If we could see our interconnectedness, I imagine it would look like a fabric: threads running between each of us and every person on whom our lives depend; threads tracing the path from each of us to each nonhuman creature that interacts with our life—the food on our table, that tree that we smile at every morning, the birds that sing us awake; still more threads traveling from each of those creatures to all of the creatures on which they depend—their pollinators, their food, the earthworms that till the soil in which they grow. And finally, there are the shimmering, gossamer threads, spun of some gorgeous hue, running from each creature and each human to God.

Our lives are held, connected, one to the other and all to God: we are bound up in a beautiful, multicolored, homespun fabric. That fabric is an ecological truth: it describes the deeply interconnected and interdependent world that I came to know as an ecologist. And that fabric is a theological truth, reflecting the world as God made it to be—a relational world, a connected world, an interdependent world.

The land's mourning speaks simultaneously of a vision of the world as it ought to be—that beautiful fabric—and the truth of the world as it is: too much injustice and too little love fraying the threads that hold us all. The land feels those fraying threads. The land grieves those fraying threads. The land mourns.

Now, as then, the fabric that connects all of creation is badly torn: torn by manifold injustices wrought and perpetuated by the exploitative systems in which we live, torn by ideologies of scarcity that teach us to love too narrowly and too little. To mourn is to speak that truth to the lies that prop up the denial on which the status quo depends.

To take seriously the land's mourning is to acknowledge that the grief that we feel—solastalgia, ecological grief, climate grief—is wider than our own lives. In that acknowledgment is an invitation to become even greater participants. What might happen if we used creation's lament as inspiration for what to do with our own too rarely acknowledged grief? If we engaged, in other words, in biomimicry?

Biomimicry is literally the copying of life. The practice of biomimicry looks to nonhuman nature for inspiration for architectural design, technological design, and even the transformation of human cultural systems. Humans try to solve problems by carefully studying the natural world and imitating what we see there. We do this because we observe that nature has often developed efficient and intricate means to an end. Often solutions that the human mind cannot find are available in nature, if we look closely.

Otis Moss III has extended this concept to what he calls theological biomimicry. “When we recognize the interdependence and interconnection in nature,” he told the *Century* in 2017, “we begin to build human systems that are interdependent and interconnected, based on justice and love” ([see “Chicago church connects sustainable food, economic empowerment” September 20, 2017](#)). This work moves us closer to God's vision of the world as it ought to be: a world of justice, interdependence, and mutual flourishing.

When we undertake this work, in this time of climate change, we become participants in the holy work of lament. We join our voices to the creation-wide expression of grief that is, even now, pouring forth. To do so is to recognize our interdependence and to affirm our interconnectedness by stepping into a deeper solidarity with one another and with all of God's creatures.

In that kind of boundary-crossing solidarity, we begin to weave together those beautiful but frayed threads, the ones that hold us in right relationship with one another, with all of creation, and with God. Mourning together, in true solidarity, we name the truth of what's wrong. And in so doing, we begin to make it right.

Religious leaders can help with that project. We can create brave spaces for lament. We can build communities in which we learn how to practice solidarity with those who mourn, to honor the grief of those who weep. We can, in our preaching and praying, our rituals and our liturgies, expand the circle of compassion to include the whole of what God made, human and nonhuman neighbors alike. If we do that, then we will begin, together and with God's help, to weave anew that beautiful fabric.

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