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**Family Instability, Lament, and Blue Herons
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For a while, there are cards in the mailbox, casseroles in the refrigerator, and people stopping by. The busyness quickly becomes an uneasy stillness shortly after her mom's funeral. The change feels abrupt, especially after the past month's intensity when 14-year-old Wendy helped take care of her mom's cancer-ridden body. The silence expands around her like a dark, uninhabited cave as the implications of her mom's death shut out the last glimmer of daylight. Wendy crawls into bed and pulls the covers tightly over her head, hoping to shelter her body from the cold stone walls closing in around her. Today people expect her to decide who to live with.

She barely knows her dad. Her parents divorced when she was five, and her dad moved to another state. He usually sends a gift for her birthday and Christmas, but she hasn't spent much time with him. Mom always assured her that it's better this way. Four years ago, Wendy and her mom moved in with her new step-dad. He's a nice guy but has kids of his own who visit every other weekend. When they are around, Wendy feels like an awkward "extra." She decides to live with her grandmother even though it will mean moving again.

Wendy pulls the blankets tighter. A scene from the week keeps playing in her head, and she can't turn off the automatic replay button. A kind man in the neighborhood came by with a lasagna. He bent down to meet Wendy's eyes and says, "I am so sorry you lost your mom..." Immediately the man's face brightens and eyes shine as he continues, "...but God wanted her with him in a better place." The scene haunts her as the words reverberate,

“...better place...better place...” Who is this God that wants her mom to leave her for a better place?

Wendy once heard a preacher describe God as our helper, “All you have to do is ask God for help, and he will be there.” She must have prayed for her mom a thousand times, but God didn’t help. Maybe God was absent and didn’t hear her because he was helping others? Or worse, if God was present and didn’t do anything to help, God is either uncaring or doesn’t think Wendy is worth helping. It is easier to believe God is absent - especially if God wants her mom to be in a “better place.”

Reflecting on joy and adolescent flourishing is more straightforward when our lives are not plagued with sorrow, loneliness, or fear. How do we speak of the joy that permeates the biblical witness when turbulence and uncertainty are the rhythm of life? How does joy erupt amid the overwhelming emotions accompanying the effects of family instability – or does it? *Where is joy when God feels absent?*

Defining family instability and its effects

Family instability refers to changes in family structure that inhibit a young person’s healthy developmental trajectory. Researchers in the 1960s primarily examined the effects of family instability based on rising divorce rates, and they quickly uncovered more than changes in marital status.ⁱ Alongside approximately half of first time marriages ending in divorce, families in the U.S. were also experiencing increased rates of remarriage, unwed mothers, and cohabitation. Each of these involves changes in the family structure.ⁱⁱ Researchers now understand that family instability is more complex than simply divorce rates, and family structure in the United States is increasingly dynamic. As a result, “family changes over the past half century have created fundamental shifts in children’s experience of family life.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Since not all change is negative (a divorce or remarriage can potentially improve family life), researchers assess changes in family circumstances that are “abrupt, involuntary, and/or in a negative direction” and have potentially adverse effects on development.^{iv} A new family structure often involves changes in a child’s relationship with a parent and/or parental figure, variations in rules and behavior patterns, and movement to new schools in new neighborhoods. As in Wendy’s experience, the family structure may change due to a parent’s death, health crisis, or mental illness. “Uncertainty” is a common feeling for young people across these diverse situations because life doesn’t return to “normal.”^v

Such experiences stand in contrast to the stability children and young people need for a healthy developmental trajectory. Having a nurturing and responsive parent or parental figure, a place to live, nutritious food, medical care, and education provide stability.^{vi} When children and young people feel insecure in these areas, they need attentive adults to “act as a buffer against any negative effects” and help them “learn how to cope with adversity, adapt to their surroundings, and regulate their emotions.”^{vii} So when the pivotal parental relationship itself is in transition due to changes in the family structure, potential for adverse effects increases.

Research suggests that family structure changes have an accumulating effect. Children and youth with one transition fare better than those who experience multiple transitions.^{viii} In fact, the outcomes associated with multiple transitions appear more consequential for young people than only being raised by a single mom.^{ix} Wendy’s life in the above example includes four transitions: her parents’ divorce, living with a step-father, death of her mom, and moving in with her grandmother. You can imagine how Wendy’s transitions will also have a domino effect across other parts of her life.^x Wendy’s next move to her grandmother’s will require changing schools, neighborhoods, friend groups, and faith

communities. Like sound waves emanating from their source, the effects of family instability reverberate across many arenas of life.

These effects vary by subgroup populations (gender, race/ethnicity, region of the U.S., economic status) as well as the type of change involved (i.e., moving from a two-parent home to a one-parent home or cohabitation). For example, an extensive study^{xi} reveals that white children struggle more when one parent leaves a two-parent home, but when one parent figure enters a single-parent home, the impact on Hispanic children is greater. White children tend to have more behavior problems while black children more frequently face increased academic struggles. There are also indications that some racial/ethnic minority groups have more stress buffers when faced with family structure changes because they have stronger “kinship networks” that are “better equipped to absorb the impacts of changes in the nuclear family structure.” However, these same children may be more susceptible to “chronic instability” over time compounded by “structural disadvantage...including persistent poverty, racial segregation, and low-quality schooling.”^{xii} In addition, low-income parents face increased stress and a decreased ability to provide their children with needed support when family structure changes are compounded by economic instability.^{xiii} Overall changes in family structure for children 0 to 6 years old and 9 to 18 years old pose the greatest danger, and researchers find that the impact on boys appears greater than on girls, possibly because they more frequently lose a male role model.^{xiv}

Emotional impact

Family instability increases stress, which is the “biological and emotional responses to challenging, threatening, or traumatic experiences.”^{xv} Our bodies have stress response systems to help us react in stressful situations. We experience biological changes such as increasing our heart rate, blood pressure, and production of stress hormones. There are

generally three categories of stress: positive, tolerable, and toxic. Even though positive stress (i.e., failing a test, navigating friendships) is important for the development of a healthy stress response system, overactivated stress response systems can negatively impact development. Heightened stress is typical for young people. Their bodies are changing, they are renegotiating relationships with parents, school pressure is increasing, complex peer and romantic relationships are challenging, and concern for their future is looming. Second only to early childhood, adolescence is a critical developmental life phase increasing their vulnerability to the effects of stress.^{xvi} However, even if stressors multiply, adult support can buffer stress and put them in the second stress category called “tolerable stress.”

Toxic stress involves “biological and emotional responses that result from strong, frequent, prolonged adversity.”^{xvii} Certainly abuse, neglect, and trauma induce this level of stress.^{xviii} When the effects of family instability aren’t met with nurture and care in the family, these experiences can also lead to toxic stress.^{xix} We see this in Wendy’s experience. Without an adult to express empathy and act as a buffer, the stress walls of the dark, deserted cave are literally closing in on her.

Joyless emotions accompany stress including anger, fear, anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Some kids express this by acting out while others withdraw, like Wendy who pulls the blankets tightly over her head. There is growing consensus among researchers that a common effect due to family instability even across different subgroup populations is the way stress impacts a person’s “socioemotional development.”^{xx} “Socio” refers to the ability to maintain healthy relationships while “emotional” refers to labeling and regulating emotions. The two frequently join together – socioemotional – since managing feelings about ourselves, other people, and the world occur in relational contexts (i.e., family, school, job).

Children and young people learn emotions primarily from their parents or parental figures. Both directly and indirectly, they teach children how to label, interpret and express emotions.^{xxi} By and large, people express the emotions they learn at home. Warm, supportive relationships at home help them become “emotionally competent.” This remains true even in adolescence because the brain’s neural system that regulates emotions is still developing.^{xxii}

Emotional competence influences self-esteem (how I feel about myself), self-confidence (willingness to try new things and take advantage of opportunities), communication skills (expressing and interpreting emotions), and the willingness to persist in the face of adversity. As you can imagine, Wendy has a lot of emotions to navigate in her next life transition. She needs adults around her to buffer the stress by allowing her to express a range of emotions, especially as she works through the negative ones. For Wendy, these negative feelings extend even to God. Faith can provide a sense of stability in an insecure world. Yet if God appears to be absent and the faith community ignores these feelings or expresses simple answers such as God wanting her mom in a better place, Wendy is more likely to feel abandoned and angry.

A joy inhibitor

Family instability can inhibit joy as emotions accompanying stress responses take hold. Even if there are moments of joy, these can be crowded out by negative emotions evoked by a young person’s experience. How do we create pathways for joy if God appears absent? Imagine Wendy and me standing on opposite sides of a busy street. Any pronouncement I make of joy’s possibility is drowned out by the abrupt car horns and screeching brakes in Wendy’s life. Like the classic game Frogger, I can attempt to move joy strategically across the street, swiftly changing lanes and dodging speeding cars. Yet as

Wendy's disruptive experiences accumulate like heavy traffic, they run over joy before it reaches her.

The real fallacy here is assuming joy to be something we can deliver to ensure adolescent flourishing. *Joy is a response to the breaking in of God's presence like a light shining in the darkness.* For Wendy, feeling God's absence is joylessness. Joy isn't something we can produce or duplicate or provide her like a transaction. In fact, Wendy has to discover, choose, and pursue this joy herself [cite Volf -page].^{xxiii} No pronouncement of joy can morph into an experience of God's presence. *Joy is discovering that God is present when we thought God was absent.* Before we can reflect on joy's possibility amid the effects of family instability, we must start with Wendy as she is rather than any joy-objective we might have for her.

"Your mom is in a better place." The well-intentioned, lasagna-bearing man skips over Wendy's pain and rushed to joy. He doesn't peer into the gap between his condolences and the hope he seeks to express. He doesn't pause and empathize with her despair where God's absence is deeply *felt*. Instead, he rushes joy into the busy street of her life, and it is immediately flattened by a Mac truck. Long before joy can erupt, we must begin on the busy, disruptive streets with young people who suffer the stress effects due to family instability. The heavy traffic begs us to draw first from resources within the Christian tradition that allow young people to express their negative emotions such as fear, loneliness, anxiety, and abandonment.

Lament and Blue Herons

Lament is a genre in Hebrew poetry found in books of the Bible such as Lamentations and many Psalms. Imagine a lament being used when God's people gather to worship when facing a tumultuous time. Lament is "a liturgical response to the reality of suffering and engages God in the context of pain and trouble."^{xxiv} Lament includes

mourning and grieving; yet, at its core, it involves offering a complaint against God for not coming to the rescue. It is God's absence that evokes lament. Lament does not cultivate joy (even if it might point to a pathway). Instead, lament focuses our attention on the street's heavy traffic in an unstable world. When we lament as a community, we join Wendy's cries and complaints against God. The expression itself is not the end, even though we will find it offers needed consolation for a hurting young person. Ultimately, lament is a community's prayer pleading with Wendy for God to act.

In many American churches, lament is less common in worship gatherings. Theologian Soong-Chan Rah and reveals ways this is especially true in suburban churches that are removed from the daily injustices of city life. He argues convincingly that we have a propensity for celebration-based worship when we don't have immediate experiences or encounters with suffering (such as lacking food, shelter, or physical safety). Because our lives are pretty good, we don't need to lament and can focus on praising God. Without the need to lament, Rah warns that we can easily forget suffering exists.

In addition, I've written elsewhere about societal norms that influence our relationship with other people in the church.^{xxxv} Because religion has less influence across society than in previous eras, churches have to compete for attention by having a specialized product limited to spirituality. We also live in a consumer culture and find ourselves conditioned to consume. If we are not careful, Christianity can morph into another consumable product in our lives. For example, our expectations of a church – the spiritual providers – would simply be to meet our spiritual needs. We could then formulate a Christianity based on an upswing where God's plan for our lives is always good and beneficial: going to church should lift me up and not drag me down, singing about God's crazy love for me feels better than confessing sin. The parts of life that inhibit joy will be

less appealing than those that enhance joy. “Christianity” of this kind will find it is best to avoid Wendy’s pain (“just put your trust in Jesus”) or offer quick-fix answers (“have hope - this is part of God’s plan”) rather than join her lament.

If Wendy is part of a faith community that doesn’t include ways to lament, what effect does this have on her? Just as parents directly and indirectly teach their children emotions, cultural contexts provide emotional socialization.^{xxvi} This means that Christian communities teach young people how to interpret and express emotions. If a church avoids negative emotions or offers simple answers to the person who is suffering, we demonstrate which emotions are appropriate for Christians...and which are not. Implicitly young people will determine that negative emotions such as anger and anxiety are less “Christian” than positive emotions such as hope and joy. We may actually be contributing to Wendy’s instability and confirming God’s absence in her life rather than leading her toward experiencing joy in God’s presence. In Rah’s words, “Lament needs to run its course. Neither the absence of human comfort nor the human attempt to diffuse and minimize the emotional response of lament serves the suffering other. It only adds to the suffering.”^{xxvii}

Lament plays an essential role in a faith community keeping us from “superficial theological statements” that hope “to bring lament to an end without encompassing cries and grief.”^{xxviii} Engaging in lament together affords us the opportunity to sit with Wendy in the gap between our condolences and well-wishes. Since “lament is the language of suffering,” we need to become conversant in it in order to engage with young people who are suffering the effects of family instability.^{xxix} As Archie Lee points out, the Bible includes examples that “remind the Judeo-Christian communities to give lament a place in their religious life and practices.”^{xxx} In the following section, I will draw from two of these examples: Lamentations and the lament psalms. Together these writings become a resource

for churches to rediscover ways to include lament in their worship gatherings. They offer a “contextual biblical interpretation of the human experience of grief, loss, and...suffering” that allows us to reflect theologically in our own lives and sit with Wendy in hers.

Introductions

In Lamentations, we read a portrayal of Israel following the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in 587 BCE due to the disobedience of the people. We listen to the experiences of those remaining in Jerusalem after Judah was sent into exile. These people witnessed destruction, and their daily lives are a reminder to their deep loss. Lee suggests that traditional interpretations of this book often center on the voice of the hopeful male prophet in chapter three instead of the desperate, mourning widow whose voice permeates chapters one and two. Lee claims, “The faceless, suffering woman is hurriedly replaced by the male royal-messianic figure, who embodies the source of comfort and redemption.”^{xxxix} This approach portrays lament as valuable only when it moves toward hope and reveals our uneasiness with negative emotions. It sounds similar to our churches, doesn’t it? Below I will follow Rah’s exposition and expand the typical space given to the mourning women’s lament with one important clarification: Israel’s suffering is a consequence of the disobedience of the people. The woman’s mourning in chapters one and two also includes a confession of guilt. I am not proposing any parallel to young people who suffer the effects of family instability. They are clearly the innocent (addressed in Lam 4). I will be drawing from the emotions expressed in these laments. For even when Israel was guilty, God received their cries.

There are different categories of Psalms in the collection including both individual and communal laments. They are often referred to in more explicit terms: a complaint or prayer for help. It is striking to note that individual laments are the most frequent type in

the psalter.^{xxxii} Their prevalence stands in contrast to the number of joyful hymns and choruses more common in our churches.^{xxxiii} Unlike Lamentations, the individual laments of the Psalms tend to have a hopeful and trusting conclusion; the communal laments do so less frequently. Even though there is a common structure among them, scholars suggest that the variations demonstrate how a writer's unique experiences also shape the structure.

Interpretively this means that when we approach the lament psalms, we are not restricted to only asking about the original setting and meaning ("what was wrong with the psalmist") but can also read these as a theological resource to reflect on our circumstances ("what is wrong with me").^{xxxiv}

When studied together, Lamentations and the lament Psalms are a resource within the Christian tradition to help us care for young people like Wendy. Paralleling the above research on the destructive effects of family instability, learning to lament in a community will also have particular effects. The effects of lamenting as a community explained below promote health and stability - *en route* to human flourishing - as well as open a pathway for Wendy to discover the joy of God's presence.

Expressing emotions: Being seen and heard

Strong emotions rise out of the instability we experience in our broken world. Laments in the Bible are an avenue for expressing such emotions. For example, in Lamentations we listen to a mix of grief, despair, fear, and anger. Instability marks their lives as they survey the Temple and city ruins while mourning the loss of family and friends taken into exile. In the opening chapters, we read their raw expressions of grief and despair. The once "queen" Jerusalem is portrayed as a widow and slave who suffers from desertion (Lam 1:1-3), so she (Jerusalem) "weeps," "mourns," and "grieves." Emotions fill the descriptions of her experience of "torment" and "affliction" with "no resting place" and "no one is near

to comfort.” The widow’s complaints against God express fear and even anger. At one point, she describes God’s actions as violent. God is “summoning an army against me” (1:15) and, like an enemy, “swallowed up Jerusalem” and “destroyed her strongholds” (2:5). She blames God who “poured out his wrath like fire on the tent of Daughter Zion.” The widow feels despair as she recounts how God’s presence used to fill the Temple, but now God is absent. She boldly complains, “The Lord has rejected his alter and abandoned his sanctuary” (2:7) Even on a festival day when they should be celebrating God’s faithfulness, their enemies fill the “house of the Lord.”

Such expressive laments are a resource for us. As we read these laments, we provide young people with words and phrases to express their own feelings. Wendy will recognize the Psalmist’s cries over God’s absence as he pleads, “Awake, and rise to my defense! / Contend for me, my God and Lord” (Ps 35:23). God’s lack of intervention emboldens his cry, “Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever” (44:23). When the psalmist describes feeling abandoned when he calls out, “Why have you forgotten me?” (Ps 42:9), Wendy hears words that capture her own experience. When Wendy asks why God hasn’t heard her prayers, she resonates with the Psalmist’s appeal, “How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? / How long will you hide your face from me? / How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? / How long will my enemy triumph over me?” (Ps 13:1-2). The desperate cry, “How can this be?” (Lam 1:1) helps give form to her own cries.

Search Institute conducted research to identify what characteristics of relationships with adults support a young person’s healthy development. The research found that one of the foundational aspects of these relationships is expressing care in the form of “show me that I matter to you.”^{xxxv} We can think we are expressing care, but, for a young person to feel

this care, they need to know we are paying attention.^{xxxvi} Adults who listen to Wendy express her loneliness and fear can become a ray of light breaking into her dark, isolated cave where she experiences being seen and heard.

Practicing lament also has an effect on the faith community. Rah contends that lament keeps us from making real problems only “abstractions.”^{xxxvii} By the word “abstractions,” he means that we are prone to adopt theories, ideologies, or political positions thinking we have responded to a person’s suffering. As theologian Vincent Miller explains, social media exasperates our tendency to respond to real problems through abstractions.^{xxxviii} Posting what we believe, support, or stand against feels like taking action, but it actually maintains a wall between us and the sufferer by only addressing issues and not persons. When we listen to the emotions expressed in lament, this wall comes down, and suffering rightfully becomes the real faces of people like Wendy.

Listening to a person’s specific expressions of pain and loss increases our ability to empathize. Researchers find that among successful mentoring relationships empathy is a crucial characteristic. Empathy is “understanding another person’s frame of reference and affective experience.”^{xxxix} Paying attention to the affective experience involves listening to Wendy express herself. Empathy recognizes that “Lament is deeply felt. It is not simply a conscious, cognitive exercise.”^{xl} How Wendy feels may even be different from what she knows (cognitive) or does (behavior). Attending to these expressions evokes our genuine empathy and results in seeing and hearing Wendy.

Ordering the disorder: Gaining models and practice

In both Lamentations and the Psalms, laments have a particular structure. Chapters one through four of Lamentations are acrostic poems that move through the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. By following the alphabet from beginning to end, “acrostics

impose order and organization on shapeless chaos and unmanageable pain.”^{xli} Some chapters double or triple the letters for emphasis while chapter five has no order, which potentially expresses utter despair.^{xlii} The structure of an individual lament psalm begins with a complaint, is followed by a petition asking for help, and ends with an affirmation of trust and praise.^{xliii} Communal laments are distinct because they often include descriptions of God’s saving acts of the past but less frequently end with expressions of trust.^{xliv} We discover that these biblical authors had resources to express their suffering and followed a structure known to the community. The felt disorder of their lives finds order in the lament structures.

Rah observes that the structure provides “boundaries” that also give space for full and complete expression. There is no need to hold back because the boundaries give permission for the person to express in full.^{xlv} And yet, without boundaries the flood of emotions can overwhelm rather than relieve. When a young person’s life feels unstable and lacks order, learning a structure for lament can provide a healthy model to practice expressing emotions. Imagine the opposite; without a structure, Wendy’s emotions are formless and boundless. She needs a model to use in order to give her experiences expression.

As noted above, developing socioemotional competence is critical for young people like Wendy. Adolescence might be a vulnerable time in life, but it is also an opportune moment to “set a path to fulfilling their potential.”^{xlvi} Researchers who focus on strengthening families and helping young people thrive find that socioemotional competence has both protective (minimizes risks) and promotive (supports the transition into adulthood) benefits. This type of competence does not “evolve naturally.”^{xlvii} Young people need communities with adult and peer relationships where they can learn how to “experience, regulate, and

express emotions.”^{xlviii} Like many behaviors, a young person needs feedback to learn how to express emotions appropriately. Gaining models and getting to practice help young people “acquire skills and attitudes” necessary for healthy development and establish a trajectory toward “a productive, responsible, and satisfying adulthood.”^{xlix}

Specific to faith communities, providing young people with a structure to express their emotions also conveys God’s faithfulness. God’s covenant with God’s people provides order amid our often-disordered world.¹ Living within the covenant’s boundaries and order enables our relationships with God and one another to flourish. Yet maintaining the covenant depends upon God’s faithfulness because we so easily forget (Ps 98:1-3).^{li} We wander away from God and neglect our responsibilities to one another. Particularly in Lamentations, the lament structure includes corporate confession. The people must grapple with God’s judgement against them and acknowledge their unfaithfulness.^{lii} For Christian communities, lamenting over the effects of family instability reminds us to examine ways in which we might contribute or perpetuate family instability.^{liii} Do struggling families feel shunned or cared for in our churches? Do we provide concrete support in times of need? Does our language about families pay attention to the family’s changing structure in the U.S.? Structures for lament demonstrate to young people the order provided by God’s faithfulness, which in turn reminds us to examine our own unfaithfulness.

Orienting our lives: Acknowledging the Creator-Redeemer

Laments in the Bible are pleas directed to God when God appears absent. The authors recognize that their present instability cannot be resolved by their own strength and abilities. They need God’s intervention. When feeling abandoned, authors of the individual laments often place their trust in God, “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation” (Ps 13:5). Authors of the communal laments justify their present petitions

based on God's past – not present – faithfulness, “You, Lord, showed favor to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins... [therefore] Restore us again, God our Savior.” (Ps 85:12, 4) In Lamentations, the only glimpse of hope comes in a plea for God to take action against their enemies (3:65-66). Even so, God remains their hope. Rah states, “Lamentations is a reminder of our place in creation. We are not elevated above God or even above God's creation...lament recognizes our frailty as created beings.”^{liv}

As created and derived beings, our identity and purpose find meaning only as we orient our lives toward our Creator. The instability around us is the product of a disordered world under a different reign. The psalmists repeatedly lament because “God's rule is constantly and pervasively opposed.”^{lv} Yet they simultaneously acknowledge God's present reign amidst the chaos, “Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; [God] lifts his voice, the earth melts” (Ps 46:6). God's sovereign reign comes into focus through lament and helps us to orient our lives toward God. God is not only our Creator but also our redeemer. As our Creator, we acknowledge our need for God as Creator-Redeemer and find hope. Jurgmann Moltmann defines hope as anticipated joy. We face forward toward the redemption in hope and await joy's eruption. Even when our faith is weak, laments made to our Creator-Redeemer cultivate hope because in Jesus Christ hope rises out of suffering.

A pervasive theological theme in the Psalms is how to gain happiness or experiencing contentment and joy.^{lvi} Psalm 1:1 answers the question, “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night.” We are mistaken if we interpret this only as following rules. The psalmist is expressing our orientation toward God in the middle of the “wicked” and “scoffers” of our

unstable world that awaits the fullness of redemption. This is why the psalmists repeatedly refer to God as “a refuge” in whom we can trust, “Happy are those who take refuge in him” (Ps 12:2b).

Blue Heron Nests: Dead trees with wide views

There is a wooded area with many well-marked trails for Wendy to explore near her grandmother’s house. They wind for miles and even cross adjacent town lines. Crowded trees shade the trails making it difficult to see what’s in the distance. In the middle of this lush environment, the only place where the view breaks open is when Wendy reaches a large, marshy area. Home to tadpoles and snakes, the murky water makes an effective breeding place for mosquitos. At some point, this area was dry land filled with flourishing trees. But now only tall, dead tree trunks extending up to the sky remain. These lifeless trees scattered through the marsh didn’t survive their environment’s changing structure.

Giant nests built by blue herons sit atop many of the dead tree trunks. Blue herons are migrating birds and return to these same nests year after year. The trees’ height provides needed protection from the dangers below. It doesn’t look like the tree trunks would survive high winds or a harsh winter, but their dead roots are deep enough to keep them in place. The blue herons have found a good spot to care for their young, so they keep coming back. Nestled in these high nests, eggs hatch, and new life emerges. The nests provide stability in an unstable world. It’s quite a sight to see new life safely perched high in the sky...on a dead tree. Rising high above the forest, the babies have a wide view of the world and can look beyond the nest toward their futures.

Christian communities can act like blue heron nests in a marsh. Our nests stand atop resources within the tradition that can support hurting young people. Lament is like the dead tree – it’s roots run deep within the Christian tradition. Because lament is good for

our young, we, too, can keep coming back to it. As we do it will be like climbing to the top of dead trees with young people in a changing environment. Here we attentively listen and empathize so that Wendy can experience being seen and heard. Throughout history, God's people have expressed feeling abandoned and even dared accuse God of being absent on lament trees. Like them, we can offer Wendy structures and boundaries for expressing her emotions in ways that support her flourishing. Sitting in precariously perched nests on dead trees will remind us that our hope lies not in our own strength. Here we are prompted to orient our lives toward our Creator-Redeemer. Wendy can look out across the story of God's people from this high nest, hear their proclamations of trust, and remember stories of God's past faithfulness. Hope can surface as she peers beyond this nest at her future. At this point, dead lamenting trees can become an opening for Wendy to encounter God's presence when she thought God absent...and joy erupts.

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ⁱ United States Census Bureau, "America's Families and Living Arrangements."

ⁱⁱ United States Census Bureau, "Remarriage in the United States."

ⁱⁱⁱ Lee and McLanahan, "Family Structure Transitions and Child Development: Instability, Selection, and Population Heterogeneity," 756.

^{iv} Sandstrom and Huerta, "The Negative Effects of Instability on Child Development: A Research Synthesis," 5.

^v Cavanagh and Huston, "The Timing of Family Instability and Children's Social Development," 1259.

^{vi} Sandstrom and Huerta, "The Negative Effects of Instability on Child Development: A Research Synthesis," 4.

^{vii} Citing the National Scientific Council On the Developing Child, Sandstrom and Huerta, 6.

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^{ix} Fomby and Cherlin, "Family Instability and Child Well-Being."

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- ^x Cavanagh and Huston, “The Timing of Family Instability and Children’s Social Development,” 1259.
- ^{xi} Cavanagh and Huston, “The Timing of Family Instability and Children’s Social Development.”
- ^{xii} Lee and McLanahan, “Family Structure Transitions and Child Development: Instability, Selection, and Population Heterogeneity,” 742–43.
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- ^{xiv} Sandstrom and Huerta, 6.
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- ^{xvi} Browne, 1.
- ^{xvii} Browne, 6.
- ^{xviii} American Academy of Pediatrics, “Adverse Childhood Experiences and the Lifelong Consequences of Trauma”; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, “Adverse Childhood Experiences.”
- ^{xix} Citing the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, toxic stress can impact brain development resulting in a smaller brain, lower stress threshold, suppressed immune system, and heightened fear and anxiety. Browne, “Youth Thrive: Advancing Healthy Adolescent Development and Well-Being,” 7.
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- ^{xxi} Klimes-Dougan et al., “Parental Emotion Socialization in Adolescence: Differences in Sex, Age and Problem Status,” 327.
- ^{xxii} Nelson et al., “The Social Re-Orienting of Adolescence: A Neuroscience Perspective on the Process and Its Relation to Psychopathology.”
- ^{xxiii} Volf’s discussion of joy includes attunement highlighting a person as active agent. Volf, *Joy and Human Flourishing*.
- ^{xxiv} Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 21.
- ^{xxv} Ketcham, *Reciprocal Church: Becoming a Community Where Faith Flourishes after High School*, chapter 2.
- ^{xxvi} Klimes-Dougan et al., “Parental Emotion Socialization in Adolescence: Differences in Sex, Age and Problem Status,” 326.
- ^{xxvii} Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 67.
- ^{xxviii} Lee, “Lamentations, Book Of,” 567.
- ^{xxix} Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 23.
- ^{xxx} Lee, “Lamentations, Book Of,” 565.
- ^{xxxi} Lee, 567.
- ^{xxxii} McCann, Jr., “The Book of Psalms,” 644.
- ^{xxxiii} Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 22–23.
- ^{xxxiv} McCann, Jr., “The Book of Psalms,” 645–46.
- ^{xxxv} Roehlkepartain et al., “Relationships First: Creating Connections That Help Young People Thrive,” 4.
- ^{xxxvi} Nel Noddings describes the difference between the “cared for” and the “carer” to expand this distinction. See Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education*.
- ^{xxxvii} Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 84–85.
- ^{xxxviii} Miller, “Taking Consumer Culture Seriously,” 287–88.
- ^{xxxix} Spencer, “Understanding the Mentoring Process Between Adolescents and Adults,” 289.
- ^{xl} Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 56.
- ^{xli} Rah, 111.
- ^{xlii} Lee, “Lamentations, Book Of,” 566.
- ^{xliiii} Brown, “New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible,” 665.
- ^{xliv} Brown, 648.
- ^{xlvi} Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 112–13.
- ^{xlvi} Browne, “Youth Thrive: Advancing Healthy Adolescent Development and Well-Being,” 1.
- ^{xlvii} Browne, 5.
- ^{xlviii} Browne, 5.
- ^{xlix} Browne, 3.
- ^l Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 118.

^{li} God's memory is the basis for our practice of remembering. See Ketcham, *Reciprocal Church: Becoming a Community Where Faith Flourishes after High School*.

^{lii} Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 74.

^{liii} Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers*; Clark, *Adoptive Youth Ministry*.

^{liv} Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 139.

^{lv} McCann, Jr., "The Book of Psalms," 668–69.

^{lvi} McCann, Jr., 667–68.