Silence as Liturgical Space of Lament
Praying and Listening on Christmas Eve Amidst Ecological and Migration Emergencies

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Lament is about making things inaudible, invisible, inconsequential, and injurious to be audible, visible, recognized, consequential, and – potentially – repaired and healed. Lament is a multilayered spiritual, theological, ritual, moral, and therapeutic practice. As such it may be one of the few effective spiritual antidotes to the otherwise engulfing cultural and ecclesiastical conventions which, in liturgical contexts, perpetuate what Johann Baptist Metz called the "eulogistic evasion of what really matters, serving merely to lift the apathy from our souls and our indifference and lack of sympathy towards other people's suffering"[1] in so many Euro-Atlantic spaces of institutionalized Christian worship.

In contemporary liturgical studies, there is a growing recognition that lament has been overlooked and underestimated in many Christian traditions of public worship. It is still rare in communal worship practices in organized/institutionalized Christian liturgical assemblies. In communal and individual liturgical contexts, lament is about opening spaces for recognition and expression of pain, anger, despair, and unredeemed wretchedness. Lament is about cathartic, which is to say, unsettling and turbulent, voicing of things conventionally driven into the festering underworlds of avoidance and suppression which privilege the comfortable lifeworlds of those already allegedly "richly blessed" while piously gaslighting the experiences of affliction and alienation. Hence, lament is about an "in-your-face/ear" kind of visibility and audibility in prayer. Lament ultimately foregrounds what is stigmatized and denigrated in the bodies and souls that are routinely deemed undeserving of recognition, naming, and listening to. Lament as a spiritual and liturgical practice is not simply a psychological unburdening of suffering (beneficial as it often is for psycho-somatic reasons). As a spiritually and theologically transformative practice, lament may potentially unclench the unholy intersectional fist of oppression, repression, abuse, and indifference. Lament – uttered, seen, heard, witnessed, acknowledged – may accompany the unbinding of lives warped into curving circles of despair and

[1] Karl Rahner and Johann B. Metz, *The Courage to Pray* (New York: Crossroad, 1981). The reference is to Metz's Chapter 1, "The Courage to Pray," 20.

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hopelessness so that they, too, can finally live and move "at full stretch before God."[2]

Lament is, therefore, at least somewhat *loud,* and it is also unsettling, precisely as it engages the most deeply embedded dimensions of desolation when it is finally surfacing from the recesses of repression, be that personal, inter-relational, socio-cultural, political, or economic. Such as, imagine, when a package is impatiently unwrapped or when a (now rare) paper envelope is unceremoniously torn open without that vintage ivory paper knife but by bare and impatient hands. But if even a sliver of these mundane allegories sounds applicable concerning the nature and function of lament, then why might it be relevant to reflect on the importance of *silence* as a fitting liturgical space for lament?

In the current context of the intertwined ecological and migration emergencies, these two specific vectors of reflection on silence as a liturgical space for lament – among many that could be equally insightful, stimulating, and productive for theological and pastoral practices in various contexts but are beyond the scope of these reflections – strike me as most worthwhile to explore. To minimize confusion about what kind of silence will be at the center of my reflections, it is important to underscore that the silence I will reflect on is most certainly not a ruse for silencing of lament through internalization, rationalization, sublimation, sublation, or the plain old repression through tyrannical power structures, cultural mores, blame games, spiritual "bypasses" or muzzling the afflicted into self-defeating muteness. I do not propose silence as a substitute of lament. Rather, I propose a certain kind of silence as an indispensable liturgical space *for* lament.

These two vectors – climate and migration emergencies – in themselves comprise a topic of enormous complexity for theo-ethical and theo-political inquiry as well as liturgical and pastoral studies. In what follows, I will necessarily take a narrow approach to silence as a liturgical space *for* and *of* lament as a diasporic theologian living and working in the American Midwest who does not (yet) bear the brunt of climate degradation (nor do the ecclesial communities where I worship). On the other hand, I also approach these topics as a diasporic Christian who worships among people who routinely lack any realistic understanding of the political, cultural, psychological, and economic travails that most types of migration – forced and even relatively un-forced – often necessitate. This ambivalent lived experience makes me vigilant about the limitations and occlusions of using the plural pronoun "we" while reflecting on lament in communal ritualized, especially public, forms and locations.

[2] The phrase is a key motif of Don Saliers' liturgical theology. For details, see, among other resources on Saliers' prolific work, the essays in the *Festschrift* volume *Liturgy and the Moral Self: Humanity at Full Stretch Before God*, eds. E. Byron Anderson and Bruce T. Morrill (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998).

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My exploration gravitates around three questions: For *whose lament* might silence serve as a fruitful and respectful liturgical space? And *whose silence* is needed for certain kinds of lament to be heard, seen, and witnessed? Furthermore, what is the significance of *the interplay of silence and listening* in liturgical spaces for lament? For the sake of feasibility and brevity, my explorations are limited to one particular locus of worship: namely, how might silence serve as a liturgical space for lament in the Prayers of the People during the ecclesial rites celebrating the Incarnation – the birth or the Nativity of Jesus Christ?

One last contextual note: The assemblies of Christian worship that most directly shape my reflections are those gathering for most recent (as of the time of writing) Christmas worship (2024) in the Midwestern urban and suburban localities in the Anglican/Episcopalian tradition. The Episcopalian community whose Christmas Eve liturgy will be the main focus in this essay has the "land acknowledgement"[3] and various inclusivity statements printed in their worship materials and displayed on their websites. Nevertheless, they squarely fall into the privileged category of mainline North American Christian milieu which Sam Coddington calls the milieu of "hosts" – individuals and communities still "participating in a stream of history of well-intentioned white people seeking to help 'the less fortunate'" and "continually presuming the posture of hosts is […] where we are now […]".[4] As a white Euro-American, I inhabit the "host" space while as a diasporic Latvian-American, my belonging in these ecclesiastical "host" spaces is interstitial and hybridized by the lived experience of migration: in short, it is complicated.

Christmas Intercessions, Lament, and Planetary Eco-Degradation

First, against the background of a very stormy hurricane season in North America in the fall of 2024, I ponder over silence as a liturgical space for human but also non-human lament in the context of the devastation that hurricanes Helene and Milton unleashed on parts of the United States in September and October 2024 within the broader climate emergency.

With increasing regularity, climate events of catastrophic proportions, such as hurricanes, wildfires, and tornadoes, which are exacerbated by human activities such as fossil fuel use, deforestation, and pollution, are not confined to the South or the West, but can now be felt in the American Midwest. In June of

[3] "Land acknowledgments" in North America typically include a formal statement that recognizes and honors the Indigenous people as the original inhabitants of the location where a Christian church (or any institution/organization) holds a regular activity or owns property. Such statements are usually printed, recited or displayed in those churches which have adopted them.

[4] Samuel Coddington, *Listening as Hosts: Liturgically Facing Colonization and White Supremacy,* Foreword by Claudio Carvalhaes (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2024), xvi, xx.

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2023, the sky turned hazy in the Southwestern Ohio. Smoke from the Canadian wildfires generated air quality alerts from the National Weather Service. On a couple of occasions, the evening skies sported a spooky orange hue. Most recently, the remnants of the deadly Hurricane Helene that devastated the Gulf Coast states and even portions of North Carolina, including killing over 200 people, made it to Southwestern Ohio on Friday, September 27, 2024. There were flash floods and power outages. Trees were toppled, and smaller tree limbs were scattered in streets. Down South, before Helene, there came Hurricane Beryl in early July 2024 – the earliest Category 5 hurricane on record – whose downgraded tropical storm remnants also made it to the Southwestern Ohio as a preview of what was to come.

Of course, in worship services, we interceded for the victims of the hurricanes and wildfires. We prayed for all those who heroically and selflessly toiled to save human and animal lives, livelihoods, and habitats. In some expressions of Confession/Penitential Rite, contrition for "our" (i.e., human) contributions toward anthropogenic climate change was voiced. Elements of lament occasionally surfaced in Prayers of the People as well as sermons about the polluted waters and soil, about the species whose existence is now under threat and about the future generations of humans who may well have to live in a world of depleted biodiversity while the global pursuit for endless economic growth goes hand in hand with the human population growth on the rapidly warming planet. Some church members here in Southwestern Ohio have a more immediate connection (relatives, friends, co-workers, business partners) to the hot spots of climate emergencies and their devastating impacts on human lives, livelihoods, and natural habitats destroyed in several regions of North America and elsewhere. Yet many have not yet experienced the brunt of environmental degradation up close and personal. Nevertheless, it is noticeable even among this relatively sheltered segment of worshippers that many share the ambiguity recently captured by the Lutheran theo-ethicist Cynthia Moe-Lobeda:

> It seems to me that we are – on a largely subconscious level – awash in grief. Grief at the massacres on public school campuses and shopping malls, grief that people are without homes and must live on the street, grief at the ominous climate future crashing into our present. Yet, if you are like me, you do not really feel it, at least in full force. I protect myself with a comforting cloak of numbness and denial [...]. We are lured into numbness that, at this moment, people are dying from climate change-related disasters that we are intensifying.[5]

Indeed, me too. Consequently, when Moe-Lobeda suggests that the spiritual practice of lament is one of the "fingers on the hands of healing,"[6] I wonder how this lament can become audible and visible in the rites of worship? In dia-

[5] Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Building a Moral Economy: Pathways for People of Courage* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024), 195.

[6] Moe-Lobeda in *Building a Moral Economy*, 193.

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logue with the Womanist ethicist Emilie Townes' emphasis on the significance of communal lament "as rite and worship on a regular basis" which has the potential to keep "the question of justice visible and legitimate,"[7] Moe-Lobeda sees lament as a practice of hope. "Perhaps," she suggests,

> [...] rituals that elicit grief and allow us to wail in the streets communally – about the suffering generated by climate change and a predatory economy, about all that our children and grandchildren will not have, about the damage we have done and cannot undo – will help us to unlock hope and agency that we did not know we had.[8]

Might the intercessory Prayers of the People during Christmas worship – the liturgical celebrations of precisely the Word-becoming-flesh – open space for lament toward incarnational hope? And not just space for "our" lament: "our" meaning, "us" – the consuming and thoroughly self-centered humans. Not only "us," the Christians who are morally and cognitively aware of such ecological death spirals in the still relatively unscathed American Midwest, voicing lament for those who are already being crushed by eco-degradation (and possibly already flowing into the ranks of climate refugees) but also non-human creation whose lives and habitats are being destroyed?

In one of the festive Eucharists in the Episcopal Church of the United States (ECUSA) that I participated in on 2024 Christmas eve in Cincinnati, Ohio, the Prayers of the People included a wide range of intercessions tinged with a sense of lamentation. The petitions gravitated around the familiar theme of the internally displaced Holy Family not having "enough room" in Bethlehem. We confessed that "it is hard to make room for others in our world" – for the poor, the immigrant, the stranger, those with disabilities, those from different ethnic backgrounds, religions, and political views. And then we prayed to the welcoming God to "make room" in our church for all people, especially those rejected by others and for those with whom we disagree, for those who have inadequate resources, for felons who need a second chance, for those who try our patience. Finally, we prayed for our local diocese, the bishop and the whole denomination's witness to the love of God after remembering and praying for all victims of war who have no safe place to their heads – for people of Gaza, Ukraine, and other war-torn places as well as for those who are impacted by gun violence and for the students traumatized by school shootings and violence.

Without a moment's hesitation, all of the above most definitely merit particularly fervent prayers and prayer-inspired transformative action. But, curiously, on the Eve of the Nativity of Christ when the churches celebrate the Incarnation – the Word becoming flesh (John 1:14) – through the "deep incarnation" of the Logos, the Second Person of the Trinity therefore becoming part of the

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7 Quoted by Moe-Lobeda in *Building a Moral Economy*, 196. Original in Emilie M. Townes who, in turn draws from the work of Walter Brueggemann, in her *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 24.

8 Moe-Lobeda, *Building a Moral Economy,* 197.

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materiality of this planet and the "whole blooming, buzzing, evolving, groaning cosmos" (Elizabeth Johnson),[9] current ecological emergencies did not find enough room in the Prayers of the People. Neither in the form of "us" naming the pain and the grief and interceding vicariously for those who already and directly suffer from the draughts, from the floods, from the wildfires, from the food deprivation, and from the socio-political conflicts already intensifying due to detrimental impacts of climate change. Nor in the form of "us" asking "the welcoming God to make room in our church" for the incarnational wisdom and empowerment to spur "us" into eco-justice action.

These lament-like 2024 Christmas Eve Prayers of the People were certainly incarnational in one sense. They resonated poignantly with the kenotic paradoxes and imperial ironies of the economy of salvation – but in the most anthropocentric sense. Yet they also displayed the default mainstream "spiritual trivialization of creatures and creation" that is "steeped in the long-standing Christian assumption that only human beings have souls – intrinsic spiritual value, a 'meeting place' with the divine, a dimension of creaturely being that seeks and receives salvation."[10] These Prayers of the People represented another version of how the theological dynamic plays out in worship which Song-Chan Rah describes as "dysfunctional Christology [as] a dysfunctional understanding of the incarnation"[11].

Might lament for the unfolding planetary eco-degradation sound something like a "rage prayer"? For example, something like Elizabeth Ashman Riley has scripted to address the "Creator of all things" that begins with a confession of "our greed, our consumption, and our self-absorption" which have "wounded this holy planet?"[12] Her prayer on climate change acknowledges that:

> We weep for the Earth and the damage we have caused, for the extraordinary life you have infused into the world in plants and creatures, all forms of life and creation that we have treated so carelessly [and] we repent for our failure, for our consumption, for our arrogance.

[9] Elizabeth Johnson, "For God so loved the cosmos: When Christ became human, he also became part of the vast body of the cosmos," *U.S. Catholic*, March 31, 2016. Online: https://uscatholic.org/articles/201603/for-god-so-loved-the-cosmos/ [08.11.2025]. Johnson's brief article refers to the constructive eco-Christology of "deep incarnation" pioneered by the Danish Lutheran theologian Niels Henrik Gregersen, for example, in his 'The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World', *Dialog*, 40(3), 2001, 192–207, and in the collection of essays edited by him *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015). In conversation with Gregersen's proposals, Johnson has further proposed the imaginary of "deep resurrection." For the outline of her argument, see Elizabeth Johnson, "Deep Resurrection," *Modern Believing* 64, no.2 (2023), https://doi.org/10.3828/mb.2023.1.

[10] Carter Hayward, *Keep Your Courage: A Radical Christian Feminist Speaks* (London: SCM, 2011), 112.

[11] Song-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 193.

[12] Elizabeth Ashman Riley, *Rage Prayers* (New York: Morehouse, 2024), 131–132.

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> We pray for the healing of the world around us, for the healing of ourselves, that we might turn our hearts toward care and stewardship of the whole Earth.[13]

Of course, the "we" always needs further concretization and contextualization. But the more interesting question about lament remains unanswered even in the "rage prayer" framework: how can "we" make space and give voice for the lament of non-human creation in Christmas intercessory prayers? After all, the Nativity narratives in the gospels don't suffer from the lack of non-human creation's participation in the incarnational dynamic – the Logos makes mind-boggling ontological migrations and becomes a deeply incarnate flesh (σάρξ, not just a male *homo sapiens* body) in the Gospel of John. Angels are busy juggling the delicate logistics of the birth of Jesus in Matthew and Luke. Animals surround the newborn Jesus closer than most humans ever will and witness the original *fortissimo* of the angelic *Gloria in excelsis Deo* firsthand in Luke. Even stars are deployed on a special astronomical mission to navigate the magi to the right newborn in the colonized backwaters of the Roman Empire in Matthew.

The Nativity is embedded in the biblical imaginary in which heavens declare the glory of the Lord (Ps. 19:1), floodwaters/seas lift up their voice (Ps. 93:3), rivers clap their hands (Ps. 98:8) and mountains praise God (Ps. 148:9). One possible avenue for opening up intercessory space for lament is to pause "our" lament and tune into the noise of hurricanes, wildfires, flash floods and the screams, sighs, and groans of humans and animals fighting for their dear life. It is to allow the dying rustle of plants as they are consumed by drought, flooding, pollution, or fire to enter the rites of worship assemblies, even for those of "us" who are not right in the middle of these deathworlds. Many of "us" have seen and heard the sights and sounds of these carnages on television and social media. Might these sights and sounds be the non-verbal lament, the contemporary "lifting up their voices" of non-human creation of God? Might it be helpful for "us" to shut up for a moment, in silence, and perhaps even to pause the eloquent lamentations about "our" anxiety, uncertainty, discomfort, guilt, indifference, and hopelessness?

Furthermore, might the quintessentially eucharistic practice of *anamnesis* of Christ's life and death be a comportment that would allow "us" to silence "our" so human, so anthropocentric, fretting to instead offer "our" silence – as hospitable aural liturgical space – for the lament of the "other-than-us" creation precisely as a sacrifice of praise for the Word who became flesh "for us and for our salvation"? In the deeply incarnational sense, the "us" and "our salvation" would finally need to include "all forms of life and creation" as Ashman Riley's "rage prayer" incarnationally does. If failure of imagination strikes, there are always the amazing possibilities offered by thoughtful digital media ministry to enlist for assistance in worship. There is no shortage of docu-

13 Ashman Riley, *Rage Prayers*, 131–132.

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mented carnage that eco-degradation and skyrocketing pollution continues to wreak on "other-than-human" creation to help uncage "us" from the instinctual anthropocentrism that saturates Christian rites of worship.

Or let's consider the low-tech route for the One-Third industrialized churches: Could the serenaded "silent night, holy night" somehow lure "us" into a silence that allows "all ye faithful" who hasten toward the adoration of Christ to take a deeply and truly incarnational look at "this holy planet" (Ashman Riley) from a posture of listening to hear the lament of the fellow sojourners of creation – even if "our" silence might only amplify the sound (and maybe the smell of exhaust) of fossil fueled car engines speeding past the church buildings on busy traffic routes?

Christmas Intercessions, Lament, and People on the Move

Second, during Christmas season 2024 I ponder over silence as a liturgical space for lamenting the carnage that forced migration continues to wreak under the auspices of a growing culture of hostility toward migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, not only in the United States but also worldwide.

A statistics chart on Sky News flashed across my computer screen on December 26, 2024: 451 undocumented migrants arrived in the United Kingdom on Christmas Day 2024 in small boats braving the bleak midwinter waters of the English Channel. Another 407 joined them on the Boxing Day.[14] Meanwhile, on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, December 28, 2024, at least three migrants perished in the same waters during their attempted crossing of the Channel from France to the U.K. setting out in unseaworthy vessels from Bleriot-Plage while over 300 managed to make it to the U.K. alive. Some 50 others were rescued by the French and British coast guards on the Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, December 29, 2024 and taken into the care of the humanitarian charity Utopia 56. So far, in 2024, 76 people have died trying to cross the Channel in small boats.[15] On January 6, 2025, the Orthodox Christmas Eve, a baby girl was born on a migrant dinghy trying to reach the Canary Islands about 15 minutes before the inflatable raft was located off the island of Lanzarote – and she survived.[16]

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14 "More than 150,000 migrants have crossed Channel to UK in small boats since 2018," *Sky News*, December 27, 2024, https://news.sky.com/story/more-than-150-000-migrants-have-crossed-channel-to-uk-in-small-boats-since-2018-13280562 [08.11.2025].

15 Bethany Minelle, "At least three people killed and 50 rescued off coast of France attempting to cross Channel," *Sky News*, December 29, 2024, https://news.sky.com/story/at-least-two-people-dead-and-50-rescued-off-coast-of-france-13281057 [08.11.2025].

16 Frances Mao, "Baby born on migrant boat crossing from Africa to Canary Islands," *BBC*, January 8, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cj6z61807zjo [08.11.2025].

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Christmas on just this one of the many deadly frontiers of global migration provides a tiny but poignant snapshot of the accelerating upswell of forced migration and the correlative intensification of what Achille Mbembe has so fittingly described as necropolitics[17] and brutalism.[18] Mbembe describes necropolitics or necropower as a kind of socio-political operating system which results in "subjugation of life to the power of death."[19] Necropolitics manifests as "ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating *death-worlds*, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*."[20]

Brutalism amplifies the neo-colonial necropolitics: "Brutalism is a form of planetary social war. As molecular warfare, it is largely directed against those who, wishing to sell the only commodity they possess, namely their labor power, can no longer find any buyers. Their transformation into border-bodies is perhaps the greatest challenge to contemporary population policies."[21] "Border-bodies" are a "new type of human body," Mbembe argues, that is "one that is forbidden to shelter or protect (hence the laws against hospitality in Europe), to save from drowning in the middle of the sea, or from dehydrating in the middle of the desert."[22]

According to the latest official United Nations data (as of the time of this writing, July 2025), at the end of 2024, there have been at least 123.2 million forcibly displaced persons in the world. UNHCR summary adds that the most recent estimated number of such "border-bodies" have slightly dropped to 122.1 million as of April 2025.[23] Regardless if theologians and liturgists are diasporic persons like myself who have a personal experience of migration or not, it behooves to take note of Mbembe's intervention about the urgency and relevance of this situation. He, among other voices, is certainly justified to point out that "[t]ogether with climate change, the governance of human mobility is set to be the major problem of the twenty-first century"[24] on a planetary scale. It is no accident that migrants are the "glocal" scapegoats and lightning rods of choice in the current political moment. They already provide the most incendiary grist for the escalating culture wars inside and outside communities of faith not only in the Americas and in Europe, but also in other regions of the world.

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17 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitic*s, transl. Stephen Corcoran (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019).

18 Achille Mbembe, *Brutalism*, transl. Steven Corcoran (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2024).

19 Mbembe, *Necropolitic*s, 92.

20 Mbembe, *Necropolitic*s, 92. Italics in the original.

21 Mbembe, *Brutalism,* 90.

22 Mbembe, *Brutalism*, 95.

23 UNHCR Global Trends 2024. Published on June 12, 2025 by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees office, https://www.unhcr.org/us/global-trends [08.11.2025].

24 Mbembe, *Brutalism*, 91.

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So, what about silence, then, as a liturgical space for lament in Christmas intercessions? The prayers already quoted above did, if somewhat obliquely, intercede to the "welcoming God" to "make room in our church" for those for whom it is "hard to make room for" by "us." That petition explicitly named immigrants and strangers. These intercessions gestured toward what Rob Muthiah describes as penitential lament – "the pattern of lament as confession and repentance" which "expresses anguish at having forsaken God and seeks forgiveness and restoration."[25] Not only in relation to racism but also regarding the histories of hostility toward the people on the move, "this lament type fits for those who realize that they have benefited from and perpetuated the racist paradigms and imagination of the dominant culture."[26]

To reiterate, the elements of lament in these contritional intercessions were more about "us" and "our" turning away and "our" knowing of "how hard it is to make room for others in our world," especially in light of the Nativity narrative from Luke 2 which the community had just heard and reflected on. Yet, again, what about the space for lamenting predicaments of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and strangers and, even more pertinently, space for *their* lament?

If there are migrants among the worshipping community, then hitting a pause button on the conventional script of self-centered "host" intercessions to open up space for migrants' words, sighs, or shouts of pain or joy, or whatever it is that wants to be seen and heard, may be something to consider. In this regard, the intentional silence of the "host" majority voice may work as an invitation – not a demand nor an obligation which may be, for some, simply unsafe in the present political circumstances – to name, to intercede, to sigh, to groan, and maybe, to wail about the perils of displacement, persecution, and uprootedness while also straining toward the dreams of hope, dignity, and peace. Lament may enter into the Christmas Prayers of the People (and that, at least theoretically, includes people on the move) through the inviting of migrant bodies and voices to be seen and heard, if they so choose. Such an invitation also means consenting to their lament, if they choose to express it, to potentially rattle the cozy candlelight a bit before the herald angels eventually outsing us all. And then there is always the possibility of reading a line or two from a migrant's own *anamnesis* of their journey, be it in poetry or prose, or a passage from a deposition for an immigration court hearing. Perhaps some of their voices and faces can appear through the digital media which various communities of faith are increasingly using in their worship? It is very important to remember, as Muthiah observed, that "in the church context, lament can take different forms, depending on who is doing the lamenting. These include confession, despair,

25 Rob Muthiah, "Lament as antiracism work," *Christian Century*, January 27, 2021, 29.
26 Muthiah, "Lament as antiracism work," 29.

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and protest. Lament is capacious enough as a liturgical form to communicate all of these."[27]

The intentional silence of the "hosts" as liturgical space for lament in Christmas Prayers of the People has the potential of emerging as a decolonizing space. Together with Kwok Pui-lan, I affirm that not only in theological scholarship but also in worship, "we must look for alternative sources and lift up forgotten, silenced, and repressed voices in the theological tradition" since "decolonizing theology requires a new theological hermeneutic that interprets the theological tradition globally and contrapuntally."[28] Such a practically contrapuntal hermeneutic seems to be overdue in the theologies and practices of worship, especially in the "host-type" ecclesial communities in the Euro-Atlantic Christian milieu.

Liturgical festivity, especially at Christmas, does not equal liturgical pretentiousness or sterile triumphalism. Especially when the whole point of the Nativity celebrations gravitates around a newborn sharing space not only with angels but also with straw and sheep! It takes only a few verses in the Matthew 1–2 Nativity narrative to capture the whirlwind from Jesus' paradoxical birth to the adoration pilgrimage of the magi onto the massacre of the infants all the way into seeking asylum in Egypt. Making space for lament – be it liberative, healing, prophetic, transformational and mobilizing lament, or perhaps, for the time being, just bringing the true depths of anguish and grief to awareness and some type of expression – may be a healthy irruption of the tempting ritual triumphalism (or, the opposite slippery slope of hyper-coziness of *Gemütlichkeit*) of Christmas worship. Lament should also not be banished to some peripheral "blue Christmas" service in what is technically the season of Advent, often to be relegated to a workday evening when nothing other of significance happens to be on the schedule. Perhaps the irruptive and unpredictable quality of lament is one of the liturgical paths toward decolonization of Christianity to "reclaim traditions of peace, create new symbolic universes, and tell new stories" to allow Christians to "speak of divine power in radically new ways, for Christian images of God are commonly shaped by dominant images of power and might."[29]

Silence as Liturgical Space for Lament: Silence as Listening

Intercession, argues Guido de Graaff, is "primarily a vicarious act" in "the remedial, and potentially political, sense."[30] Intercessions in the Prayers of the

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27 Muthiah, "Lament as antiracism work," 29.

28 Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Politics and Theology: Unraveling Empire for a Global World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2021), 94, 95.

29 Kwok, *Postcolonial Politics and Theology*, 181.

30 Guido De Graaff, "Intercession as Political Ministry: Re-Interpreting the Priesthood of All Believers," *Modern Theology* 32:4 (October 2016), 508.

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People participate in Christ's ultimate act of intercession in the Paschal mystery of his death and resurrection. To consider silence as a liturgical practice and space *for* and *of* lament of the non-human creation and the often-dehumanized people on the move in the Prayers of the People is also a vicarious act. Muthiah observes that "lament can move the privileged to empathy – and offer an open space to those who have suffered."[31] It is telling that the recent collection of liturgies of lament, *God's Good Earth In Crisis: Liturgies of Lament*, features an extensive collection of rites engaging climate emergency in conjunction with a rite of lament for and with refugees.[32]

Lament that questions God and the world is not blasphemy, as its presence in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures quite clearly signals. It is rather an opaque doxology or subversive doxology. As such, "lament is an act of faith, not faithlessness, […] an act of worship."[33] Silence to hear the lament of all manner of creatures is what God has in abundance. It is also what so many individuals and communities of faith sorely need – and yet paradoxically – lack. So often, in the global postcolony, "White colonial liturgical gathering, vocabularies, and gestures do not listen with the disinherited of the earth and the disinherited earth. The disinherited of the earth and the disinherited earth remain treated as objects without agency and without a voice."[34] These painful shortfalls are not limited to the global North nor to a specific socio-cultural location.

A postcolonial approach to worship prioritizes "listening with those who are wounded, binding up the brokenhearted, and proclaiming the liberty and release of the captives."[35] As Min-ah Cho has so poignantly observed, intentional and contemplative silence is radically different from coercive and complicit silence; it is a "fluid space" where all kinds of "we" can aspire to "pay attention to the unsaid and unspeakable experiences of suffering and listen to them without hastily attempting to react, translate, speak for, or instruct."[36]

There it is: Silence as a liturgical space for lament is not the silence of sheer indifference, or of cruelty, coercion, or self-absorption. It can be a liturgical space for transformative listening wherein lament can be embodied, heard, and seen, in words or without words. Listening is impossible without silence. And listening, as Judith Herman notes, so often "turns out to be a radical act."[37] Silence as a liturgical space for lament at full stretch before God and among

31 Muthiah, "Lament as antiracism work," 30.
32 Anne and Jeffrey Rowthorn, eds. *God's Good Earth In Crisis: Liturgies of Lament* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2024).
33 Muthiah, "Lament as antiracism work," 31.
34 Coddington, *Listening as Hosts*, 122.
35 Coddington, *Listening as Hosts*, 125.
36 Min-ah Cho, *The Silent God and the Silenced: Mysticism and Contemplation Amid Suffering* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2025), 120.
37 Judith L. Herman, *Truth and Repair: How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 2023), 4.

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God's people begins with liturgically, theologically, and ethically radical acts of listening.

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