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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Lamentations 3:22-33, Mark 5:21-43

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning's reading from *Lamentations 3* is the only reading from *Lamentations* in the entire three-year lectionary. It is just too good to miss, and so I am building this sermon chiefly on that reading.

Carol and I have special affection for the book of *Lamentations* because of our memory of being young parents and listening to the growing verbal abilities of our son Sam. You know how little children are: because they are so new to the world, they lack perspective, and so every little complaint they have is like the worst thing in the world. Sam was especially good at giving voice to his complaints. David was good at it too, but Sam was our firstborn, and so it was with him that we first encountered this phenomenon. Carol and I would often find ourselves on the verge of bursting into laughter while listening to Sam complain. We'd try to listen respectfully, but afterward we would laugh about what we called the "Lamentations of Sam."

Well, the *Lamentations* of Jeremiah are eloquent and passionate, like that of a verbal child, except that they are not childlike, nor do they lack perspective. *Lamentations* is one of the most heartbreaking books you'll ever read in the Bible. In fact, some of the passages are so sad, so appalling, that I would not read them aloud for you.

The word "Lamentations" indicates the tone of this short book. It is five chapters of laments, of dirges, of sorrow and regret. And I mean to illustrate some of that. But first, I want to lift up the beginning verses of this morning's reading. They spring forth all out-of-kilter with the rest of the book. They are filled with hope and confidence in the love of God. Indeed the hymn we just sang - "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" - is built on these verses. They go this way:

²²The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
²³they are new every morning;
great is thy faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22-23, RSV)

It is always a wonderful thing when words of love are spoken on earth. The promises of love on the wedding day are very moving. Many a time I have noticed tears in the eyes of bride and groom and congregation when the solemn promises of love are exchanged.

But perhaps just as moving are words of love somehow wrangled forth in the midst of conflict and suffering and disappointment. When one of the aggrieved

parties can put aside all of the hurt feelings and speak of love, well, that puts a whole new slant on things. That suddenly makes life better.

Again, I am put in mind of our son Sam when he was a little guy. We were coming home from school, from nearby PS 6. We were in the elevator of our building. I had knelt down before him and was earnestly scolding him about something – I do not remember what. Then, right in the midst of my scolding, Sam threw his little arms around my neck and said, “But Dad, I love you with all my heart!” Now, there’s a line to make you pause. In one way, it had nothing to do with what I was scolding him about. But in another way, it had everything to do with it. It was a reminder of perspective. It was a reminder to me to keep the big picture in mind. It was a reminder from a child of what really matters in life.

That’s how our Bible text is: In the midst of all Judah’s suffering, guilt, and regret, there is suddenly this passage which speaks of God’s love and faithfulness.

²²The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;

By tradition, the author of *Lamentations* is Jeremiah – the Prophet of Anguish. Jeremiah spent much of his career trying to warn Judah of coming disaster. If Judah did not repent of her idolatry and sinful ways, she was going to suffer. Jeremiah could feel it in his bones. But Jeremiah preached to a stiff-necked people. They resisted his warnings. They resisted his calls to holiness of life. Jeremiah preached that the Lord was looking for one righteous person in Jerusalem — one would be enough:

¹Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem,
look and take note!
Search her squares
to see if you can find a man,
one who does justice and seeks truth;
that I may pardon her...
(Jeremiah 5:1, RSV)

But Jerusalem does not repent. And as Jeremiah had warned, Jerusalem was destroyed.

Okay, so Jeremiah does this thing – he calls the people of God to repentance and warns them of troubles to come if they do not repent.

But other prophets do that too. The distinctive thing about Jeremiah is that he both warns his people and identifies with them. In Jeremiah, the distinction between the one who condemns and those who suffer his condemnation breaks down. Jeremiah is not one to stand apart from the people he judges. When he warns of doom, he means doom for himself too, because for him, there is no suffering for his people that does not mean suffering for himself too. He is not the righteous critic who can stand by when punishment comes and say, “See, I warned

you that this would happen.” No, in Jeremiah we have someone who preaches to his people with a kind of desperation because he knows that if they suffer, he suffers too. He cannot help it. He loves his people so very much, even if they sin. They might disagree with him, ignore him, even abuse him, but his heart is forever bound to his people.

There is a spirit of gentleness here and love for his people. I try to follow Jeremiah in this and I commend it to you too. Try to be gentle with one another. Try to live with the spirit that you do not want to lose anyone! – even if they disagree with you, you do not want to lose anyone.

And so Jeremiah looks on heartbroken as he sees the sin of his people and the approach of punishment:

¹O that my head were a spring of water,
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
so that I might weep day and night
for the slain of my poor people! (Jeremiah 9:1, NRSV)

There is a similar passage to this in *Lamentations*:

⁴⁸my eyes flow with rivers of tears because of the destruction of the
daughter of my people.
⁴⁹My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite,
⁵⁰until the LORD from heaven looks down and sees;
⁵¹my eyes cause me grief at the fate of all the maidens of my city.
(Lamentations 3:48-51, RSV)

This similarity of sorrow over the destruction of Jerusalem is probably why Jeremiah is thought in the tradition to be the author of *Lamentations*.

Clearly, something awful has happened to Jerusalem in the book of *Lamentations*. The mighty armies of Babylon have destroyed the city, whisked the leading citizens off into exile, and left the city bereft of Temple, national significance, even of food:

¹¹All her people groan as they search for bread; they trade
their treasures for food to revive their strength...
(Lamentations 1:11, RSV)

The author weeps as he sees children dying in the arms of their mothers:

¹¹My eyes are spent with weeping;
my soul is in tumult;
my heart is poured out in grief
because of the destruction of the daughter of my people,

because infants and babes faint in the streets of the city.
¹²They cry to their mothers,
“Where is bread and wine?”
as they faint like wounded men
in the streets of the city,
as their life is poured out
on their mothers’ bosom. (Lamentations 2:11-12, RSV)

The book of *Lamentations* is beyond the stage of claiming innocence. It is a steady account of the sorrows of the city, along with acknowledgment that she has sinned and deserves what has happened to her:

¹⁸The LORD is in the right,
for I have rebelled against his word...(Lamentations 1:18,
RSV)

Lamentations does not protest innocence or complain about the Lord. It simply grieves:

¹²Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?
Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow
which was brought upon me,
which the LORD inflicted
on the day of his fierce anger. (Lamentations 1:12, RSV)

Then, in the midst of this lament, we suddenly come to today’s great text:

²²The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
²³they are new every morning;
great is thy faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22-23, RSV)

It is like a flash of insight – a sudden recall that the Lord is good and that if he chastens the people for now, it is with the intention that he shall save them in the end – save them from both suffering and from sin.

And this confidence in the steadfast love of the Lord is justified! It is justified because the spirit of love that inspired Jeremiah is the same Spirit of love that drove Jesus to the cross that his people might live.

OUR GOSPEL STORIES

So, now I think maybe we are ready to take a deeper look at this morning’s Gospel stories about the healing of the woman with the flow of blood and the raising up to life of the Jairus’s daughter. We can well imagine the sense of

urgency in Jairus. His daughter is near death. We can understand that he would want Jesus to hasten to her side, and we can imagine his increasing panic as Jesus calmly deals with the woman who has touched him and been healed of her flow of blood. It is easy to imagine the emotions of Jairus and of the woman who has suffered for so many years.

At first glance, we might be struck by Jesus as the master of the situation. We might imagine him to be the calm Savior who grants help, but is not personally involved in the suffering of the people. But that is not so. The one who stands there with Jairus and the woman is Jeremiah, or rather a greater One than Jeremiah.

Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me, wherewith the LORD hath afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger.

These words come from *Lamentations*. But they are at their best when we think of them as the words of Jesus. Is there any sorrow like his sorrow when he beholds the woman who has tried for twelve years to be healed? who ...

...had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. (Mark 5:26, RSV)

Is there any sorrow like the sorrow of Jesus who stands at the bedside of a child and sees her dead? Of course he takes her by the hand and pulls her back up to life!

Maximize this sorrow to the heavens and here is what you get: Jesus sees the sin, the guilt, the regret, and the suffering of humanity, and like Jeremiah of old, he cannot permit himself to stand distant from it, but rather, dives into that suffering and guilt in order to save us. He sees the sin and the suffering and submits to the Cross that we might live, indeed, have life abundantly.

Us

It might come your way someday that lamentations are wrung from your heart – deep cries of sorrow, perhaps for our land, perhaps for the state of Christ’s church on earth, perhaps for the sake of loved ones, perhaps for your own sake. But if things should seem entirely lost in sin and guilt, or if you should feel overmatched by troubles, or if the whole world is frowning at you and scolding you, then know this: The true God, the Maker of heaven and earth, is even better than that little boy in the elevator who throws his arms around your neck and says he loves you. Whatever your sorrows in life, or whatever your regrets, take divine

words of love to heart and apply them to yourselves. Take thought of Jesus on the Cross and imagine him saying these closing words right to you:

I love you with my whole heart. Indeed, my love is an everlasting love. I shall be faithful to you. Morning by morning my mercies shall be new for you. I have suffered and died for you. So wait and hope with a holy waiting and a holy goodness, and you shall see my salvation.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.