

LAMENTATIONS 3: 19 – 26 2 TIMOTHY 1: 1 – 14**FAITH WHEN THE WORLD FALLS APART**

INTRODUCTION The readings set for today all deal with the theme of faith. In Lamentations, it is faith in perilous times when the prophet Jeremiah expresses the grief of the people in a series of laments. In the gospel reading [which we have not read today] the disciples ask Jesus, “Lord, increase our faith.” In the Letter to Timothy, the Apostolic writer (who may have been Paul or someone writing in his name), speaks of Timothy’s “sincere faith” which has been nurtured in him through his mother and grandmother.

These readings and the newspaper and TV news, have prompted me to ponder the question of faith for the proclamation this morning. What is the faith the Scripture urges us to hold on to? And perhaps more pointedly in these days, “How is faith maintained and rekindled in a person’s life when we live in times of chaos, violence and threat that threatens the future of civilization and the possibility of life on our little, but vulnerable, planet?

Which is why I want us to listen particularly to the Book of Lamentations this morning.

1. The Book of Lamentations:

The remarkable (really!!) book of Lamentations urges a preacher to get real about the dangers and difficulties of faith in a world gone mad and turned upside down. For the Israelites of that time when the promises of God for land, a Davidic king and temple are all gone in an invasion by the Babylonian empire with their blood lust for conquering. How do God’s people hold on to Yahweh’s promises when the basis of their hopes are snatched away? How do we hold on to faith when our hopes of “the good life” are snatched away in economic chaos, the existential threats of authoritarian governments and personal health challenges? In short, can we still believe as we once did? The reality of Lamentations presents us with our own realities and offers genuine and truthful resources for tackling these huge questions once again.

The context appears clear enough. The year is 587 B.C.E. and the months succeeding that date. After a lengthy siege, Nebuchadnezzar's armies broke into Jerusalem, slaughtering the hungry inhabitants, raping the women, seizing the power brokers—priests, king and court, scribes, accountants—and herding

them west toward Babylon. The great majority of the city dwellers were left to fend for themselves. The economy quickly collapsed, food sources disappeared, water sources were fouled, the daily rhythms of life ceased. People wandered the streets dazed, confused, desperate for a bit of bread, a cup of water. The city became unsafe, as any semblance of order was replaced by chaos. All of these realities are suggested by the poems that make up the chapters of Lamentations.

So what is a preacher to do with this? Of course, these images are not unfamiliar to us in the 21st century. Our TV screens are filled every day with similar scenes, sometimes far away in lands we have not visited, in places of war and exile and terror, and sometimes in places we know too well. Neither must we forget the homeless, the refugee waiting for the visa, the indigenous person waiting for recognition and justice, in our very own cities. One could also preach a potent word about our casual ignorance or benign acceptance of the ways of life of too many of our planetary brothers and sisters.

But something else provokes me today. I am struck, as I read the five chapters of this very stark series of poems, at the struggle the Hebrew poets feel in the face of the realities of pain and death between their resolute clinging to the hope of God and the vast despair they feel whenever they open their eyes to the monstrosity inflicted on them that threatens to consume them and their faith forever. Just how can one maintain faith in the hope and promise of God when confronted with the dismay, the genuine horror of what we humans can and have done to one another?

First, there are those who mightily cling to the faith of their ancestors; despite what their eyes see—skeletal bodies, piles of ashes and shoes and eyeglasses—they claim with Lamentations 3:22, **"The steadfast love of YHWH never ceases; God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness!"** We blithely sang it this morning in the face of all hideous realities we see each night on our TV screens. But perhaps it was not so easily sung? Indeed, that Christian hymn, "Great is Thy Faithfulness" has become an anthem especially for those who find themselves facing such horrors that they simply cannot face alone and refuse to give into the nihilism and faithlessness that could destroy their hope and their lives.

Second, there are those who are not so sure about all that supposed certainty of YHWH's love and faithfulness. Can one maintain a traditional faith when six million die for the absurd reason only that they are Jews. In our own time, can we sing it when we confront each day the graphic results of a mad man whose political ambitions plunge Europe into a protracted war for his own warped nationalistic ambitions? Where is God when we confront the consequences of the power of a weak and twisted brain? Can traditional faith survive such an unspeakable thing? These friends continue to worship, continue to pray, but they find it more and more difficult to remain traditional.

Third, there are Christians who can no longer embrace traditional views at all in these times. There is no shortage of people who were once Christians but can no longer hold to “the faith once delivered to the saints.” I suggest that may be because they have lost touch in the Church’s accommodation to the culture and our desire for institutional power in society to realise just how counter-cultural the Christian faith, the biblical faith of the church, really is.

2. Being Contemporary Witnesses: The Apostle’s words in his letter to Timothy provided us with a clue as to how we might respond to these challenges; he calls us, “**not to be ashamed of the gospel nor of Paul its prisoner.**” It appears that Paul himself, by his imprisonment has become a scandalous figure in Roman society. But it is also a reference to the scandal of the counter-cultural nature of the gospel itself which does not march to the drum of cultural popularity. Being bold witnesses to the tradition means living lives that are consistent with the truth we proclaim. The apostle reminds his readers that the Spirit we have from God is not “a spirit of timidity” but rather “a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” This may well be a timely reminder to Christians in our age that our faith and our witness need not, or rather must not, be spineless, apologetic and undisciplined.

William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, in an interesting little book about the church called ‘Resident Aliens’, wrote, “*Yet no clever theological moves can be substituted for the necessity of the church being a community of people who embody our language about God; where talk about God is used without apology because our life together does not mock our words. The church is the visible, political enactment of our language of God by a people who can name their sin and accept God’s forgiveness and are thereby enabled to speak the truth in love. Our Sunday worship has a way of reminding us, in the most explicit and ecclesial of ways, of the source of our power, the peculiar nature of our solutions to what ails the world.*” (Resident Aliens: page 170)

Conclusion: That is my prayer for the Church today – for this and every congregation. An answer to the modern day disciple’s request, ‘Lord increase our faith.’ First, that every Christian community will be a community who lives every day, what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Second, that Churches will honour the tradition and be communities of ordinary people whose deeds match their words because they know what they believe, can share it with others and express it in their everyday living.

So we will be known for our grace, generosity, forgiveness, acceptance of the stranger and the sinner; we will dare to embrace the world with God's love and we will dare to speak out when we see God's world and its peoples being treated unjustly, uncaringly and intolerantly by whatever power or authority – including religious authority. We will engage our world with the good news - lived out in the hurly burly life of our world!

And we will live with hope in our broken and fearful world. That every Christian will say 'Amen' to Paul's bold doxology: *"...I am not ashamed, for I know the One in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day, what I have entrusted to him."*

Amen. So may it be. Amen