

Our Source of Hope

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Scripture Reading: Lamentations 3:22-24

- 22 The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end;
23 they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.
24 “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.”

As the name of this book in the Bible literally reads, this book of the Bible is about mourning. Very briefly summarized, and as in various accounts in the Old Testament which is a reoccurring and cyclical event, is that of the people sinning, God calling them to repentance and/or punishing them, and the days of seeking restoration. Lamentations recounts through poetry how the people of Israel were conquered by enemies, their homes and land destroyed, and how they lived feeling abandoned and in misery.

And though this is not to simply say or conclude that whenever tragedy strikes or when, as some would say, bad things happen, that is because of sin or that it's God's punishment. There are many times that is negated, not only in life but throughout the Bible itself, the Old and New Testaments.

Though we may at time feel like we are being punished in life, may we find strength, hope and perseverance knowing that God's love never ends, that God's mercies never end, and God's faithfulness endures even when our faithfulness struggles and wanes at times.

If you read the entire third chapter of Lamentations, the longest of the 5 chapters, you find through the 66 verses that there are a whole range of thoughts and emotions that speak of how the people of Israel have felt crushed by God, yet trusting in God for mercy and deliverance, as well as seeking punishment for those who were used to deal them such incredible losses and even death.

The story of the Israelites at this point, though unique in so many ways, has many themes common to people from various places and times, that include being conquered, taken captive, made to be slaves, who were taken from their homes or living under occupation while living in their homes.

The writer of Lamentations, by inspiration of God's Holy Spirit, releases not only raw and unfiltered thoughts and feelings of abandonment, pain, suffering, and wanting revenge, but also of God's love, mercy, faithfulness, and hope.

In spite of all that has gone terribly wrong, and in light of how most of the verse in the entire book of Lamentations is that of lamenting, in several places, such as in verse 24 of this 3rd chapter of Lamentations we read, “The Lord is my portion...therefore I will hope in him.”

Portion in this sense is similar to an inheritance. Yet, in speaking of God as our portion or inheritance does not make sense unless you see it terms of God being our redeemer, savior, and what we need in life and death. Our relationship with God through Jesus Christ is one with which we do not and cannot lose hope.

There is something to be said about being able to say without hinderance how you feel when hurting and to be able to say how you feel defeated, to point out the causes and reasons, as well as to express wishes for payback on those who were part of the problems if not some of the direct sources of your pains and struggles. Like the writer of Lamentations, we learn that God does not want us to hide our feelings and thoughts from Him. I'm always aware when reading the Bible how there are no filters in place when accounts are taken, as well as thoughts and feelings shared and revealed.

We can read how people lose hope when we read of their grievances, in the retelling of wrongs done, of how things should be made right, and even with negative self-talk or asking why or how God could allow such things to happen. But there is even greater concern when there is complete and utter silence due to hope being truly lost. When all hope seems to be lost, then even the expression of feelings is no longer desired. There is no desire to talk about what's going on, to complain, to seek answers and solutions, or to somehow let off steam in order to allow room to be made for what good that can be received. That is when concern levels truly rise. I'm not talking about simply taking a break or a breather from focusing on something or even someone. It's when there is no more hope for the future in some or even all areas of one's life.

Lamentations show the power of hope, even a little hope, in light of how terribly sad, grueling, trying, and all that can and does happen in life, that with God there is always hope.

In my lifetime, I have heard stories that were passed down and shared of how their families and communities suffered greatly at the hands of others, having lost homes, land, and lives of family and friends. Whether it was the stories of those I've listened to while visiting with during my seminary days in South Dakota and Oklahoma, traveling with a Native American friend, and meeting his family and friends on reservations. It's one thing to read such stories in books, and a totally different experience when sitting with the elders who were told the stories that have been told through the generations, as they were told to me over a period of days. It was an immersion experience that made me wonder how they could have survived such suffering over such a long time. Yet, they taught me more about the power of hope in the Divine, even as they lived with being treated as if they did not belong.

This power of hope was also revealed to me when on another immersion trip in April of 2015 with families while in Palestine, there comes a point when it's hard not to wonder what keeps the desire to persevere, to continue moving forward and trying to build a future and a better one for future generations. I once made the mistake of saying to a Palestinian friend that it looks like there's not much hope when hearing recent news of conflicts in his hometown of Ramallah.

How quickly responded with saying that there is always hope and we must make sure to be part of that hopeful future woke me up to how easily it is to give in to giving up. I also realized that I was in a place myself where it seemed there wasn't much hope when it seemed that those who had the most power could and would do whatever they pleased whenever they wanted, even when the desire is for peace. Though I cannot claim to be an expert on foreign affairs, I can say that I do understand most seemingly simple-to-resolve situations are rarely ever that, if not so complicated that world experts cannot foster such peace after hundreds of years of conflict.

It was soon after that trip to Palestine that I wrote this about my experience:

When first I first arrived in Ramallah it was hard for me to imagine the suffering of occupation that I would later see. Although I never believed all the negative stereotypes that I had seen and heard about Palestinians in the media, it was not until I witnessed and experienced it for myself that my eyes were truly opened to the beauty as well as the horrifying treatment of the Palestinian people. My heart was touched, my mind was transformed, and my faith and courage strengthened. It was a blessing to experience the life and wonderful culture of Palestinians through the people we met and the places we visited. No doubt it was powerful to meet with the people of Ramallah and enjoy insightful and challenging discussion over delicious meals and unforgettable hospitality. It was more evident that the life of Palestinians is difficult, especially while traveling through the many checkpoints that not only inconvenienced people but also harassed and degraded them. I have always tried to understand all sides of a situation, but it is hard to deny that the occupation is a systematic effort by Israel to claim all Palestinian land. It was made clear as we drove around and saw how settlements were growing everywhere. I kept saying to myself, "This is unbelievable" and "This is crazy." And after talking to community leaders, community members, and those living in refugee camps, it was clear that the only way things will change is for people to understand and do something about the injustices of occupation, especially Americans. No doubt this is a herculean task. But nonetheless it is one that needs to be taken up by more and more people. I know how important it is to build relationships when doing anything, from sharing the love of God to stopping injustices. The seeds planted will not only grow, but produce more seeds of change and justice. One change is how we use language. There should no longer be the language of "us" and "them." The language that is to be used as we build understanding and solidarity is speaking about how "we" are in this together as brothers and sisters of the humankind. I thank the American Federation of Ramallah Palestine, leader of our trip Basem Hishmeh, and all who helped us experience all that we did and to build relationships for understanding and change.

I share about my experience with Native Americans and Palestinians because it's tempting to say something like "that's their problem" or "that has nothing to do with me" or "that was a long time ago" or something else that even places blame rather than trying to seek understanding.

What seems to be absent when we look at any injustice is what Jesus taught when it comes to how we treat one another, whether someone we know or a complete stranger. We cannot forget

that as disciples of Christ we are called and even commanded to do unto others, especially those Christ described as the least of these, as if we are doing it unto Christ. Christ tells us that what we do unto others is done unto him. That is not to be a fear-driven statement, though the parable Jesus used with the sheep and goats (Mathew 25:31-46) is not exactly one that is cheerfully motivating either, we are to remember that we are all connected to each other as members of God's family, and loving God and others includes loving everyone.

Interestingly, those who were or felt oppressed and came out of such situations and abusive powers sometimes becomes oppressors themselves. We see this throughout history. Jesus goes even farther with the command to love by teaching in Matthew 5:43-48 that all who would follow him would love, bless, and pray for your enemies, those who persecute you. Unfortunately, that is not the way many walk who claim to follow Christ.

And one of the main reasons this is the case, which happens today, as we have witnessed, let alone read about in history, is because people lose hope, the hope we can have in God.

When we lose hope, then it is easier not to care about others, ourselves and even God. God knows this. And we know the results when people lose hope. Without hope in God, then we take matters into our own hands. We say that if God doesn't do anything, then we must. Now, I'm not talking about sitting back and not doing anything when we see others in need, who are mistreated, and when we need to stand up and speak out. Because of our hope in God, we can do so with purpose and power that is rooted in the ways and love of Christ. And God made sure the Bible taught us that God created us, knows us, redeems us and calls us to a life that makes a difference in Christ names here on earth and for eternity in heaven.

We can do so, especially during the most challenging times, when we remember that God is our source of life, source of eternal life, source of love, source of mercy, source of faith, source of hope and all we need for life and the life to come. This is why we worship our Lord God. This is why we live the lives we do, doing everything unto the Lord. And this is why we are able to persevere when we face challenges, trials, and tribulations in our lives. Even when others give up, walk away, or stop giving their all to God, we must remain steadfast, persevere, and love as we are able, even those who treat us like we are their enemies.

When we remember our source of hope, we can allow for Christ to be a beacon of hope in and through our lives for the love of others. In how we handle the tough times in life, the trials and tribulations, we can allow Christ to draw others closer to him.

On another note, I want to say that when we hear about how others have suffered terribly, or the history of their suffering, comparable to what was recorded in Lamentations, it's so tempting to belittle what you're going through when someone says or you think that what you're going through is nothing compared to...(and you fill in the rest of that sentence). Sure, someone usually has or had it worse in various ways. When you read the history of suffering and death, most all of us have never seen or experienced such horrific situations that others went through.

And if you're aware of current events in our world, you will find that they continue in varying degrees throughout the world, near and far. Do not negate what you're going through because someone else has it worse than you. Please remember that.

Also remember that when we say that God is everything we need that it is not a statement to say "it's all good then." Read again the third chapter of Lamentations and you'll quickly see that's not how our scripture reading, verses 22-24, is to be read. The verses of God's love, mercy, faithfulness, and our source for all we need is to give us hope for all times, no matter what we're going through.

So, we can find true strength to persevere anything because we know and remember that God is our true source of hope, especially when there are times it feels like there is nothing else to hope for.

Take time to read today's Scripture reading again. Read the verse before and after in the third chapter of Lamentations. Not only to see how it resonates with you, but how it can help you see into the lives of those who have and continue to cry out to God for deliverance, learning to walk with others who need more of the true source of hope found in God. We can do so by walking with others more closely, supportively and lovingly. Amen.

This week's announcements and prayer requests:

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our church council met and considering several factors, including how the county of Monroe and our local area significantly having decreased in COVID cases, decided that we'll resume in-person worship services next Sunday, Feb. 21, with masks, social distancing, and music but no singing until it is safe to do so. We know and understand many cannot or choose not to attend for various reasons and factors. We will continue to have videos of our worship service available, being uploaded as soon as possible following worship services.

PRAYER REQUEST

1. Keep Lori Giedlin's daughter, Brooke, in your prayers as she broke her finger in two places and was referred to an orthopedic as they think she needs surgery on it.
2. Pray for Joyce King as the radiation she's received has irritated her esophagus and she can hardly eat or drink. They've stopped radiation so she can heal, but her throat is not healing.
3. Rebecca and Theresa Miller ask for prayers for their friend Pam whose blood pressure is so high that it is causing blindness in one eye. Pam has custody of her three young grandchildren and is so overwhelmed and stretched thin.

Thank you for your prayers.