

Fourth Weekend After Pentecost (B/RCL)  
Lamentations 3.22-33  
June 27-28, 2009  
Holy Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, Manasquan

Who expects to find anything uplifting in a book called Lamentations? It's not the kind of title we reach out for when we're looking for a good summer read ☺. The Hebrew names of books of the Bible come from the first words in those books. For instance, Genesis means *beginning* and is the title of the first book of the Bible whose initial words are, "In the beginning." One English translation of the Hebrew name for what we call the Book of Lamentations is "The Book of How." "Sounds like an owner's manual of some kind, but no, the sense of it is, "**How** could this happen, Lord?" "**How** could this awful thing happen?"

Scripture scholars believe that the Book of Lamentations was written after the fall of Jerusalem in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. (587 is the date usually remembered.) The Babylonians attacked repeatedly, destroying the Temple, killing the priests, tearing down the king's palace, toppling the city's walls, and carrying the leaders off into exile. What they left behind was social chaos, a religious vacuum, famine, disease and death. All of the prophet Jeremiah's dire predictions about how God would punish unrepentant Judah had come true.

There are times when emotion is **so** intense, pain **or** joy so unspeakably deep and profound, that only poetry or music can express it, do it justice. The Book of Lamentations is a volume of poetry which has inspired musicians along the Way. It contains five poems of national lament about the sack of Jerusalem and the driving of the Jews into exile in Babylon. When we try to come up with a parallel in our own country's life, a similar time when the nation was reeling from brutal attack and suffering in the wrenching aftermath, 9/11 will probably spring to mind. It's not a good fit, though, for what the Jews of Jerusalem experienced way back when. Thankfully, our nation survived the attacks against it on 9/11. The towers were lost and Lower Manhattan was changed forever, but our government endured. Lives, too many lives,

were lost, but an entire generation wasn't carried off to another country. Our faith may have been shaken, but overall, I believe it was strengthened. Most importantly, the nation itself was preserved. Closer to the experience of those who composed the Book of Lamentations was Cambodia's hell under the Khmer Rouge, when the entire educated class was executed and the remainder of the population was enslaved by their own countrymen.

It can be healing, therapeutic for us to read someone else's words that describe our pain. When folks are suffering some loss and ask where to find comfort in Scripture, I usually direct them to the Book of Psalms, which Martin Luther called "the prayer book of the Bible." The psalmist couldn't have had exactly the same experiences you and I have, but the emotions of grief are the same despite the cause: anger, sadness, loneliness, hopelessness. Most of the songs of lament in the Bible, though, also contain grace notes, the hope and even expectation that God will come through and **save** us once again. The Book of Lamentations is no exception.

Tucked in the midst of devastating descriptions of the physical city in ruins and suffering people in despair, we find the verses from this weekend's first lesson:

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,  
 his mercies never come to an end;  
 they are new every morning;  
 great is your faithfulness.  
 "The LORD is my portion," says my soul,  
 "therefore I will hope in him."  
 Lamentations 3.22-24

The paraphrase in *The Message* is:

God's loyal love couldn't have run out,  
 his merciful love couldn't have dried up.  
 They're created new every morning.  
 How great is your faithfulness!  
 I'm sticking with God (I say it over and over).  
 He's all I've got left.

He's all I've got left and all I'll ever need. In our Weekday Spirituality Bible study this past week, we touched upon the beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," and learned that it means,

“Blessed are those who know their need of God.” The person who says, “I’m sticking with God... He’s all I’ve got left,” certainly is in touch with his or her need of divine assistance....

Aren’t the people whose faith most inspires us those who have passed through the fire, in one way or another? It’s a gift to look back on a hard time in our lives, and to be able and willing to tell others, “In retrospect, I can see what God was doing. I can see the good that God brought out of what seemed like a hopeless situation.” It’s an even greater gift to be in the midst of a crisis and to say, “I have no idea **what** God is doing, but I trust that God **is present in power**, doing something good.” There was a poem found on a concentration camp wall that you may know because it was set to music. It was composed by someone who was in terrible straits but had great, great faith. It is tailor made for our forebears who mourned Jerusalem’s destruction and for us when we grieve the loss of that which we love most:

I believe in the sun even when it isn’t shining.  
I believe in love, even when there’s no one there.  
I believe in God, even when He is silent.

Back to Lamentations and those verses which we’d all do well to commit to memory:

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,  
his mercies never come to an end;  
they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.

Those are words of hope that sprang up unexpectedly in the midst of despair like wildflowers that pop up between cracks in the pavement, improbably rooted in a sprinkling of soil, shoehorned into an impossibly small place. If you know the refrain of the hymn, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” you’re already part of the way to memorizing those two gemlike verses:

Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!  
morning by morning new mercies I see;  
all I have needed thy hand hath provided;  
great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

The man who wrote the lyrics to “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” was named Thomas Obediah Chisholm. He was born in a log cabin in Kentucky and became a schoolteacher at the

age of 16, despite the fact he didn't have much schooling himself. His health was poor, and he had to cobble together a living doing whatever he could in addition to teaching, including stints as a journalist, insurance salesman and evangelist. Lamentations 3, verses 22 to 23, spoke to Thomas Chisholm clearly and loudly, so much so that he was inspired to write "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," while he was living in Vineland, NJ. He sent the words to a composer friend, William Runyan, who published the hymn in 1923. It was not an immediate hit. It got some press along the way as the unofficial theme song of the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, but only became well-known when Billy Graham's musician, George Beverly Shea, highlighted it at Crusades around the world. I was surprised to find that "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" was not included in the green Lutheran Book of Worship. As far as I know, it formally entered Lutheran circles when the blue hymnal, "With One Voice" was published. Most recently it was also included in our red Evangelical Worship Book. Let us sing it now as our Hymn of the Day, rejoicing in God's tender mercies, past, present and future. It is #733 in the ELW. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

(Story of "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" is included in *Then Sings My Soul: 150 of the World's Greatest Hymn Stories* b Robert J. Morgan, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003, pp. 284-285.)