

Sermon - July 1, 2018 - Pentecost 6

Great Is God's Faithfulness

Lamentations 3:22–33



Dear Friends in Christ,

I'm sure many of us know stories of people who have come back from the ashes so to speak, and flourished again, be it financially, health, even relationships. It could also be for entire communities who lost their livelihoods to anything, wars, flood, fire, or anything else. It is good to appreciate their resilience and the desire to be productive again.

One of the stories has to do with who we are in Canada. One of the things I appreciate about visiting seniors, the ones who immigrated to Canada decades ago, is hearing their stories. How they lived in the Old Country, how the war displaced them all over, how they lost their possessions and family members. Then, when everything seemed lost they found their way to Canada, where they will have a different kind of suffering, homesteading. But as hard as life would be they pressed on and contributed to what Canada it is now, which we proudly celebrate today. Of course, it wasn't on their own we know that, in everything we see God's hand at work.

Our text of meditation this morning is based on the Old Testament reading of Lamentations chapter 3. The text offers us Christians a glimpse of God's great power and work in the midst of suffering. This is a voice of lament that came to a people who was experiencing exile, siege of a foreign nation, their capital city and their temple destroyed, the Israelites where those people suffering.

And although our text is a voice of lament, really is about God's amazing faithfulness that remains for generations and today guides our lives in Hope in the midst of suffering.

Now, you'll agree with me that grief has many voices; people grieve in different ways. In the Bible we see the same thing as the book of Lamentations reveals it to us. This book actually contains five different laments, of which today's reading is part of what is called the third lament.

It is very personal. It's the cry of a man who has seen suffering (3:1), the suffering of the exile and God's judgment upon his people. Having seen these things, this man cries out in grief. But his cry is not so much about him complaining or crying to God, no! It is actually about God and what he does.

Not that his situation didn't matter, no is not that. In fact he had been crying out lots. In his lament he recognizes that what they were suffering was God's judgment, and even describes how harshly God's judgment was, he describes God as a "bear lying in wait" and "a lion in hiding" (v 10). Or, in another verse he talks about God being like an archer who has not only marked out the writer as prey but has also driven his arrows into his kidneys (v 13). Can you picture God like that? I can assure you that that picture is not something we want to have, or think about or even describe. What kind of God would that be? Right?

But that's how the writer describes God. He has been experiencing God's judgment physically, mentally, emotionally. And that experience had reached a point where his endurance and his hope from the Lord have perished. He can't speak to God any more. He knew that looking at God through the lens of his life, seeing God through the experience of suffering, would make him stop praying. What's the point? He asks. He can't speak to God anymore, but there is something he can do, he can speak about God instead.

In the midst of his lament he remembers something about God. He calls to mind God's faithfulness, God's mercies and God's steadfast love. These are the things he had learned before. These were the words found in Israel's history books and spoken in her psalms, words God gave to Israel. He knew Moses writing: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6). These words he remembers as he cries, as he laments his situation. And as he remembers something amazing begins to happen.

Suddenly from speaking about God, he now speaks TO God. Notice his prayer goes in 23, he says: "Great is your faithfulness" (v 23). Not great is God's faithfulness but great is YOUR faithfulness.

This God, who had pursued him like an enemy, suddenly is near to him in faithfulness and love. God restored his relationship with this man, after all God will not forsake his people and stop loving them. And more and once again deliver this man in his people from the exile in a foreign country, Babylon. This God, who judged his people for their sin, will forgive them and bring restoration. In the face of great sin and great suffering, God's faithfulness is great, greatness that his people can rely on.

That's what happens when we keep God's word in our hearts, that even though we are called not to sin, we know that in this human flesh we are sinners from birth, deserving of God's punishment. Yet when the consequences of our sins are experienced, even there, it does us good to remember God's faithfulness. It is good to keep God's words in our hearts that when we ourselves experience hardship, suffering, pain and even grief, that "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; ²³ they are new every morning; great is (his) faithfulness."

It does us good also to understand that when we read God according to our lives we will not experience hope. That when we use our life experiences as a way of determining and measuring God's love we will fail. That is when we think that if God has delivered us from suffering, then God is powerful. If God has prospered our business or family then God is loving! But when life begins to break down, then our understanding, our view of God brakes too, and with that we lose faith.

But thanks be to God because this text urges us to see God not from our life's point of view, but for who he is: "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." That that God "...will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love" (vv 31-32).

It does us good to remember those words, just as his people of old did and were led to pray to him in the midst of suffering, from one generation to another. We can do the same today, today we can rely on God's great faithfulness and love.

Of all people, you and I know about the steadfast love of our God. That love was shown in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. There on the cross, a Roman

instrument of torture, God wrote his faithfulness in the landscape of our history. His love is so great that he provide Jesus to bear the judgment of our sin on himself. His love is so great that he promises life eternal to us. It's love that brought you here today and love that sends you home. It is the love that little Hunter will receive the new life he promised through the waters of baptism. God is good, gracious and loving indeed!

Yes, while in this world, we will have suffering, we will have trials, but in the midst of all of that we have hope. There is no judgment we endure where Jesus is not at the right hand of God interceding for us, and there is no suffering we bear that Jesus has not ultimately overcome.

Now, see what happens to this man as he remembers God's faithfulness, suddenly he begins to live in true hope. That's what God's great faithfulness does, leads and guides our lives in hope.

Living in hope does not mean that the suffering has been taken away. In fact, for this man, the suffering is still present. But this time, when he remembers his suffering (3:40–54), he does so with hope. He later own writes: "I called on your name, O LORD, from the depths of the pit; ⁵⁶ you heard my plea, 'Do not close your ear to my cry for help!' ⁵⁷ You came near when I called on you; you said, 'Do not fear!' (Lam. 3:55–57).

Earlier, he was at the end of his resources. He was without peace (v 17), without happiness (v 17), without hope (v 18). When he opened his mouth, all that came out was an expression of emptiness, "my endurance has perished; so has my hope from the Lord" (v 18).

Now, however, his soul is full. "The Lord is my portion," he says (v 24). Often, one's portion was something you would gain in battle. After fighting, the spoils of war were divided, and each warrior received his portion.

This time, however, the Lord has fought for him, and he has won. But there is more, because God actually becomes the portion. Now, this man and his people receive not the winnings of battle but the one who wins the battle. The Lord is their portion.

When God is your portion, you live with hope. The one who created the universe, the one who defeated death and the devil, the one who forgives your sin is on your side. He fights for you.

Is it any wonder that this man's language suddenly bursts with hope? Even in the midst of suffering, this man speaks of God's goodness. Because God is good (v 25), life is good (vv 26–27). Yes even in the midst of exile and suffering life is good, because of God's faithfulness which guides our lives in hope. Just as Jesus said before his death, he said: "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33).

Bill Johnson, some of you remember him, he passes back in 2014, he was 89, for about two years, he had no immediate memory of anything. He remembered pastor though. Every time I came to see him, I would ask, if he knew who I was, he would say, yes you are the pastor. Then we would "talk" and I would ask him, 'Bill do you know where you are going to?' He would say yes, "Heaven" then he would quote me this verse: "I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me." (2 Tim. 1:12) He might of lost everything else, but one thing he still remembered, God's faithfulness and mercy.

That's how God wants to trust him. That's how we really and truly come back from the ashes into victory, through Jesus Christ, who died on the Cross of Calvary to take away our sin, thereby giving us hope.

I'm sure we all have heard heartwarming and inspiring stories of our ancestors as they made their living and set a future that we now enjoy, which we celebrate and give thanks to God on this Canada day. I'm sure God's hand has been involved in all and for all.

But the far sweet part of our celebration is the recognition that in Christ's, in God's faithfulness we have hope for the future, and not only an earthly future, but with God in heaven forever.

God's faithfulness to this promise is great. It is great in its power to forgive you your sins. It is great in its extent, lasting from generation to generation. And it guides your lives in hope until Christ returns. Then, he will bring about a new creation, where all those who believe in him will live in the wonder of his great faithfulness and love.

That's what God desires for us, even as we observe Canada day today. As we ponder our lives and all the good things we have been given, all because of God's grace and mercy. Likewise we need to show that grace in mercy to others, so they too may relay in the greatness of God's faithfulness.

Amen.