

“God’s Faithfulness”

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Lamentations 3:21-25

But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
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.’
The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.

Mark 5:21-43

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, ‘My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.’ So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.’ Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, ‘Who touched my clothes?’ And his disciples said to him, ‘You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, “Who touched me?”’ He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.’

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader’s house to say, ‘Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?’ But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, ‘Do not fear, only believe.’ He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, ‘Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.’ And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, ‘Talitha cum’, which means, ‘Little girl, get up!’ And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

I may have preached from the Old Testament's Book of Lamentations ... once.

This book is a set of acrostic poems, which means that the first verse, or group of verses, begins with the first letter of the alphabet, the second verse with the second letter and so on, through all 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. So, in this book, we have five poems, cleverly written, which, unfortunately, lose quite a bit in translation to modern English.

Tradition suggests that Jeremiah is the book's author, but while he may have written one of the poems, he didn't write all five.

The Book of Lamentations was written during the Babylonian exile. It tells of the people's sorrows when they watched the Babylonians destroy Jerusalem and its temple, and when the victorious invaders took their king and other leaders into exile. Listen to the first two verses of the book to get a sense of what the Judahites were feeling:

Oh, no! She sits alone, the city that was once full of people.
Once great among nations, she has become like a widow.
Once a queen over provinces, she has become a slave.
She weeps bitterly in the night, her tears on her cheek.
None of her lovers comfort her. All her friends lied to her;
they have become her enemies. (1:1-2 CEB).

Can you hear the grief and regret?

Throughout the exile, Jeremiah and other prophets spoke for God, offering both words of judgment and hope. They continued to call for the people to trust God. They could do this because they knew God is faithful. They could say along with the writer of Psalm 89: "You established your faithfulness in heaven itself... Your faithfulness surrounds you." These writers recognized that faithfulness is not a secondary part of God's character. It's at the center of who God is.

The word lament has multiple meanings. We can lament when we say, "I'm sorry; I messed up." We can lament when we mourn or grieve. We can also lament when we complain. Though we don't use words like lament or lamentation very much, in practice, we do lament. We do grieve. We feel remorse. We complain.

Do you know someone who's always complaining about family or neighbors, the weather or work, or aches and pains? The Book of Lamentations can seem like this. The writers lament through almost three complete poems, almost three times through the alphabet. Then, it's as if they take a calming breath and says, "It can't be all bad. I need to look for the good in this." And that's when we find the affirmation we/Bonnie just read: "Certainly the faithful love of the Lord hasn't ended; certainly God's compassion isn't through! They are renewed every morning. Great is your faithfulness." These words speak of someone who has chosen to turn their attention from self to God, and to rest, for at least a moment, in God's unconditional love.

Our second reading confirms this trust in God's nature. Jesus shows the same faithfulness and compassion for each person, no matter who they are, what their situation is or where they're from. And through Jesus' example, we find God's compassion displayed in very practical ways. Jairus' daughter is gravely ill. We can imagine her family's fear, their sense of helplessness, their mental anguish. Jesus listens and immediately starts walking. He encourages Jairus, and, arriving at their home, coaxes the child to get up.

To the woman who touches his clothing, Jesus offers a different compassionate response. He brings her *shalom* – in this case, “a total restoration of life as it is meant to be.” *Shalom* goes way beyond physical, mental, or emotional healing so that even when a hoped-for return to health does not occur, we can still live fully. With life renewed and restored, we can again live the life God hopes for us. We can choose – with God’s help – to live in wholeness. This is what God wants for us. And, in the good and the bad, God nudges us always toward lives of wholeness.

Like the hymn we’ll sing in a few minutes reminds us, we can trust to God’s faithfulness. Remember the story of David and Goliath? When Saul asked David why he thought he could slay the giant, the boy explained about his days as a shepherd. He said, “The Lord, who rescued me from the power of both lions and bears, will rescue me from the power of this Philistine” (1 Samuel 17:37). Based on past experience and trusting in God’s unchanging character, David trusted that God could deliver him once again.

The words God and Unchanging are sometimes used together. This can be a challenge for some of us because we trust that God does change. If God didn’t change, then God could never interact with us, never be swayed by Moses’ prayers or ours. It is *God’s nature* that is unchanging. God is ever loving, ever just, ever faithful.

Trusting in God’s faithfulness helps us through challenging times – such as:

When we’re feeling discouraged. God hears our prayers and connects with us. We can trust that God abides with us – whether we are following God’s preferred path or not.

Another time is *when we’re tempted* by something. We can lean into God. While God is not going to remove temptations, God will give us strength to stand up to them. Just as Jesus resisted his temptations, so can we – when we open ourselves to God’s resources for us.

Other times when trusting in God’s faithfulness can help us are: *When we’ve made a mess of our lives* and *when we don’t think we have the strength to continue.* We can trust in God’s presence and support. We may long for God to convict us, or to accept us, or both. We need God’s grace – God’s love, forgiveness and acceptance – so we can begin to forgive ourselves. We’ll still have to face the consequences of our own and others’ actions, but we don’t have to do it alone.

When we read the words of biblical prophets – from the earliest ones through to Jesus – we find words of judgment and hope. The writers affirm that God is on the side of the oppressed and will not abide our arrogance or injustice. Still, God loves all, the bullies and the ones they abuse.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann suggest that the prophets speak with two narratives – one is God’s narrative and focuses on justice and compassion, especially for the poor and the outsider. The other narrative, which most of us tend to live by, is “committed to the notion of *self-invention* in the pursuit of *self-sufficiency*.”¹ It’s a narrative of selfishness where we declare our independence from God and from our neighbor. It’s attractive because it promises us control over our lives. Appealing but short-sighted. And in a scary sort of way, ironic because as a nation we pride ourselves on independence and self-sufficiency. What is freedom? Are we really free to do whatever we please with no thought of God or neighbor?

We hear today’s texts at a time when many women, men and children are experiencing distress. Right here in Wausau, while people have been showing lambs and rabbits, and enjoying concerts at the fairgrounds, others are struggling to feed their children, having their utilities shut off, or living under shrubs. Locally and nationally, there is so much fear, so much frustration. A lot of lamenting is going on. Some of it is complaining. Some is contrition. Some is begging for God or

someone to help. Do we know ourselves to be part of the problem?

So many concerns. Yet, along with the lament, we still find God's word of hope. When we think God has given up on us, we are reminded again that God is truly faithful. The question remains – are we prepared to accept the gifts God offers? Are we ready to entrust our lives to God?

The people of Judah had put their trust in themselves and their military and had neglected to include God as a vital part of the equation. This is an echo of our own times, so one question we might ask ourselves is, “In what ways can you, and can we, entrust our lives – and the life of all creation – to God just a little more fully – this week, this year?”

The God who is just is also the God whose faithfulness and love never ceases. This is the answer to our lamentations.

Amen.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination*.