

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 1, 2018

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

"The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in Him."

- Lamentations 3:24

Sitting amid the ruins of Jerusalem the prophet Jeremiah laments,

I am one who has seen affliction

under the rod of God's wrath;

he has driven and brought me

into darkness without any light;

against me alone he turns his hand,

again and again, all day long.

He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,

and broken my bones;

he has besieged and enveloped me

with bitterness and tribulation;

he has made me sit in darkness

like the dead of long ago.

He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;

he has put heavy chains on me;

though I call and cry for help,

*he shuts out my prayer;
he has blocked my ways with hewn stones,
he has made my paths crooked.
He is a bear lying in wait for me,
a lion in hiding;
he led me off my way and tore me to pieces;
he has made me desolate;
he bent his bow and set me
as a mark for his arrow.
He shot into my vitals
the arrows of his quiver;
I have become the laughingstock of all my people,
the object of their taunt-songs all day long.
He has filled me with bitterness,
he has sated me with wormwood.
He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
and made me cower in ashes;
my soul is bereft of peace;
I have forgotten what happiness is;
so I say, "Gone is my glory,
and all that I had hoped for from the Lord."
The thought of my affliction and my homelessness*

is wormwood and gall!

My soul continually thinks of it

and is bowed down within me.

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 story of the prophet Jeremiah and the book of Lamentations is different from all the other prophets. His is not the call to speak truth to power in the ways of Samuel or Nathan. He is not sent to speak the promise of restoration and redemption, to prophesy the coming of the Messiah like Isaiah. Nor is he sent to call the people to repentance, back to faith in God, back to the law and justice like Amos or Joel.

No, Jeremiah's story is very different. It's darker. For Jeremiah is the last of the major prophets before the Exile to Babylon and it is his job - his unenviable job - to tell the people over and over and over again that the jig is up. There is no more time for repentance. It is too late. Jerusalem will be destroyed, God will cast them out, and they will go into exile.

And for most of his ministry no one listens to him. So he has the triple misfortune of having nothing but bad news to bring to a people who have no more time to repent and who don't want to hear what he has to say anyway. And who could

blame them? After all, none of what the previous prophets promised had come to pass. Sure, the Northern Kingdom had been carted off by the Assyrians never to be heard from again - but they were schismatics and outright idolaters. The Babylonians had come and carted off the people of the villages of Judah, but so what. Those were not Jerusalem. Zion. The City of David. The home of the Temple, the very house of God! What kind of God would allow his temple to be destroyed?

They don't want to listen to Jeremiah. Nobody wants to listen to the crank who spends all his time telling everyone, "You're doomed! Doomed I tell you!" No, Jeremiah is not an enviable prophet. Jeremiah reminds us that being a prophet should not be on one's short list of things to do in life.

Nobody listens to Jeremiah. Even as the Babylonians surround the city. Even as the siege leaves them trapped in a city with no food and nowhere to bury the dead, where disease is rampant and parents are forced to cook their own children to survive. But then what would Jeremiah have told them? What they didn't want to hear. There's no point in holding out. You're doomed.

And then the day comes that the Babylonians breach the walls. Jerusalem is pillaged and looted. The Temple is destroyed. Not one stone is left upon another. The people are bound in chains. And what does the prophet do?

Not what we would expect. We, they, expected the prophet to gloat. I told you so! I told you this was going to happen! See I was right!

But no, Jeremiah sits in the ruins and weeps. He weeps, because he was right. He weeps because for as bad as Jerusalem and her people are, they are his people, they are God's people.

This is where Lamentations comes from. It is the prophet Jeremiah's angry cry, his near despair at what has happened. His distress and sorrow at being *right*. And in his grief he brings before us deep and hard questions.

Where is God in all this? How can we trust in God at time like this? How do we make sense of God's promises to His people when His Temple, His city, His people have been brought low and destroyed?

Jeremiah doesn't begin by telling everyone not to worry, or that everything will be okay. No, the first thing he does is take stock of the situation for what it is. The city he loves has been destroyed, its people whom he loves in spite of their sin, are dead, dying, defeated, and being carted into exile. And he weeps. He weeps and cries out to God. He cries out and complains.

He, the prophet, the guy who knew all along how this was going to end, still complains. He even holds God accountable for it all, *"Although he causes grief!"* he cries. This may well be God's plan, but Jeremiah doesn't use that as a platitude to make himself or anyone else feel better. It's God's plan, that doesn't mean it doesn't suck.

Jeremiah reminds us that in all the awfulness of tragedy the way to hope is not to downplay the pain, it's not to try to brush it all away and try to get God off the hook. It's to enter the brokenness, to sit in the ruins, to be covered in dust, to face the unknowns of exile head on - and tell it all to God. For if our God is truly omnipotent - as we confess that he is - then he can deal with our sorrow and anger, he can handle all our words, and all our feelings.

Jeremiah looks at all the destruction, all the anguish, all the death, and sorrow and even as He calls God to account for the awfulness of this plan, he also says, *"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.'"*

We have this tendency as human beings to think that our options are to buck up and be cheery or just sit in the ruins and feel sorry for ourselves, to just give God

glory and praise and thanks and find a silver lining in "God's plan," or hate God forever.

But that's not what Jeremiah shows us. Nor is it what Christ shows us.

Notice Jeremiah's words, "*The Lord is my portion, therefore I will have hope in Him.*" Ponder that. Notice what he doesn't say. He doesn't "I will have hope in Him because I know for sure He really loves Jerusalem and will make it great again." Nor does he say, "I have hope that in the future God's people will create a more just society." He doesn't even say, "I have hope that this won't happen again."

He does this strange thing, He holds God to account, confesses His sorrow and anger, and then turns to the Lord in hope without telling God how He should make this all right, or what Jeremiah's preferred future is that God should now enact.

It's enough to have the Lord as his portion. His hope is simply this: He has the Lord, the Lord has him, and that is enough.

It doesn't solve anything. It might not answer any questions. It doesn't have to. Having the Lord is enough.

Jeremiah is showing us what Luther calls a theology of the cross. The theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is. She looks at the cross in all its blood and gore and doesn't try to make into a soft bed of flowers. She lets it be suffering and death. She lets it be heart-wrenching and defeating. She lets it be weakness and humility. All in contrast to the theologian of glory who wants to get past all that to make the cross somehow good.

And what the theologian of the cross finds in all of the blood and gore, the suffering and death, the heartache and defeat, the weakness and humility is ...
God.

This is what Jeremiah would have us see. For all the horrors of the fall of Jerusalem and the Exile. For all the death and destruction. For everything that brings him low and forces him to weep in the dirt, for all that... that's where God is present.

God will be with the people who go into exile. God will be with the people who have suffered and lost. God will be found not in glory or victory, but in sinners sitting in the midst of death and destruction.

But the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem is not the end. It's really but a foreshadowing of the cross. God is not made manifest to us through His glory. We don't learn who He really is through His acts of power. We see it in Jesus who cries out with us and for us, *"My God, My God, why have You forsaken me!"*

Where is God when all is lost? When the cancer returns? When a hurricane drowns and then flattens half the town? When your child is lying in a hospital bed and there is nothing you can do? Where is God when it all goes wrong?

He is here with you. He is here with you because that is His promise. It's the promise He made to you when you were baptized and united to Jesus. United to Jesus in His death. You have been crucified with Christ, and united to Him by the Holy Spirit. And that means when it all falls apart Christ is here, because you are here and He has united Himself to you.

This God, our God, is not impassible, immune to suffering. Just the opposite, He comes to be in the suffering, to be with you in your suffering. To remind you that everything that you feel He has felt- abandoned, forgotten, forsaken, alone. *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

And unlike Him, you are not alone, for Christ is with you. That's what He promised you in your baptism. And as Jeremiah reminds us, *"This I call to mind and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases... great is your faithfulness."* There is no tragedy so great that God will forsake you, there is

no anger you could have or words you could say that will drive Him from you. For He is faithful.

He is faithful and that is what matters. He is faithful and that is why you'll find Him sitting in the dirt with the prophet, and at a bedside with you, for He who was not above the cross is not above the dirt, or a bedside.

And what He gives you is nothing less than Himself. Jesus gives you Jesus. So you cannot lose everything, for you cannot lose Him. He is your portion. He is the one in whom to have hope. For just as He rose on the third day, just as He brought the Jews back from exile, so too will he heal this, redeem this, and give you life again.

"This I call to mind and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases..." Amen.