

World Communion Sunday (Year C)

---

*Lamentations 1:1-6*

*How lonely sits the city  
that once was full of people!  
How like a widow she has become,  
she that was great among the nations!  
She that was a princess among the provinces  
has become a vassal.*

*She weeps bitterly in the night,  
with tears on her cheeks;  
among all her lovers  
she has no one to comfort her;  
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her,  
they have become her enemies.*

*Judah has gone into exile with suffering  
and hard servitude;  
she lives now among the nations,  
and finds no resting-place;  
her pursuers have all overtaken her  
in the midst of her distress.*

*The roads to Zion mourn,  
for no one comes to the festivals;  
all her gates are desolate,  
her priests groan;  
her young girls grieve,  
and her lot is bitter.*

*Her foes have become the masters,  
her enemies prosper,  
because the Lord has made her suffer  
for the multitude of her transgressions;  
her children have gone away,  
captives before the foe.*

*From daughter Zion has departed  
all her majesty.  
Her princes have become like stags  
that find no pasture;  
they fled without strength  
before the pursuer.*

*Lamentations 3:19-26*

*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 Lord is good to those who wait for him,  
to the soul that seeks him.  
It is good that one should wait quietly  
for the salvation of the Lord.*

---

Today's two passages, both from the book of Lamentations, document two very different emotions. One of them is pain and the other is hope. As a Christian community in a fractured world, it is our job to hold those two things in tension with one another. It is seldom an easy job; but it is certainly a necessary one.

As we have spoken of in the past few weeks, Jerusalem was in ruins. The Babylonians had raped and pillaged the stronghold of Israel. The people of this nation had been captured and enslaved, taken away to foreign lands. Families were split apart. Communities destroyed. Warfare violated what was once a peaceful city and a prosperous nation. Today's first text is a lament that gives voice to this pain and suffering.

*How lonely sits the city  
that once was full of people!  
How like a widow she has become,  
she that was great among the nations!  
She that was a princess among the provinces  
has become a vassal.*

*She weeps bitterly in the night,  
with tears on her cheeks;  
among all her lovers  
she has no one to comfort her;*

This passage speaks to a ruined Jerusalem. A lonely city that was once full of people and laughter, life and love. But now she is like a widow; the former princess is now a lowly servant. Her response is to weep bitterly because she has no one to comfort her.

Yes, this passage speaks of the destruction of Jerusalem. But it could just as easily be speaking of the rubble of yet another Syrian airstrike. It could just as easily be speaking of the communities that were recently decimated by the flooding in Louisiana. It could just as easily be speaking of the playground at the elementary school in South Carolina that was riddled with bullets earlier this week. Or perhaps it's speaking to the devastation that you are feeling because of some barren place in your life.

Today is World Communion Sunday, an observance that takes place every year on the first Sunday in October. It is an opportunity for us to remember that we are but a small part of a very big family. We are part of a global family that has far too much warfare, far too much inequality, far too much hatred, and far, far too much apathy. Today is a day when we are invited to ponder the quiet pain of the first chapter of the book of Lamentations and remember that the emotions felt in that passage are not emotions that only existed thousands of years ago. These are emotions that are felt today in many places of the world. These are emotions that are felt here on this island, perhaps in this very room. If you are not feeling such devastation at this very moment, perhaps you will remember a time in your life when you did.

It is important that the biblical narrative gives witness to the reality of suffering that is an inevitable part of the human condition. If the Bible had nothing but "happy-go-lucky" passages in it, where would we turn when we feel alone, violated, depressed, or empty? Where would we turn to to speak theologically of the suffering of our hearts and our bodies?

But it is equally important that the biblical narrative gives witness to another reality, a reality of the steadfast love of God. Only two chapters after today's first passage, the author of the book of Lamentations explores a deeper narrative. The author has grieved, and perhaps is still grieving. However, the deep expression of grief has made room for another truth, a truth that God is still good and that whatever suffering is currently happening is not stronger than the God who forever holds us in love.

Now, to be sure, to place our hope in the steadfast love of God does not discount the reality of suffering. Suffering and the steadfast love of God are not mutually exclusive. They are but two realities that exist in a tension with each other. And today's second passage explores the tension between the two.

Lamentations 3:19-26 begins with a blunt expression of suffering.

*The thought of my affliction and my homelessness  
is wormwood and gall!  
My soul continually thinks of it  
and is bowed down within me.*

There you have it - affliction and homelessness. The author continually thinks of it. He or she is bowed down deep by it. However, the tone of the passage abruptly changes. It's as if the author has cried so many tears that their streaming has made room for something else.

*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.*

I'm sure you've heard those words before. I'm even more sure that you've sung them. Our opening hymn this morning was the beloved hymn, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," a hymn inspired by the very words of today's second passage from Lamentations. Like many of you, I have sung this hymn hundreds of times in my life. However, the most memorable was when I was singing this hymn with a congregation that I served while I was in seminary, Silver Creek Presbyterian Church. It was the Sunday after the congregation had gone through a very painful split, a story that I have spoken of with you before from this pulpit. The congregation was in pain. Friends and families had split; some decided to stay, others decided to leave and start a new congregation. It was my job to help lead worship with those who decided to stay. We wept together and prayed together and we sang together, as was our job to do as a Christian community. Our first hymn that day was "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." We felt a special kinship with the author of today's passage from Lamentations. The pain was still fresh. The grief was still raw. The tears were still streaming. But we called God's steadfast love to mind and, therefore, we had hope.

The hope we have in proclaiming God's steadfast love is not an empty hope. We have evidence of God's goodness. We have stories of love and life of the biblical narrative. Stories of God prevailing ultimately. Stories of God creating, redeeming, and sustaining. Stories of our savior Jesus Christ who was born in the flesh and died on a cross and rose from an empty tomb, defeating even death itself. Yes, there are also stories of pain. Often the most profound pain comes after periods of joy. Conversely, sometimes the most profound joy comes after periods of deep grief. Other times, joy and grief mix and mingle in complex and mysterious ways.

But today we remain hopeful of the steadfast love of the Lord. We remember that great is God's faithfulness in all places, at all times, under any circumstance. The Table of our Lord Jesus Christ is the best reminder of this truth. We remember today that this table is not just set here on Shelter Island in this sanctuary. On this World Communion Sunday, we remember that this table is set, also, amidst the rubble of a bombed Syrian town. We remember that this table is set, also, on the school playground where the shooting happened in South Carolina. We remember that this table is set, also, in the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida. It is set in the home of a homebound person and in the hospital room of the sick person. This Table, and the steadfast love of God that it proclaims, is bigger than you and me.

Friends, let us together remember the steadfast love of the Lord. Let us remember that the Lord is our portion and, therefore, we have hope.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Together, let us sing the words of hope instilled in today's passage.