

October 6, 2019

What We Ought to have Done

World Communion Sunday/Shepherd's Grace Church

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. ²She 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. ³Judah 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. ⁴The 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. ⁵Her 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. ⁶From daughter Zion has departed all her majesty. Her princes have become like stags that find no pasture; they fled without strength before the pursuer.

¹⁹The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! ²⁰My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.

²¹But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: ²²The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; ²³they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ²⁴"The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." ²⁵The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. ²⁶It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD (LAMENTATIONS 1: 1-6, 3: 19-26)

⁵The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" ⁶The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you. ⁷"Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? ⁸Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? ⁹Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? ¹⁰So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'" (Luke 17: 5-10)

There are several verses of scripture to consider this morning but really very few words. Only about 450 of them. We could read all three passages in less than 5 minutes, and yet, there is little in any of these passages that most of us have committed to memory. It is not like these verses are filled with "In the beginning," or "I Am," or even "For God so loved the world," however they are verses that invite us to intense reflection.

As I write, and even as I preach these words, I wonder how many of you have your Bible opened to the book of Lamentations. If you were pressed, without looking in the index of your bible, could you find the book? How long has it been since you last read a verse or chapter from the book?

Today, it is proper that we read from this book as we celebrate *World Communion Sunday*. This particular day in the life of the church is a day on which we ought to live into the title of our biblical book. World Communion Sunday invites us to lamentation. It invites us to sit with, to consider and to realize the significance of an event that all too often we take for granted.

World Communion Sunday is the one Sunday of the year that we are all called to be "One Bread, One Body." Every church, regardless of denomination or lack of denominational affiliation is encouraged to celebrate the Lord's Supper today as an act of unity. Regardless of our differences...regardless of how we work out our theology or think about our salvation, today is a day we set aside to affirm that even in our differences there is one essential fact that we cannot ignore. Jesus Christ is Lord!

Jesus is our rock and our salvation and His saving grace is undeniable and essential to our Christian faith regardless of how we work out that salvation. Lamentation helps us understand the magnitude of the words above.

Lamentation is not meditation. It is not reflection with an intent or purpose to seek or gain greater understanding. To lament is to "be with." To lament is not to try to change or understand or analyze. To lament is to accept.

I think one of the reasons we do not read the book of Lamentations much in today's world is that we do not feel comfortable just accepting or being with any circumstance in our lives. If we are sad, we want to understand our sadness and try to fix the condition that caused it so we can be happy. If we are happy, we want to analyze what is making us happy and duplicate that event so we can be happy more often. We have a difficult time just being.

Paul Tilich, author of the book, "The Courage to Be" supposes that we who live in this century or the previous one were taught that we were supposed to be becoming. We were always supposed to be moving toward a better version of ourselves. If we achieved success, we did not get to enjoy it because we were supposed to build upon it. If we experienced failure, we were supposed to pick ourselves up by our bootstraps and overcome. We were supposed to become something, making something of ourselves, achieving greatness.

There is nothing wrong with aspirations. We as human beings should seek to become the best us we can become. We should ponder our successes and failures and analyze what we can do to maximize the one while we minimize the other, but we should also ask, what is success and what is failure? How do we measure? Are our only standards the standards applied by the world? Is money the measure? Does power point to our success? Does greed really gain us greater respect in this world?

I want to suggest today that lamentation offers a consideration. As we live our lives together, lamentation can help us move past becoming to realize who we are. Lamentation can be an element of learning what it takes to have "The Courage to Be."

Lamentation can offer us an opportunity to exist right where we are and observe all that is going on around us. It can invite us to acknowledge that we do not always know exactly how we have reached the places we are but we are where we are.

The book *Lamentation* in the bible invites this kind of reflection. In chapter one, in the passage printed above, the people find themselves exiled in a strange land. The beautiful buildings they have built now stand empty. No longer are the people streaming to the temple to worship. No longer are the city streets alive with chatter and conversation.

The opening chapter does not offer explanation for why the people find themselves in this position. It simply observes that this is where they are. They are in a strange land amidst people of strange customs, speaking strange languages and eating strange foods. There is no struggle with the circumstance; there is only an acceptance. The people are not attempting to become anything other than who they are and they are not trying to manipulate who they are into positions of power or leverage.

The people are in a lament, a deep and abiding reflection of what is happening in that moment. The people are accepting...the people just are.

A couple of weeks ago, I preached from Jeremiah 29 and as we came to verse 11, I advised the congregation that the way we read it is more the way we want to read it; not necessarily the way the prophet preached it or God intended it. The verse reads, "For surely, I know the plans I have for you...plans to prosper you and not to bring you to harm...plans for a future with hope."

Our contemporary minds want to read this passage as a promise from God that God will deliver us from our places of exile. God will move us to "Gardens of Eden" where everything will be provided for us and all will Always be well. The problem with this interpretation of the passage is that for most of us, we realize that it doesn't work that way.

Most of us find ourselves in places we do not want to be in our lives. When we pray to God for deliverance from these places, we are not frequently mystically and magically moved to other places. In reality, we find ourselves working right from where we are. Somehow, we find the courage to be in whatever situation we find ourselves in.

Many of you face the most dire of circumstances. You face health issues and decisions that weigh on your minds daily. You have difficult relationships with friends and family that cause you great anxiety. You struggle with the costs of raising a family on limited resources and you wonder how you will make do in your present situation. Perhaps in those moments as you wonder you pray for God to change your situation, to make it easier, to pick you up and move you to a place of greater prosperity. I know this prayer.

I also know that God does not promise us in Jeremiah 29: 11 an answer to this prayer. Instead, God promises the courage to be, right where we are. God does not know plans to move us to great gardens where there are no problems, no worries, no concerns and only lollipops and roses. Instead, God promises that God knows the plans God has for

us. Those plans exist right where we are and in our courage to be right where we are. God invites us to faith in him in those moments when we can see no way out of our current situation. God invites us to have the courage to be! Right where we are.

The people in exile lamented their circumstance. They pondered it and prayed about it and considered it and they did it from where they were. They did not try to escape from the Babylonians. They sat where they were and carefully considered what it would take for them to exist right there.

I believe that if we sit with our situations, allow ourselves to be ourselves in our situations, God will allow us to "be" right where we are. God will execute God's plans for us, plans to prosper us and give us a future right where we are. God will not relocate us to the "perfect" place or create for us the perfect health situation or relationship situation or financial situation. Instead, God will allow us to "be" right where we are and from here, God will create a future for us.

In the passage from Chapter 3 of Lamentations we are invited into that future. It is a future filled with promise and with hope. What it is not is a panacea or perfection. It is not a utopia where we will suddenly have everything, possess every possession, enjoy every relationship. Instead it is the future of right where we are, and it is a future that is very near. It is as near as our next heartbeat or as close as the next breath we take. It is the future that invites us to participate with God.

Ted Peters call it, "God, the World's Future." Peters implies a God who works from the future but not the distant future we so often consider. Instead, as *Lamentations* says, a future that is new every morning. God's future is the future that invites us to look at our situation and circumstances and consider the day just ahead. With God's love and presence near to us, how can we make that day all it can be. How can we trust and know the Lord in that day? That is our challenge and in that challenge, we walk by faith.

I believe it is in that day that we encounter the disciples with Jesus this morning. In Luke's gospel, the disciples are caught between two stories; the first, the story of Lazarus and the poor beggar outside his house. You remember this story. Lazarus is wealthy and the poor beggar only wants the scraps from his table. Lazarus ignores the man and his needs and eventually dies and ends up in hell while the beggar ends up in the arms of Father Abraham in heaven.

Lazarus seeks comfort but finds none. Lazarus seeks a warning for his brothers but is reminded that we must make choices in this world that will ultimately lead to consequences in the next.

The disciples hear the story and wonder how they can be sure they are doing the right things in the moment. They are trying to walk by sight. What they see is what they are trying to walk toward. The problem is that as they walk by sight, they are walking in the past. Sight is always in the past. What we see has already happened. It may have happened in the blink of an eye, but it has already happened. When we look, it takes even just a microsecond for the light and reflection of what we see to reach our brain and be processed. Sight travels at the speed of light but still there is a minute delay. Sight is always in the past.

What the disciples are wondering as they hear the story of Lazarus is, "How can I or we walk in the future." If what we see is in the past, how can we move to the future? The answer, of course is to "walk by faith." As Lazarus examines his situation in hell, he realizes that he always had enough and that the beggar was always wanting. The cost of helping the beggar would have been small but he didn't see it because he was walking only in that which was past. He was protecting that which he could see without imagining that which he could not see. What he could not see was God's provision, a provision that does not take place in the past, but only in the future.

According to *Lamentations*, this provision is "new every morning!" God provides in each day, a plan to bring us a future with hope, and not a future of despair! As we live in abundance, sometimes all we can see is how we need to protect what we have. We can only see the struggle to hold on. We can only walk by what we see. God invites us to walk by faith, by trusting Him every morning and even more, every minute. When we walk by faith, we can imagine circumstances that are different than those we see... those of the past and our own making in them. When we walk by faith, we can imagine new possibilities...new every morning!

In the world we live in today, these possibilities are right in front of us. They are the possibilities of health care, ends to gun violence, elder care...and on and on and on. Walking by faith invites us into the future and God's plan for us...for a future with hope and not to bring us to harm. It invites us into a series of alternatives which we can pick with boldness and confidence knowing that God is just ahead of us preparing the way from right where we are.

The second story I mentioned is the story of the 10 lepers. I will not say much about this one since it is the topic for next Sunday and you will just have to come and hear for yourself. However, you know the story well enough to know that 10 were healed and only one came back to thank and praise God. At the end of the story, Jesus says, "Get up and go, your faith has made you well."

These last words ring in our ears as we lament our situations today. We all have different situations and no one knows all of another's situation. Our struggle is that we are called to live together in our individual situations and circumstances. These events shape and define our reactions to one another and often cause reactions that could not be anticipated by others. Sometimes we react with unexpected anger, other times with unexpected compassion depending on the way we are feeling in the moment...depending on the way we are interpreting our own situations.

When we decide to get up and go because our faith has made us well, we make a conscious decision to live in that faith. We make a choice to trust God and not ourselves. This trust allows us to live in closer concert with God's will and not our own. Faith in God necessarily invites trust in God and when we trust Him, we walk in the future, a future that is filled with the full measure of the promise God has made to us...For He knows the plans he has for us. God alone knows and when we walk by faith, we trust God's knowledge from right where we are and not where we might like to be.

Standing between these two stories this morning and with a full understanding of *Lamentations*, the disciples ask the Lord, "Increase our faith." They ask because they

are hearing of the struggles of Lazarus in hell and the benefits of the one who came back. They want to be like the one but they do not believe they have enough faith.

The problem with the disciples question to Jesus is the same in the 1st century as it is in the 21st. It is the wrong question. It is the wrong question because it imposes a worldly interpretation to an eternal situation.

The disciples ask for an increase in faith as if bigger is always better. They want more, supposing that having more will guarantee them a sufficient amount to accomplish their task. The problem is they did not listen to the story of Lazarus.

Lazarus had plenty even up to an abundance but he did not realize that he had to use what he had in a different way. Instead of hoarding or trying to use it all for himself, he had to give it away.

When the disciples ask for more faith, they are still asking for themselves. They are wanting more so they can be sure they never run out. Faith, like love is not a measurable commodity as Jesus illustrates.

When he answers them, he replies, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you would be able to say to the is mulberry tree, uproot yourself and be planted in the sea and it would obey you." We might want to read this statement as a rebuke. Perhaps we have been taught that it is a rebuke, an expression of criticism of the disciples' doubt. What if, instead it is an affirmation of what they have.

For faith to be effective, it has to be used, to be lived, to be tested...trusted. It has to ask the mulberry tree to be moved. Even in the absurdity of the request, the reality of the action is affirmed. God lives in, not only in the future but sometimes in the impossible. When we cannot see a solution, our faith allows us to step into a different possibility. It allows God to work where no work was being done. We do not need more. We need to use what we have.

Jesus response was not a rebuke, it was an affirmation that the disciples have sufficient faith. It is an affirmation that we have sufficient faith. It was an observation that instead of wishing for a different situation or for something more, we should lament. We should live with where we are and what we have. Only in doing this can we fully appreciate that we cannot walk by sight. We cannot see the faith we have. We can only take a step from where we are into a future...into God, the world's future.

Jesus' message today, the message of faith is a message to trust what we have. It is an opportunity for us to recognize that we do not and will not live in the utopia we thing we desire, but that God had a plan for us right where we are. That plan is a plan of promise and hope! It is a plan born of faith.

Who among us would not like to change our circumstance. Jesus tells us this morning that when a slave comes in from the field instead of offering the slave a place to sit and eat, we would rather exercise our dominion over that one. We would rather serve than being served.

We want to read this again as a rebuke. What if, instead and again, we read it differently. What if it is a metaphor. Instead of reading ourselves into the role of master, we read the Lord into this role. What if we read ourselves in as the slave. What if we recognize that to be a slave to the Lord is a privilege. Instead of resenting the work we do tirelessly for Him, what if we embrace this work. What if we have faith in our Master as the one who has a plan for us, a plan to prosper us and not to bring us to harm.

What if we consider serving God with all our heart and mind and strength and soul. What if, in the end we realize that this is all we can do and that the Love God has for us is not dependent on how much of it we do, but on how we do it to the very best of our ability.

What if, in the end we recognize that we can only do this from where we are. We can never be somewhere other than where we are, and as a wise man once said, "if you ain't where you are, you are nowhere." What if we lament. What if we sit with the situation we find ourselves in and imagine, instead of seeing, that we put all our trust in God. What if we go forward into a future filled with faith, trusting that what we have is sufficient and that God will renew His love for us each morning.

These are only the things we ought to be doing. What if we recognize that we are nothing more than worthless slaves and that we have done only what we ought to do. Might we then recognize that our faith is not dependent on what we do, but is rather in response to all God is about to do in us? What if we acknowledge that we already do have faith the size of a mustard seed?

As we celebrate this World Communion Sunday, what if we believe, as we join others around the world that His Body, and His Blood, transformed into our lives can change the world right from this place? Amen!