

October 2, 2022
Pentecost 17, Proper 22 C
All Saints', Littleton, NH
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Lamentations 1: 1-6

Psalm 37: 1-10

2 Timothy 1: 1-14

Luke 17: 5-10

This morning's readings run an interesting gamut: from the great beginning of the Book of Lamentations, which is lamenting the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., for which the Psalm is a further reflection, to an exhortation from Paul to young Timothy about maintaining the confidence of the faith, to Jesus' teaching about faith as a grain of mustard seed, and the parable of grateful servanthood.

This passage from Lamentations is the lament of the fall of the Kingdom of Judah, and her capital, Jerusalem. The author compares Jerusalem to a princess who has been dispossessed, and all the princes scattered. Zion (the holy city) is bereft and no one comes to visit. Jerusalem was the place of gathering for the whole nation for major festivals, but now the roads leading to her are only empty.

An interesting little note is that the first 6 lines of the beginning of the book form an 'acrostic' device. Are you familiar with this term, it means that the beginning of each verse is a letter or forms a word, and in this case they are the Hebrew alphabet in succession, so, 'aleph, bet, gimmel, dalet, ha, wav'. Turn with me in the Prayer Book to page 763, the beginning of the 119th Psalm. You'll see here how the sections of this, the longest Psalm, are titled by the letters of the Hebrew Alphabet. This was not an uncommon thing in its day. Perhaps you tried this in your youth---starting each line of a poem with a letter of the alphabet in succession or the first letter of each line forming a word as you go down the page.

It seems like such a downer to have a whole book of the Bible dedicated to mourning and lamentation. But think with me for a moment how good that is. Certainly, in its context it shows how connected the people were to their land and how important that was to their personal and national identity. It must have just flummoxed them when Jerusalem fell, because God had promised them this place and this land. What could this mean?

The other good thing about this book is that it puts mourning and grief smack dab in the middle of life, and by extension to us. Perhaps we grieve over different things, but this is good wisdom about the importance of grief. One whole side of my work when I was involved with the Hospice movement was reaffirming the need for people to grieve--- for those who have lost someone, to fully grieve their loss and memorialize the person who died in the most meaningful way they can. As we always say, the painful work of grieving actually plants seeds for new ways of being connected to the person who has died.

And whenever I think of laments, I always think of that whole specific genre of bagpipe tunes called pibroch or 'laments'. They are some of the most difficult, beautiful, and haunting – and always played by a lone piper. To hear them coming from across a lake or from a distant hillside is still one of the most stirring things I've heard. Of course, the Scots had their own awful history of being dispossessed of their land during the Highland Clearances of the mid-19th century. And, for another musical reference, I also think of Barber's 'Adagio for Strings' that was played most famously at Princess Grace of Monaco's funeral. Perhaps you have your own bits of music or poetry that come to mind that express grief well for you.

The Psalm we read this morning is a perfect echo to this reading in that it really is referring to the fall of Jerusalem and the captivity in Babylon. To the people of Judah in captivity, their whole life was centered in their worship, music, civic and cultural life; to the Babylonians they were just another one of the ethnic people who had interesting customs and music: "hey, you Israelites, sing us one of those songs of Zion"do you remember this haunting little verse from our Psalm which was one of the songs from Godspell?"On the willows there, we hung up our lyres, and our captors required of us songs, 'Saying: Sing us one of the songs of Zion,

Sing us one of the songs of Zion. But how can we sing? Sing the Lord's songs? In a foreign land?" . You can feel the pain of dislocation in this Psalm/song, and their deep sense of grief.

I think a lot of us now have a low burning grief over the loss of the country we knew, especially since the events of January the 6th. We worry that our democracy is failing. We lament the bitterness that divides us.

The last several weeks we have been reading Paul's first letter to Timothy, and today we begin his second letter. In the beginning of this letter he is basically appealing to Timothy to hold true to the faith, the faith that he received from his grandmother Lois, and his mother Eunice. Now, isn't this interesting....what is the untold story of these godly women who helped form one of Paul's closest companions.....and Timothy was a convert not through Paul, but through his mother and grandmother!

If you read between the lines, it almost feels that Paul has heard word of Timothy's faltering in the faith. What could have been happening? Has this ever happened to you? Have you needed a pep talk on the faith when all the world around you is going to pot and you just don't know what to think, feel, or believe? Again, it's here in the Bible just like the grief in Lamentations, and here someone's faith was faltering. It's comforting to know we are not alone in this regard. Who of us hasn't needed someone to say to us: "my beloved child: grace, mercy, and peace from God and Jesus be with you."this is sort of why I address you in emails and letters as "All Saints' Beloved" ---because you ARE beloved by God! If we can hear this, then we can "guard the good treasure entrusted to us, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us!"

I have recently been made aware of the great Sufi poet Hafiz. Now let me share a poem of his that gets to the point of the grace of God which is with us and in us even when we can't feel it:

Poem: We should talk about this problem.

There is a beautiful Creature
Living in a hole you have dug.
So at night

I set fruit and grains
And little pots of wine and milk
Beside your soft earthen mounds,
And I often sing.
But still, my dear,
You do not come out.
I have fallen in love with Someone
Who hides inside you.
We should talk about this problem—
Otherwise,
I will never leave you alone.

Finally this morning we have this short section of Luke where Jesus talks about faith as a grain of mustard seed, and the privilege of service without being thanked! I want to first explain something that is often not translated well from the Greek. Jesus says, “if you had faith as a grain of mustard seed...” In Greek, there are two different meanings to the conditional ‘if’: one is how we commonly think of it—‘if’ as saying it is not so and contrary to fact, like in the short sarcastic phrase when you don’t really believe something—‘As if!’; and the other way is according to fact, e.g., ‘if Christ is Lord, then...’ In this instance Jesus was using the one that is more aligned with fact, as if he was saying ‘because if you have faith, even as small as a grain of mustard seed, which you do, you can do...’ And therefore this is an invitation to live into this profound faith and discover its depth and power. This is good encouragement!

The second part of this gospel passage is a bit more enigmatic and cuts across our contemporary sensibilities. In this day and age, aren’t we all supposed to be praised for any little act of kindness and even if it is something expected of us? Oh, how I long for the days of my parent’s generation when there was still a simple sense of duty. That sense of duty so well-embodied in the late Queen Elizabeth. In my father’s era of soldiering (and some of you here today too), there was a common refrain from those who were lauded for some heroic epic in battle: “I’m not sure what the fuss is about, I was just doing my duty like so many of my friends who didn’t come back.” I think it might be good to rediscover this sense of

doing the right thing for its own sake and for the joy of service to others, and not for some reward.

In a sense, the gospel is good comfort and teaching to the grief expressed in Lamentations and the faltering faith addressed in 2 Timothy. When we are weighed down with grief and our faith feels shaky, it is good to remember that even with a little bit of faith we can do great things. This orientation toward faith is so profound in its effect, we actually don't need much faith---like leaven in bread, it doesn't take much and it causes the whole loaf to rise. And with that faith we can and should just step into life and do good things without some 'quid pro quo' from God..... "yeah, I'll be good, Lord, but what are you gonna do for me?!". I hope that each of us has had multiple experiences where humble service and the happiness it gives us is its own reward; and perhaps that humble service is to someone who is grieving deeply or who's faith is faltering, and you have reminded them how beloved they are and the grace that surrounds them on every side! This kind of selfless, sacrificial offering of love is in fact the pattern that Jesus has left us. I will close with the Prayer of St. Francis, that is so reflective of that selfless love.

The Prayer of St. Francis (Feast Day, October 4th). BCP, p.833

**Lord, make us instruments of your peace
Where there is hatred, let us sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is discord, union;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.**

**Grant that we may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and
it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.**