

June 30, 2024

Lamentations 3:22-33

**“The Steadfast Love of the Lord Never
Ceases!”**

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It's hard to imagine what it must have been like for the people of God when the Babylonians came to Judah and Jerusalem to shatter their lives. The Babylonians starved the people and broke into their city. They burned the house of the Lord and the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem. The king was forced to watch as his sons were slaughtered and then his eyes were put out so that this would be the last thing he would see before he was taken to Babylon. Most all of the people who survived the destruction were carried off into exile. Their lives were turned upside down in a way that you and I have most likely never experienced.

Only when we try to put ourselves into the shoes of the people of that time will we begin to understand the message of our Old Testament lesson. We are talking about some of the bitterest sufferings imaginable for the remnant of God. And it was all necessary because of their spiritual state. The rebellion of Judah and Jerusalem was so bad that if the Lord had left them alone they would have spiritually perished. Moreover, the prophet who writes our text had to watch. He sheds a lot of tears. He writes: "I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath; he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long (Lam. 3:1-3)."

What if something like this happened to you and me? Can you imagine what it would be like to have someone starve us and then destroy our homes and church and then load us up for a trip to a foreign land? No longer will you be you. It's all gone. And you will have to live with the reality that the Lord God has allowed this thing to happen. So what do you think you would feel? Well, if the prophet was a mess I imagine that we would be a mess as well. It gets so bad for the prophet that he goes on to say: "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, 'My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the Lord (Lam. 3:16-18).'"

In this life we may find ourselves in a severe test of affliction. While we think that everything is going well today that doesn't mean that everything is going to be well tomorrow. What will we do if our tomorrow becomes a heap of ruins? What if the economy tanks as so many experts have been predicting? What if World War III comes to our doorstep? Some are saying we are already in a sort of a silent war. Is it possible that division in this country could become so great that Americans could once again kill Americans? Warnings of global warming and medical emergencies that require radical lifestyle changes are not going away. And on the small scale there are the everyday problems of ordinary Christians just trying to make it through another day.

Could it happen that one day we might find ourselves in a situation where we say with the prophet: "My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the Lord?" Those are very disturbing words that take us to the depths of what the prophet was going through. And we should ponder that we are not immune to something similar, especially, if we have sinned grievously as Jerusalem had in the time before the onslaught of the Babylonians. The prophet then says a powerful prayer after he expresses what he was wrestling with in his flesh: "Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! My

soul continually remembers 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.’”

All seems to be hopeless until the prophet prays and calls to mind that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. With the words “steadfast love,” or “mercy,” we are brought to all the accounts of the covenant, the gracious promises of the Lord to his people and his unswerving loyalty to them, and all his saving acts on their behalf, especially, the exodus where the Passover lamb freed the people from their slavery to sin, death, and hell. We know that the lamb has come in Jesus of Nazareth! While the prophet finds his hope and ability to cope with what was happening in the context of the coming of his Savior, we hope and cope in the one who died for us and rose from the dead.

It is important to consider that the prophet deeply contemplated his circumstances that surrounded him. There was absolutely nothing to suggest that anything was going to get better anytime soon. Still he says that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. With an endurance that has perished within him, and a hope that he feels has disappeared, the prophet is miraculously able to find endurance and hope in his Savior. Thus the prophet is able to see that even with everything in ruins the Lord God is doing his saving work in his life and in the lives of his remnant. With the unceasing steadfast love of the Lord in mind, the prophet knows that all is well even in the middle of ruin. The Lord God is chastening and saving his flock.

God’s saving rule offers strength, guidance, and the assurance of salvation. So, we rest in faith. It depends on where we look and how we interpret what we see. Do we look to ourselves and interpret things according to appearance, or do we look to the Lord God and see things as he sees them? When we know Jesus, the forgiveness of sins, and his ongoing saving purposes in all things down here, the words of the prophet cannot help but to bring security and even cheer in the most insecure and cheerless moments. I mean, isn’t that what the prophet himself is going through in our Old Testament lesson? All the more that we should also go through that ourselves even in the New Testament.

A man who lived in sight of a mountain range was telling a visiting friend what an inspiration the mountains were to him. The day happened to be quite hazy, and the towering peaks were hidden behind the mist. “What good are the mountains,” asked the visitor, “if you can’t see them?” The quick reply was, “Even on the darkest day or in the blackest night, I know they are there and that lifts me.” Indeed! The steadfast love of the Lord is like the mountains that are always there, even when hidden. Even when the Lord God seems to be overwhelmed in the ruins of life and overshadowed by our tears, his steadfast love never ceases. It is always there. The cross and empty tomb and having the Lord himself as our inheritance is what encourages and strengthens the joy of living.

Oh, it may not seem all that joyful at times, as it did not seem to be so joyful for the prophet. But, as the prophet was able to cut through all of the ruin around him, so are we able to see a loving heart, even when it appears that there is no heart to be seen at all. We cut through it all when we seek the Lord God in his gospel and sacraments. It is there that we see the loving heart of the Father in Jesus. Some may feel that we should stoically face our pains and sorrows alone. But our Lord urges us to hold onto him with all

our burdens and find relief. The burdens keep us holding onto him. Otherwise, we would drift away.

In all of these things, we see that God often chastens those whom he loves. We tend to interpret all of the ruins of life as being bad things. We hardly consider that God is actually loving us in the ruins of our lives down here. He leads us and moves us to constantly hold onto him because our tendency is to let go. Moreover, there are times when we are drifting and the Lord needs to bump us back into where we need to be. That was certainly the case for the people of Judah and Jerusalem. If the Lord God had not done to them what he did, they would have all become lost. The writer to the Hebrews comments on this very thing in chapter twelve:

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

So, God may use adversity to chastise us, that is, to keep us close to him. If this is what it takes, then we should be all for it. There is nothing more important than finally reaching the destination of forever heaven - even if that means ruin on earth. This also is the steadfast love of the Lord that never ceases!

And finally, the prophet closes our text with a word that should help correct some of our ridiculous notions concerning suffering. He writes: "For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men." The Lord God does not afflict or grieve because he enjoys it. No. He afflicts because of our tendency to follow after the evil that remains in our hearts. Thus, he cleanses us. He has compassion on us according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott