

## Well-Placed Hope

Lamentations 3:19-24; Psalm 33:1-4; Romans 5:1-5

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There is a familiar saying, "What was old is new again."

Today's text from Lamentations is old, about the result of the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah as a whole by Babylon, and it is new again as we witness the war and devastation in this present day.

We have already talked about the return and the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem, but we must not forget what the people lived through because it will give meaning to their actions in the future. It will give meaning to how they see themselves and how they see their God, Yahweh, and how they worship God.

There are five chapters that are composed of five poems, five dirges, in the lamentations of Jeremiah the prophet. Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet. He prophesied to a people who not only did not listen to the message that God asked him to deliver, but they constantly abused Jeremiah.

- They put him in prison;
- they put him in stocks in the city gate;
- they even threw him in a deep pit of mud in an attempt to kill him.

He would have died there had he not been rescued by an immigrant to the country.

Jeremiah had much to lament about personally, but he broadens his lamentations, his cries of grief, to include the entire nation of Judah. These are his people. He cares about them. He weeps for them.

These lamentations, these dirges, could have meaning for any war that has ever happened because that is what war is all about. They could have meaning for any great disaster that one endures. As one reads these scriptures, one does not need to limit them to the time in which they were written. They are ageless. As they are read one can experience the feeling of the many emotions expressed in the words:

- anger about the situation,
- anger against God who seems to have deserted them,
- disappointment,
- unspeakable grief, and finally, finally hope.

It is a very human, very honest display of human reaction to tragedy.

Who was this prophet Jeremiah who could put such deep emotions into words?

Jeremiah's call to be a prophet came in the year 627 or 626 BCE. For his entire life he had lived under the threat of invasion by the new Babylonian empire. Jeremiah came from a family of priests who worshiped Yahweh. His home town was Anathoth, a village a few miles outside of Jerusalem. As a member of the tribe of Benjamin, he cherished the Covenant that had been formed at Sinai. Jeremiah also had a strong feeling of solidarity with his people as they were marched off from their homeland after the invasion by Babylon.

In the Hebrew, the title of the book, Lamentations, is the exclamatory word meaning *How!* It is a word that many of us have cried out during our lifetime.

How Lord, could this virus have entered our lives?

How Lord, could there be so much gun violence?

How Lord, could so many people not get treatment for mental illness?

How Lord, can one man orchestrate a war that brings death and destruction to an entire nation?

How Lord, could You take my loved one from me?

How Lord... you fill in the rest of the question for your life.

No wonder Jeremiah sits down to pen these words! His beloved city was laid waste and all of the able-bodied people were marched off to Babylon to serve as captives to the Babylonian empire. Jeremiah cries out to God, "The thought of how I am oppressed by my situation has made me bitter to think about it. I feel bowed down. I am depressed." Is there any one of us who cannot identify with him?

But let us not forget who Jeremiah is. Let us not forget *Whose* he is. In the midst of his brokenness of spirit; in the midst of his bitterness, Jeremiah remembers *Whose* he is and to *Whom* he is talking. Even in this time of great tribulation, Jeremiah remembers what he has learned of God through years of experience.

And he cries out to God:

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,  
His mercies never come to an end,  
They are new every morning; Great is thy faithfulness.  
The Lord is my portion, the Lord is my help.  
Therefore, I will hope in God."

Jeremiah's writings reflect real life experiences. In the midst of living

- there is death,
- there is physical destruction,
- there is the destruction of hopes and dreams,
- there is hope that is not realized,
- there is a mountain top that is turned into a valley,
- there are green pastures that are dried up into a desert.

In some ways the people about whom Jeremiah was so concerned must have felt that they had been driven off into the wilderness again, captured and taken away from everything that they valued. It must have felt like a desert experience again.

They were well acquainted with the desert. They were the descendents of those who had wandered in the desert for 40 years.

Only in Yahweh, the God in whom Jeremiah believes, does he find the hope that enables him to call out praises at such a time as that.

The Apostle Paul would write centuries later from a new perspective. Paul writes on the other side of the resurrection. Paul writes to those who have placed their faith in the resurrected Jesus and who have chosen to follow Him as Lord of their lives. His words are also for us this day and throughout the ages.

Does that mean that just because we have placed our faith in Jesus that we are immunized against all hurt and harm? Of course not! We were fully human, just as the people of Jeremiah's day were fully human. Many of those to whom Paul wrote were descendants of Jeremiah's time. They would also have experienced "desert" times in their lives as well.

A journey through the desert times of life is not an easy journey, no matter in what age one lives. When we find ourselves walking through the desert, we need to keep on walking. There is another side to the desert.

Just as the people of Jeremiah's day, we can also encounter

- pain of many kinds,
- struggles that do not lead to easy answers,
- uncertainty about many things,
- physical and emotional and mental suffering.

When we find ourselves in the desert places of life, we need a shepherd to lead us through to the other side. Real, everyday shepherds lead their flocks with their voices,

- sometimes with a quiet, spoken, voice,
- sometimes with a song.

Their sheep will follow no other.

When driving down a rural road in Israel we had to stop for two shepherds who were leading their sheep across the road. Each one was going to the opposite side of the road. It was an amazing sight. Each shepherd got to the other side of the road without losing even one of his sheep. The sheep knew who to follow.

Would that we were so smart!

Our walk in this world is a faith walk; faith in the Good Shepherd who is leading us, no matter how convoluted we may think that the path may be. We can join with Jeremiah in that same song of praise that he raised to God in the days of old.

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.  
His mercies never come to an end.  
They are new every morning;  
Great is thy faithfulness.  
The Lord is my portion, the Lord is my help.  
Therefore, I will hope in God."

Our God remains the same yesterday, today, and forever. Paul assures us that when we walk through difficulty it has the possibility of increasing our perseverance. That perseverance that we develop will make us stronger, and it will increase our certainty in our faith and assure us of hope.

We are all on the human journey. The difference for us who are following the Good Shepherd is that we not only have a sure Guide, we also have one another as fellow travelers. We are blessed indeed!  
Amen.