

His Faithfulness Is Greater

Text: Lamentations 3:22-33

Hymn: "Christ Is Risen, Christ Is Living" (*LSB* 479)

Today, the fourth Sunday of Easter, is the only time we get anything from the Book of Lamentations. It was written by the prophet Jeremiah, sometime just after 586 B.C., after the holy city of Jerusalem had been destroyed.

Now the words we get from Lamentations 3 are absolutely beautiful words. Poetry that speaks of the mercies of God and His great faithfulness. But I have to tell you that reading these words and only these words from the Book of Lamentations feels a little dishonest. It's kind of like cheating. You see, as beautiful as they are, out of the whole five chapters, they are about the only beautiful words. The rest are absolutely horrific. The destruction of Jerusalem, cataclysmic in every way, gets described graphically—smashed walls, crushed houses, desecrated temple, countless executions. Horrors committed against women and children I will not detail here but they are detailed in the parts we did not read.

The part we read? It sounds like a calm, confident confession of someone who could not be more sure of God's loving presence. But even if they are that, they come sandwiched between two and half chapters on either side of the cries of anguish of someone who has witnessed all that destruction, who has lost everything. In chapter 3, he calls himself the man who was supposed to be strong enough to defend those women and children, but instead, impotent, was forced to stand by and watch it happen.

The beautiful words we read sound like they're from someone standing on firm ground. But the rest is from someone who doesn't know which way is up. At one point he'll be confessing his sins, saying, "Lord, it's my unfaithfulness. It's the unfaithfulness

of my people who have caused this.” The next minute he’s screaming at God and saying, “Lord, it’s way too much! You’ve gone off the rails.” He doesn’t know whether he should believe in God or hate Him. He doesn’t know if God is his friend or maybe his disciplinarian. Right before this, God is his enemy filling him with arrows (3:12-13). He’s a man in absolute, soul-wrenching agony. His “tongue walks on stilts” and his “reason goes forward under a half sail,” drunk with grief (Luther).

In the words just before our text, he writes, “I have forgotten what happiness is” (3:17). Whoa. Talk about raw. Talk about honest. We know this guy’s heart—honest. That’s what hits us when we read these graphic laments. What hits us most is that honesty, and perhaps because we’re not used to being hit with that kind of honesty. We live in a world where that kind of raw expression of pain is tacky: “How are you? I know you’re feeling lousy, but please don’t say that, because that would make both of us feel comfortable.” To express real doubt is downright gauche. And if you’re going to complain about something, please make sure it’s something that I can fix or suggest a solution to, but the unfixable, the sort of stuff that you just have to sit with and doesn’t make sense, please keep that to yourself. It’s too embarrassing to let it leak out.

Which is why when you see it leaking out in something like the tear-streaked poetry of Lamentations, you notice. We believe in the inerrancy of God’s Word, God’s inerrant revelation. And we should, because it is. But words like this make us wonder what exactly is being revealed. Here, more than anything, what is being revealed is what we conceal. The inerrant revelations of the pain and doubt and grief that we errantly conceal from each other—and also from ourselves.

So, as raw and graphic and hard to read as much of it is, that's why the Book of Lamentations is also so darn refreshing. We read it and say, Finally, finally, someone's saying what he really thinks. If you have lived any length of time, you have probably witnessed someone in a controlled setting suddenly just losing it, unexpectedly speaking his mind and with neither the polite vocabulary nor chaste hand gestures of a Victorian Englishman. We remember those moments because they are so rare. And we experience them often with a degree of sympathy, because we all know what it is to work at keeping the lid on. There's something refreshingly honest when the lid comes off. Scenes like that are a kind of a dramatic enactment of what the poet of Lamentations expresses in the entire book.

Except the select passage we heard, which actually is prefaced by these words, "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope." He goes on, "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." "But this I call to mind," he starts. It's as if he's mid-flying off the handle, losing it, 99% of his brain on fire, but with 1% he remembers something. Something he learned, something in a calmer time he loved. Somehow it has sunk into his soul. Given what he's been through now, he only hears it as a distant rumor. It's something he wants to be true, something even in all his anger and grief he has trouble believing but still clings to as just maybe true.

That *the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases*. That despite it all, God is not done loving him, has not given up on him yet. Even though he doesn't always see them and aren't exactly the mercies he would choose, they are still mercies, new every

morning, because God is faithful and God's faithfulness is greater than whatever he's going through.

But, again, this is not something he comes to easily. To say so is cheating, since as soon as he's done saying that, if we keep reading, we discover he's back to screaming. The calm trust is not something he's able to hold on to for very long, but it's there. "But this I call to mind." Something, some light that keeps coming back to him, something that keeps being given to him even in the midst of all that.

I read a news article this week that led me down a bit of a rabbit hole. It had to do with the show *America's Got Talent* and a contestant singer named Jane Marscewski. Jane died this past February, and apparently was such a fan favorite and made such an impression on the judges that *America's Got Talent* announced on Monday that they're planning a tribute to her in an upcoming live show. Last summer, Jane, whose stage name is Nightbirde, sang so well that Simon Cowell gave her the golden buzzer, fast-tracking her to the final round of the competition. She got the buzzer for her singing but I'm sure also for her story. At the time, Jane was 30 years old, weighed about 80 pounds, and on her third bout with cancer. Doctors told her that she had a 2% chance of survival. Her husband greeted the news of her first diagnosis by telling her he wanted a divorce. To keep it together, to keep the lid on, Jane would sing. And like the Jeremiah of Lamentations, she also wrote. This is from one of her posts (written after a long night spent throwing up in the bathroom):

I have had cancer three times now, and I have barely passed thirty. There are times when I wonder what I must have done to deserve such a story. I fear sometimes that when I die and meet with God, that He will say I disappointed Him, or offended Him, or failed Him. Maybe He'll say I just never learned the lesson, or that I wasn't grateful enough. But one thing I know for sure is this: He can never say that He did not know me.

I am God's downstairs neighbor, banging on the ceiling with a broomstick. I show up at His door every day. Sometimes with songs, sometimes with curses. Sometimes apologies, gifts, questions, demands. Sometimes I use my key under the mat to let myself in. Other times, I sulk outside until He opens the door to me Himself.

I have called Him a cheat and a liar, and I meant it. I have told Him I wanted to die, and I meant it. Tears have become the only prayer I know. Prayers roll over my nostrils and drip down my forearms. They fall to the ground as I reach for Him. These are the prayers I repeat night and day; sunrise, sunset.

Call me bitter if you want to—that's fair. Count me among the angry, the cynical, the offended, the hardened. But count me also among the friends of God. For I have seen Him in rare form. I have felt His exhale, laid in His shadow, squinted to read the message He wrote for me in the grout: "I'm sad too."

If an explanation would help, He would write me one—I know it. But maybe an explanation would only start an argument between us—and I don't want to argue with God. I want to lay in a hammock with Him and trace the veins in His arms.

I remind myself that I'm praying to the God who let the Israelites stay lost for decades. They begged to arrive in the Promised Land, but instead He let them wander, answering prayers they didn't pray. For forty years, their shoes didn't wear out. Fire lit their path each night. Every morning, He sent them mercy-bread from heaven.

I look hard for the answers to the prayers that I didn't pray. I look for the mercy-bread that He promised to bake fresh for me each morning. The Israelites called it manna, which means "what is it?"

That's the same question I'm asking—again, and again. There's mercy here somewhere—but what is it? What is it? What is it? I see mercy in the dusty sunlight that outlines the trees, in my mother's crooked hands, in the blanket my friend left for me, in the harmony of the wind chimes. It's not the mercy that I asked for, but it is mercy nonetheless. And I learn a new prayer: thank you. It's a prayer I don't mean yet, but will repeat until I do.

Call me cursed, call me lost, call me scorned. But that's not all. Call me chosen, blessed, sought-after. Call me the one who God whispers his secrets to. I am the one whose belly is filled with loaves of mercy that were hidden for me.

Even on days when I'm not so sick, sometimes I go lay on the mat in the afternoon light to listen for Him. I know it sounds crazy, and I can't really explain it, but God is in there—even now. I have heard it said that some people can't see God because they won't look low enough, and it's true.

If you can't see him, look lower. God is on the bathroom floor.¹

¹ Marscewski, Jane. "God is on the Bathroom Flor." *Nightbirde*. March 9, 2021, www.nightbirde.co/blog/2021/9/27/god-is-on-the-bathroom-floor. Accessed 5 May 2022.

(I wouldn't have discovered all this about Jane Marscewski if it weren't for something in the article that caught my attention. Her family was quoted as saying that "her lasting legacy will be the gift of hope she gave to so many through her music and the strength she found in Jesus.") There's not much to add to that. Maybe just this: If things are super for you right now so that something like that or the Book of Lamentations doesn't really do it for you, two things: Thanks be to God and just wait. But if you have or are having trouble keeping the lid on, if you count yourself among the angry, the cynical, the offended, the hardened, know that God counts you as His friend. If you've spent some time on the bathroom floor or are there now, God is there with you. God is there on the bathroom floor *with* you, because He was on the Cross *for* you. And if you find that hard to believe, which we all do, at least from time to time, I am very glad you're here, because it is my only job and the job of the lamenters seated around you to bear witness to the fact that the rumors are true: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases. Christ is risen. God is not finished loving you. His faithfulness is great. His faithfulness is greater than whatever you are going through now and whatever you will go through.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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