

The Good, the Bad, the...Faithfulness of God

October 3, 2010, Ord 27C

Scripture: Lamentations 1:1-6

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.

Luke 17:5-10

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!'"

Driving through town I was aware that things have changed

The old storefronts sit dark, like storage units with relics of old merchandise. Wal-mart now carries everything you need.

The neighborhoods where working folks lived have gone down into further disrepair

The textile mill sits abandoned, glass missing from some windows

It is now home to families of mice and a couple of desperate people who have made their home there. Ruins of the old Lydia Mills sit like a marker in a cemetery.

Whew-thankfully the churches still stand, McDonalds is hustling, people still buy groceries at the Ingles, and the Presbyterian Institutions Thornwell Home for Children and Presbyterian College look alive and well. There is a new Mexican Restaurant in the old shopping center...signs of life.

Meanwhile many of the town's sons and daughters are struggling. There is no industry except the low wage service industry. Mental illness rates are among the highest in the state. Gone are signs of the families who used to run the town. But new things have happened, the empty building of the Presbyterian Home at Frampton Hall, now houses a new PC Pharmacy School. I drove through Clinton, SC recently. This is the town I

describe, but perhaps you thought of other towns you know in the South. I could have been describing various places in our region.

Time marches on...things change...economies change...lives change.

Our city and community certainly have it's share of challenges. Many of us here are personally touched by the economic adversity, budget cuts, and uncertainty about the future. People we know and love are struggling with issues of change, addiction, health, and relationship problems. The Scripture gives voice to what some of us experience or feel.

In the passage from today in the book of Lamentations attributed to Jeremiah,

The City Jerusalem is desolate. She is like a widow without rights or means; abandoned...her children have been carted off to Babylon. Even the roads that lead to Jerusalem mourn. Priests groan. Her foes become her masters. All her majesty has departed.

Rust Belt cities and textile towns once humming with activity and industry, sit abandoned, alone, struggling with crime or joblessness and some level of desperation.

Time marches on...things change...economies change...lives change.

Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonians. She felt abandoned, alone, God-forsaken....it was the Pearl Harbor of the Israelites' lifetime. It shaped and formed generations.

It was the Nagasaki, the Vietnam, the Sarajevo of a whole people.

It was the 9/11, the Great Depression, the new Recession, the budget crisis of a nation.

For some of us a cry of lament sounds foreign, perhaps even faithless.

But Biblical faith is like that...honest, raw, dealing with the suffering of God's people. Biblical faith is also joyous abandon as David dances unclothed before the Lord, Miriam, leads the dance with tambourine, and great festivals take place to celebrate and honor God. But truth-telling to God is an act of faithful intimacy and trust. Lamentations reminds us that God is partner with humanity suffering with us. Just as the Psalms are prayers and songs of honest truth-telling, this lament is a faithful act of trust in the God who is "with us" through the good, the bad, and the ugly. When tragedy hits, a stunned person, sits silent in the pain, but the healing begins when we turn to God and voice the pain.

Where is the Babylonian exile in our world today as we remember our fellowship with brothers and sisters in faith around the globe this World Communion Sunday? C.S. Lewis once wrote, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Pain gets our attention. What is crying for our attention and makes us weep with God's hurting people? Is it starvation in a world of plenty, wars of religious hatred, destructive ignorance, trafficking of women and children for profit? In Lamentations 1:12 the weeping prophet Jeremiah shouts, "Is it nothing to you who pass by? Look around and see." The prophet is indignant and wants others to notice the pain of God's hurting people. Daughter Zion is weeping, but the prophet is shouting, "It is nothing to you who pass by? Look around and see."

Isn't that how you and I feel when we are struggling, hurting, feeling alone and desperate? Would someone just look and see? Notice my pain, my suffering- don't act like everything is all right. Get angry even. Even better, do something.

When the disciples say, "Increase our faith!" Jesus says that if you had a smidgen of faith it would cause things to happen Jesus says, faith the size of a tiny mustard seed is all you need.

The prophet Jeremiah, giving voice to the pain of his people, angry at the injustice, does not stop there...He turns again in faith to God with whatever miniscule, mustard seed sized amount that is left. In a world where loss and grief are real, injustice is real, and silenced people go about in quiet desperation. Grab a megaphone, turn to God, cry out in faith. Turn again to God in trust...as the people and the prophet do in Lamentations 3: 19-26. They do not stay stuck in their hopeless lament. Hear God's word for us today:

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

See if you recognize any familiar words from a famous hymn here...

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

Call to mind these words of hope and faith from Scripture:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.

Lean on God who is faithful, whose compassions never fail,
whose mercies are new every morning.

Who refuses to give up on us, when it looks like giving up is all that is left.

Who sent his only Son, Jesus Christ to be our bread, our strength, our sustenance, our peace.

Who offers to us the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

Whose steadfast love for you, for me, for this world and all who dwell in it, never ends.

And that, my friends, is Good News to a hurting world!

Now let us stand and sing what we believe:

Great is Thy Faithfulness

Rev. Laura Smith Conrad
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church
World Communion Sunday