

7 March 2012  
Lent 2 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“The Felling of Majestic Zion”

Text: Lamentations 2; Hebrews 4:14-16; Luke 23:39-43

Jeremiah’s description of the destruction of Judah continues in Lamentations chapter 2, but this time in more detail. And it becomes clear just how great this fall was. Judah had been so majestic, so great in splendor; Jerusalem, as we heard, had been called **“the perfection of beauty”** and **“the joy of all the earth”** (v. 15). No more. Their fall was complete, the destruction total. What was before admired was now pitied. What had before struck awe in the hearts of men, now caused them to vomit and wretch. Think of the destruction in the Midwest from the tornadoes of last week - the complete and utter devastation, wiping out entire towns. That’s what Jeremiah was now looking at. That’s all that was left of once majestic Zion.

But it was, in fact, *even worse than that*. For, Jeremiah says, not only was the nation of Judah conquered and the city of Jerusalem destroyed, but God had **“laid in ruins his meeting place . . . had scorned his altar, and disowned his sanctuary”** (v. 6-7). Or in other words, the Temple was no more. The place where God had promised to be for His people, the place where they could come with sacrifices and return to the Lord in repentance, the *only* place God had given for this . . . *was gone*. Which meant, it seemed, there was no way back. No way back to God. No place for sacrifice and repentance. No place for hope. It seemed as if God really had left, once and for all. Now, instead of having the cloud of God’s glorious presence, Zion was under the cloud of sin, death, and destruction. With no way out.

And so Jeremiah finally wonders: *What words of comfort are left after this? Who can heal this - this ruin as vast as the sea* (v. 13)? **Lord, have mercy.**

*Lord, have mercy.* That’s all he’s got. There is nothing else to turn to, nothing else to rely on; only this to cling to: that the Lord is merciful. Even when He disciplines, even when He doesn’t seem merciful at all. The Lord is merciful. He doesn’t just act mercifully from time to time - He is merciful, all the time. So: *Lord, have mercy.* The cry of faith. The cry of poor, wretched sinners. The cry of those completely dependent on the Lord. *The cry God was waiting for.*

That was the cry missing from the altar and the Temple. Sacrifices were being made, but they were thoughtless and careless, mechanical and faithless, and so useless. God didn’t need the animals or the blood - the people did. But they were just going through the motions - doing but not believing; offering but not repenting. So the

Lord, *in mercy and acting mercifully*, helped them see their need by taking away everything. Everything they relied on, everything they turned to, everything they knew - so they would know only Him, so they would turn only to Him, so they would rely only on Him. It was a hard and tough love.

And, honestly, the kind of mercy and love we often need, too. When we find ourselves just going through the motions, or doing the right things for the wrong reasons, or living our lives quite apart and separate from faith and hope and love. Will a loving and merciful God and Father allow us to continue on such a path to eternal destruction, or will He discipline? Destroying now so that we live forever? So that we, too, cry out in faith: *Lord, have mercy!* The cry of poor, wretched sinners. The cry of those completely dependent on the Lord. For that is what we are.

And the Lord is merciful. He would bring His people back from their captivity, and they would rebuild the city and altar and Temple - although not back to its former majesty. For God had another altar and Temple in mind - *far more glorious* than had ever been before. A Temple not made with hands, and an altar not made of stone, but of two pieces of wood in the shape of a cross. And there He would show how great His mercy, as His only-begotten Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, hung in the darkness, under the cloud of wrath and destruction against the sin of the world. Here is the atonement for the sin of the world, and the place of mercy for all people that will never be taken away. Here is the once and for all answer to the prayer: *Lord, have mercy*. Here is the mercy of the Lord for you. Here is His forgiveness for you, His life for you, His salvation for you.

So as the author of Hebrews wrote, since we have a great and eternal High Priest who has done this for us, we do not despair, but can ***approach the throne of grace with confidence, to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*** Every need, no matter what it is. He knows our weaknesses, He knows our temptations, and He is merciful. And so to our cry, *Lord, have mercy* . . . He did, He does, and He will.

And we saw this also in the verses from Luke when the thief on the cross turned to Jesus and prayed, *Lord, have mercy*. Oh, it's true, we are not told he said those exact words, but I would say that is what he prayed; that is what is meant when he said in his weakness, in his sinfulness, in his utter helplessness and desperation: ***"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*** That's all he had. He could do nothing else. But it is the cry our Lord was waiting for, and *hoping* for. The cry that is music to His ears. The cry that says: You are the merciful One who has come to have mercy and I need mercy! *Lord, have mercy*. And He does. ***"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*** Those words are meant for you, too.

*Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed His blood for me . . .*

*O my Savior, help afford By Your Spirit and Your Word!  
When my wayward heart would stray, Keep me in the narrow way;  
Grace in time of need supply While I live and when I die. (LSB #611, v. 1, 5)*

*My hope is built on nothing less Than Jesus' blood and righteousness . . .  
When darkness veils His lovely face, I rest on His unchanging grace . . .  
His oath, His covenant and blood Support me in the raging flood;  
When every earthly prop gives way, He then is all my hope and stay.  
On Christ, the solid rock, I stand; All other ground is sinking sand. (LSB #575, vs. 1-3)*

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.