

14 March 2012
Lent 3 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Suffering Servant of Zion”

Text: Lamentations 3; Hebrews 5:7-10; Mark 15:16-20, 27-34

The first two chapters of Lamentations have been dark chapters. Judah and Jerusalem have fallen. What was before so majestic now lies in ruins. Even the Temple and God's altar are no more. All this because God's people would not listen; they would not repent. And so instead of mercy there is anger; instead of forgiveness there is destruction. It is not what God wanted. He wanted His people only to turn to Him and trust Him; but they would not. And so He allows them to be defeated in battle, hauled off as prisoners of war, and suffer a great destruction, *to this end*: that with nothing earthly left to rely on, they will turn back to Him.

But in all this it was not only Judah which suffered - today we hear in chapter 3 that God's servant, Jeremiah, also suffered greatly. Though he was God's servant and simply speaking the word of the Lord, Jeremiah speaks of being afflicted and living in darkness, of those who lie in wait to ambush and attack him, of being an object of ridicule and scorn, and of fear and great tribulation. And this for 40 years. He often wanted to quit and give it all up, but could not. He questioned God, but was told only to speak what he had been given to speak; to fulfill his prophetic vocation.

Jeremiah reminds us that being a Christian and fulfilling our Christian vocations in this world and life is often not easy. We are afflicted by our own sin and the sins of others. We will endure the attacks and assaults of satan, the allurements of the world, and the urges of our own sinful nature. God will discipline and at times may seem very far away and as if He doesn't care. We see death and destruction, God's truth challenged, and at times it may seem as if the evil is winning - around us and even in us. We see how weak and helpless we are in so many ways. Like Jeremiah.

And yet in the midst of this bleak picture, Jeremiah speaks wonderful words of hope! Words of Gospel. Words that make this chapter of Lamentations the heart and center of the book. He says:

***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.” . . .

*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 willingly afflict or grieve the children of men.*

Think about those verses for a moment and note how astounding they are! Jeremiah said: ***The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.*** Looking at the devastation that had just wiped out Judah, it certainly seemed like the Lord’s love for His people had ceased. ***His mercies never come to an end.*** Looking at the rubble that used to be the Temple, the place of prayer and forgiveness, it certainly seemed like that mercy had come to an end. ***They are new every morning.*** But every morning Jeremiah woke up he saw nothing new - only smoldering fires and cries of grief.

But Jeremiah can speak these words because they are not words of sight but words of faith. That as God has been, so He will be. That as He has promised, so He will do. The Lord does not change, as we so often do. ***Great is His faithfulness.*** ***Therefore,*** Jeremiah says, ***I will hope in Him.*** I will trust in Him. I am confident in Him.

And Jeremiah was right. Not just because God did not cast off Judah forever, but did bring them back to their land and enabled them to rebuild city and Temple. But even more than that, because God in His steadfast love sent His Son to be the Suffering Servant for the sin of the world. Jeremiah may have been a suffering servant speaking the word of the Lord for Judah’s sake, but Jesus was the suffering servant who was the Word of God in the flesh, come for the life of the world. Come not just to call us to repentance, but to be the source of our life and faith and hope.

And so as we heard from Hebrews and Mark, Jesus was the one who interceded and prayed for us. Jesus is the one who suffered for us. Jesus is the one who was ridiculed and mocked for us. Jesus is the one who was abused and reviled for us. Jesus is the one who took our place in the darkness and was forsaken by His Father for us. Jesus is the one who bore the wrath of God against sin for us, and who died for us. Jesus is, therefore, the source of eternal salvation for us. The high priest after the order of Melchizedek - which means a high priest who will be so forever. And so Jesus does Jeremiah one better - Jeremiah called the people back in repentance and to be reconciled with God; Jesus came to be our reconciliation with God.

And so, like Jeremiah, we have hope. A strong and confident trust born not of wishful thinking or pious wishes, but born from the cross. The cross which shows you how great the love of God for you. How great His mercy. How great His

forgiveness. That if He cast off, it will not be forever. If He cause grief, He will have compassion. If He afflict, it is in love, not anger. For His anger against your sin is done and gone. All of it poured out on Jesus on the cross. And so what remains for you is His steadfast love, His forgiveness, and the promise of eternal life.

This promise of a Saviour Jeremiah saw from afar and it is what enabled him to speak such words and have such faith. And so too for you and me. We live in a world of sin, sadness, and death. The Lenten season especially reminds us of this reality. But we do not despair, but repent. And our Lord is merciful and gracious and abounding in steadfast love. He is lavish with His forgiveness and His blessings, and pours them out upon you. You have His promise. And ***great is His faithfulness.***

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