

28 March 2012
Lent 5 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“The Prayer for the Remnant of Zion”

Text: Lamentations 5; Hebrews 12:3-11; Matthew 27:45-50, 57-61

The day after a funeral is always a very difficult day. All the busyness of the planning is done. The funeral service and the reception are over. The support and encouragement of friends and family is gone as they return home. And there's just a giant hole in your life where your loved one used to be. A hole that is not quickly filled; a wound that is not quickly healed.

So it was with Jeremiah. The first four chapters of Lamentations was filled with the raw emotion of Judah's overthrow and Jerusalem's destruction. Chapter five is quite different. It's like the day after the funeral. It's done. What had once been a country blessed and a city filled with life and hope was now like a corpse; the brilliant city on a hill now a graveyard. And there was a giant hole in Jeremiah's heart.

And so it was after Jesus' death. It had all happened so quickly! Jesus was arrested in the wee hours of Friday morning, and by Friday sundown . . . He was gone. Now what do you do? Hadn't they done enough? They ran away, they denied, they cowered in fear. They were even too afraid to bury their friend. There was just stunned disbelief, so many questions, and a gaping hole in their hearts. What were they going to do now?

Joseph, as we heard, asked for the body of Jesus and gave Him a quick, impromptu burial. There wasn't time for anything else. The Marys watched . . . and then they went home. It's hard to imagine how long that night must have been for them. How slowly the hours and minutes must have gone by . . .

Now what do you think satan is going to do at just such times? He will, no doubt, try to fill those gaping holes in our hearts with lies and accusations, seeking to take advantage of our vulnerability and crush our faith in doubt and despair. And so Jeremiah ends this chapter with hope and prayer, and yet also uncertainty: ***Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old - unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us.***

Well, just as we can relate to what Jeremiah was going through in his mourning, we *also know the answer to his uncertainty*. The Lord has not utterly rejected. He will restore His people. For the man taken down from the cross and placed into Joseph's tomb will rise to life again. For He is much more than a mere man, but a God-man,

a Savior, come to provide for us the restoration and renewal Jeremiah prayed for. That after death there be resurrection. After humiliation, exaltation. After discipline, restoration.

For what Judah had just endured was the Lord's discipline. A very severe discipline, to be sure! But from a Lord who cared enough to do that. Who did not just throw up His hands, leave, and forget about His ungrateful and rebellious people. But who loved them still. Who loved them enough to discipline them, to bring them back and renew, restore, and reconcile them in the forgiveness of their sins. That their **dancing that had been turned into mourning** be turned to dancing again. For as we heard from Hebrews tonight: **the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. . . . he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.**

And of this we can be sure - no uncertainty like Jeremiah! We can be sure - as sure as the empty tomb. For the empty tomb means that Jesus is not dead, but alive. And that what was before alive, is now dead - our sin, dead; the Lord's anger, dead; our condemnation, dead; the accusations of satan, dead; our death, dead. And joined to our Jesus in Holy Baptism, we are joined to Him in His triumph - His resurrection, our resurrection; His victory, our victory; His life, our life. A new life, redeemed and restored. All that is yours when Jesus is yours and you are His. All that is yours when He gives you the forgiveness of all your sins. And He has.

There will still be discipline, of that you can be sure. We still need it. Our sinful flesh still needs it, our sinful impulses and wills still need it. And your Father in heaven loves you too much not to give it. And maybe, at times, that discipline will be severe, like it was for Judah. But remember that your Lord is not forsaking you, but loving you. The forsakenness was Jesus on the cross. The forsakenness was His cry: **Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?** And though you may feel that way sometimes, you are not forsaken.

And so in Lent, **our dancing is turned into mourning.** We recognize our sins and mourn them. Maybe what bothers us so much about reading through Lamentations and what happened to Judah is that we know that is what should happen to us; that is what we deserve. But at the end of Lent, we see it all not on us - all the destruction and devastation and pain and suffering - *but on Jesus on the cross.* On Him in our place, as He hangs there in love for you. And then after the quiet of Saturday, *our mourning is turned into dancing* with our celebration of the resurrection! Jesus', and in Him, ours. And we know that's the reality, that's the truth for us. Our Lord has not rejected us and He does not remain exceedingly angry with us - He has fulfilled His Word. He has renewed and restored us. He has loved us with His everlasting love and will do so forever.

And so the book of Lamentations ends, and it ends with a question. But we know the answer, and the end of the story. Our Lord has remembered us and will never forget us. Our Lord has remembered us and sent His Son. The holes in our hearts He has filled with His love and forgiveness.

And so as we will sing on Easter: *The Strife is Over, the Battle Done* (LSB #464). *No more Lamentations!* Thanks be to God!

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