

"Morning Mercies"

Lamentations 3:22-33

Rev. Clinton G. Roberts – First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest – June 27, 2021

When Knox Presbyterian Church first sent a team to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, we came to the First Presbyterian Church on Claiborne Ave, a beautiful old church in the center of town. New Orleans is built like a soup tureen: low in the middle and higher up on the edges, like in the French Quarter and the Garden District along the River, which emerged largely unscathed. But in the middle of town, the water marks on First Presbyterian's brick walls were nearly ten feet high.

I'll never forget entering the Narthex of that church, which had a glass case which used to contain a giant, brass-bound Bible much like our own right here in Lake Forest. But this case stood empty. The Bible carefully preserved within it had been ruined. In its place lay a yellow sheet from a legal pad. On it were written these words from Isaiah:

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through rivers of water, they shall not overwhelm you." (Isa. 43)

After touring the 9th Ward I don't think I will ever think of those words without remembering the agony and faith of the people who lived through Katrina.

The Narthex led out into a bustling hallway that connected to a Daycare facility, a Soup Kitchen and classrooms set up with bunkbeds for the mission volunteers to sleep in. Down the hall in the Men's Room there was another statement written in magic marker on the wall just above the waterline:

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is Thy faithfulness." (Lam. 3)

What is it about words like these, words that carry such promise and power, they can withstand wind and water, suffering and affliction, natural and human-made disasters--even the shifting sands of time? That question will guide our meditations today, as we consider what does not change over time, and how we can build a solid foundation upon it.

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Our text for this morning comes from the Common Lectionary, from the Book of Lamentations, which is made up of five poems in Hebrew, one for each chapter, attributed to

the prophet Jeremiah who lived in Jerusalem during the final years of the Kingdom of Judah before it was utterly destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC. We learn in 2 Chronicles 35:26 that Jeremiah wrote poems of lament—and this is what we read in Lamentations--acrostic poems where each verse begins with a different letter of the alphabet, beginning with “Aleph” and ending with “Tov.” These laments were meant to be used in worship on days of fasting or mourning, notably on the 9th of August, commemorating the disaster of 587. But the Third Lament is different. It is voiced by an individual, not the congregation, and the suffering expressed is personal, private and intense. And yet, the message of hope contained in this poem has connected with millions of people over 2500 years who, like this author, have waited for morning to come.

II

When I was a young man, I thought nothing of driving all night to get somewhere fast. On one trip, driving our diesel-powered Volkswagon Rabbit from Chicago to L.A. with my pregnant wife beside me and our 1-yr-old son behind, we drove all day and all night to make it to New Mexico. By 4 in the morning things were getting pretty gritty around Tucumcari when the sky began to lighten. Soon the shape of the land could be seen, and then the sun popped up over the Eastern horizon, revealing the Rocky Mountains in glorious, golden light. Morning had broken. And it brought with it a newfound energy and resolve. When we arrived in Albuquerque later that morning, Deb said, “Take me to the airport. I’m done breathing diesel fumes! Evan and I are flying the rest of the way!”

III

It’s one thing to drive all night when we are young. It’s quite another to keep watch all night at the bedside of a loved one. That’s a very different journey. When Deb’s 94-yr-old mother lay suffering for seven weeks in Pasadena, struggling in vain to recover from emergency surgery, Deb would stay up sitting beside her and holding her hand, there in the hospital room, often into the wee hours of the morning, listening to her breathing and trying to focus her mind on something other than the endless procedures and changing reports. She often turned to Lamentations 3, reading these words softly aloud to her mother in the darkened room, letting them wash over her mind and heart:

“My soul...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.”

IV

The Lament that makes up all of Chapter 3 doesn't begin with these words. It begins with a cry. "*I am the one who has seen affliction under the rod of God's wrath,*" it says in verse 1. And for the next 17 verses, this person describes his suffering in vivid and emotional terms, accusing God of blocking his way, tearing him to pieces, shutting out his prayers. "*He has filled me with bitterness,*" says the prophet. "*I have forgotten what happiness is. Gone is all that I had hoped for from the Lord.*"

It sounds as if this individual has lost all faith in God. He speaks about God rather than speaking with him, and the words are raw with anger. But then something happens. How it happens is a mystery, a change of perspective, and a change of heart. It looks a lot like the coming of morning after the dark midnight of the soul. "*My soul is bowed down within me,*" says the poet, "*but this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.*" What is the "this" being talked about here? It's the choice of remembering God's mercies. The choice of looking back in order to look forward. This choice by the author is the turning-point of grace, and it brings with it the recovery of hope.

V

Poet and author Ann Weems, the wife of a Presbyterian Minister, describes her grief, anger and doubt after the loss of their son to cancer. She, like many, was in danger of losing her faith altogether when she decided to research the stories of her family: Scottish immigrants who came to America in the wake of the brutal annexation of Scotland by England in the early 18th Century. These stories of faith revealed a foundation that was large enough to support and carry Ann through the loss of her own son. She remembered who she was—and who God always will be. And this is what she wrote:

Friends, when faced with great suffering and loss, we can either turn away from God—or turn toward God. One road leads into darkness. The other, while it may seem equally dark, will lead us in time to the Morning.

VI

Heidi Stevens, a journalist with the Chicago Tribune, wrote a story last August about a man named Dayvin Hallmon who has been bringing the gift of music into very dark places. He grew up in Racine but currently lives in Milwaukee, and he leads a group of musicians called the Black String Triage Ensemble. In the aftermath of events like shootings, house fires, car accidents and overdoses, he brings his ensemble into these neighborhoods to play music that mirrors the stages of grieving from denial to anger to acceptance—and then they add one thing more: the stage of faith. Why do they do it? “*To guard against hardening our humanity,*” says Hallmon. “*This is how we begin to rescue that back.*”

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end.”

The mercy remembered in Lamentations 3 is “*Racham*” in Hebrew, and it means God’s compassion toward us: how God thinks about us and carries us in his heart. God’s heart is never hard but tender, because, as the text says, “*God does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.*” Indeed, the shining truth of the Gospel is that God in Christ suffers with us and for us, in order that God might save us and redeem us and bring us to the light. That is what God’s *Mercy* really means.

William Blake writes in his “*Songs of Innocence*,” “*For Mercy has a human heart, Pity, a human face And love, a human form divine.*” That human heart is Christ’s own heart. And that face? The face of Jesus.

Conclusion

I don’t know about you, but sometimes in the middle of the night, when I find myself lying awake worrying about a member of my family, a problem at work or just the world we live in, I get up and grab a cup of coffee and step outside to watch the sky. I’m watching for the morning—but really, I am watching for the Lord. And as I wait, the morning comes: imperceptibly at first, and then growing until the greyness gives way to color, and the birds begin to sing, and the sun comes up in glory just like I was hoping it always would.

"His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness."

In the end, this isn't something we do. *"Joy comes in the morning."* God's joy comes to us.

It comes no matter what else is happening, for it is our turning-point of grace. And it leads us from doubt to faith, from hurt to forgiveness, from despair to hope and from death to live.

No matter what else is happening with you, hold fast to that. Believe it. Rely upon it. Put your hope in the Lord and trust in God's mercies. *"Morning by morning new mercies we see."* Until one fine morning, we will see fully into the heart of God's mercy--in Jesus our Savior and Lord.

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