

Lamentation 3:22-33

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our text this morning is from the book of Jeremiah's Lamentations, and I know that I typically begin my sermons by reading at least a portion of the chosen pericope for the day. But before I do that, we need some more context here. This book is called "Lamentations" after all, and the text that is before us isn't very full of lamenting. But if we read the verses leading up to this, we see the lamenting in full form. For example we hear Jeremiah saying of God, "I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath; he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long. He has made my flesh and my skin waste away; he has broken my bones; he has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation; he has made

me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago.” And, “He is a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding; he turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces; he has made me desolate; he bent his bow and set me as a target for his arrow. He drove into my kidneys the arrows of his quiver; I have become the laughingstock of all peoples, the object of their taunts all day long.”

These verses don't really belong in an American Christian church, do they? I mean that this is shocking. How can a prophet of God speak this way? And make no mistake, Jeremiah was absolutely a prophet upon whom the Spirit of the Lord had come. God had called Jeremiah to preach the message of repentance, to call the people of Israel back to their devotion of the God who brought them out of Egypt with a mighty and outstretched arm. Jeremiah was to call the people of Israel back to their God who had brought them safely through the

wilderness, the God who had kept his promise to give them a land in which they could live and raise their families.

But the message of repentance came at a time of both peace and great vice. The people of Judah had become so consumed by their wickedness, idolatry, and sins that they killed any who would dare to call them to repentance. The kingdom of Israel in the North had already been destroyed because of their disobedience and faithlessness, but the people of Judah thought themselves immune. They had the Temple, after all. And because Jeremiah came preaching into a land that did not wish to hear him, he struggled. He had been tasked with this message from God and was hated for it. He was not the winner that we love to think of. He wasn't filling stadiums with thousands of people eager to hear his message.

And that's just simply not how this is supposed to work, is it? That's not how American Christians speak. God is supposed

to be all about giving us blessings and success. He's supposed to make sure that we get what we want and have what we need. He's supposed to be there to smooth over the rough edges of life. He's supposed to make good, faithful pastors prosper spectacularly. I've been told often as a pastor that if I'm doing what God wants, then everything will work out. It's the same idea that is out there for any Christian. If you're doing what God wants and you're being a "good Christian" (whatever that means) then everything will work out just fine.

But then we read Jeremiah saying, "He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes; my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, "My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the LORD." He says that he has forgotten what happiness is! That is not the kind of acceptable language from a servant of God! And again, make no mistake; Jeremiah wasn't dealing with people just not

listening to him. His writings were destroyed. He was thrown into an old well and left to die. He had true suffering, a suffering that made his hope from the Lord perish.

It is supremely important that we confront this Word of God. We must recognize that the brand of Christianity peddled in much of this country is incomplete. Far too often people who struggle with their faith are rejected. Those who have questions are cast out as doubter and scoffers. Those who are experiencing true and ongoing suffering are treated as though they have brought this all on themselves as a result of their wickedness. But yet here we have a prophet. One who is a true prophet of God, who suffers. He writes passionately and openly about his struggles and his sorrows. We find David doing something similar in the Psalms.

Truly, we ought to never forget that life can be devastatingly hard. There are any number of problems and

sorrows that can afflict us in this life. We feel the sting of death as people that we love die. We struggle with the scars of past injustices and evils that have been visited upon us. We worry and fret about our ability to have the things that we need in this life. We are not sure that we will have enough money to keep the lights on and food in our bellies. We mourn over the state of our world and the horrible afflictions borne by others around us. There are indeed times when we may have done everything right and still go to bed that night feeling like we have been abandoned by God.

And then we have to get up and come to church on Sunday morning and try to screw a grin onto our faces? We feel as though we have to muster up the courage to lie to everyone and tell them about how our lives are going well and we don't have a care in the world. We think this way and act this way because we think that if we are truly honest about how things are going,

we will be rejected for it. We will be cast out and shunned for being imperfect, for not living lives worthy of God's attention.

But in truth, God is big enough to hear our complaints and our concerns. Some of us are more optimistic by nature, and that is a wonderful gift to have from God. But there are some who merely appear to be optimistic to cover their pain, and there are those who suffer so greatly that they cannot even pretend to be optimistic. All of you are recipients of God's grace, mercy, and love. We are free to come and be honest about what life is really like, with all of the times of both victories and defeats, successes and sorrows, the times of rejoicing and mourning.

This is because there is one who has truly suffered more than any other person. Our Lord Jesus Christ suffered the total and utter abandonment of God at the cross. He didn't just feel really sad, but he was truly forsaken. It is Jesus who is the ultimate fulfillment of Jeremiah's words in our text today, "Let

him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him; let him put his mouth in the dust— there may yet be hope; let him give his cheek to the one who strikes, and let him be filled with insults.”

Jesus did more than just give his cheek to the one who strikes.

He also gave them his back, his head, his arms and legs, and even his side.

When we truly appreciate and realize what Christ has done for us at the cross, we are able to see the true measure of our salvation. We have been forgiven for our sins through his sacrifice and by his blood. And because we have been forgiven for our sins, we have no reason to fear what our sufferings may mean. Our sufferings do not necessarily mean that we are forsaken or condemned by God. For us who have faith, our salvation is secure not in our lives or what we do, but it is secured by Christ and what he has done for us at the cross.

Yes, that does mean that we may still suffer, but our suffering does not end in our eternal death, but rather eternal life alone awaits us. We have no reason to fear anything in this world because it cannot take from us this steadfast love of God. Because even though Jeremiah says that he feels like his hope from God has perished, he still goes on to say, “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.” The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him.” Even in our suffering, there is cause to praise the Lord!

We do ourselves a disservice when in our suffering we put our attention on our faith. In fact, for us to focus on our faith is often a fruitless endeavor. Rather, we turn our attention to the one who is the object of our faith. We always focus our eyes on

Jesus who died for us and who rose again for us so that we would have salvation from sin, death, and evil. This is a promise that has been made to you through the blood of Christ and the water of Baptism. It is no sin for us to be weak. Rather, in our weakness we ought to recall the words of Paul, “But [Jesus] said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

Truly, we have a God who has steadfast love for you and for me. He has promised that he will be with us to the very end of the age, so we need never fear that he will abandon us. When we suffer, we look to the cross to see his power. We have a true freedom in Christ, which includes the freedom to truly and honestly experience all that life has to offer. We rejoice that God gives us the good things in this life. And we cling to him for

strength and deliverance when we go through the bad things of life. Truly, whether we have much or are in want, whether we live or we die, we belong to the Lord. Thanks be to God for his love that sees us through it all. Amen.

Now, may the peace that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord to life everlasting.

Amen.