

Texts: Lamentations 3:1-3, 17-32; 5:1-3, 18-22

Subject: God's Steadfast Love Endures

Theme: Faithful Together

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost; June 28, 2020, Online Worship; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV; Semi-Annual meeting of the Congregation

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and the Lord Jesus,
Amen.

When I was about 14 years old, I played little league. I know, you're probably wondering why I never went pro. But the truth is, I wasn't a star athlete. In those days, I weighed about 65 pounds and could barely swing a bat. I enjoyed playing, and was on a team with many of my friends, who were much bigger and better than I was. They had abilities I did not possess. They never lost a game that year. Sure, I had fun, and from my position on the bench, laughed and learned along the way. I enjoyed being with those guys, my coach, and participating as much as I could. But I didn't get to play very often, and so when I did, I'd almost always strike out. They encouraged me, and even though my performance was on a different level, shall we say, we were a team. By the time the playoffs rolled around, I excused myself from the team, who went on to win the championship, and many of them are my friends to this day.

Team sports remain one of the ways we can find commonality despite our differences, where families with different backgrounds and lived experiences can communicate and build relationships. Churches can be like that too. We might have different understandings and experiences of God - we might call ourselves Lutherans, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, or Baptists - but we have faith. We have placed our trust in God, we study scripture, we give of our time and treasure, and pray for one another. We serve our neighbors in love in whatever ways we can. We place a high value on gathering together for worship, and when one suffers, we suffer with

them, and work to bring healing, comfort, and relief. We stay faithful together no matter what comes.

The Book of Lamentations shares differing ideas on how God is active in suffering. Does God cause the calamities that occur over the generations? Does God allow bad things to happen and remain hidden from us? Is the One who Creates also the one to inflict vengeance on our enemies? Or is God working in our joys and our pain to bring justice, wholeness, and new life? Maybe you've had questions like that from time to time in your life. We hear a little bit of all of these competing and coexisting theologies in the book, and in our world as well.

Some of us have experienced more difficulties than others. Maybe you've been affected by addictions, abuse, divorce, disease, or the death of a spouse. Others have faced natural disasters, war, migration, or financial disasters. Sometimes we suffer because of the choices we've made, and yet other times we cannot avoid affliction.

This book of the Bible is actually poetic. In Hebrew it reads as an acrostic - each stanza begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The first 2 and last 2 chapters each have 22 verses. Here in the third chapter, we find 66 verses, the alphabet is repeated three times for emphasis. We heard last week the voice of the detached funeral singer, lamenting over the destruction of Jerusalem. Then, from Lady Zion herself, calling us to behold her suffering. The first voice we hear in this reading comes from one who has been known as the strong man, who pronounces, with confidence - "I am the one" or, "I am the man." He is a protector or a leader of people who has been injured, and forced to suffer, seemingly by God, through the work of enemies. He struggles to have hope for

the future, and yet still clings to God in even when things are at their worst. He paraphrases Psalm 30:

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
23they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

If you've had to face difficulties and/or suffering in your life - in any of the forms it can take, you can imagine how hard it must be for this one to endure this kind of pain and still have faith. The context is the fall of Jerusalem, the people he was charged with protecting are gone - the elites, the leaders, the priests, many of them were taken away into exile in Babylon. Who is left? Women have been made into widows, and children are left orphaned. He's at rock bottom, realizing that his own power and strength cannot save him. Sometimes that's what it takes for us to truly receive and trust in the grace of God.

Martin Luther wrote that a [person] "must utterly despair of [their] own ability before [they are] prepared to receive the grace of Christ."¹ Sometimes, in our lives we are able give voice to what is happening around us, even if it's not happening to us. Other times, we get involved and speak truth to power on behalf of others, or even lay our own bodies on the line for our neighbors. And on occasion we fall down so hard that we can no longer do anything but hold onto faith, fully relying on God's grace and mercy in Jesus.

There is suffering all around us. Anxiety is high, and frustration comes, even when we think we're doing the right thing. It can feel like we're riding the bench and unable to get in the game. We want to fix things around us. Or we want to fix other

¹ Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*

people. Good luck with that. We want to do more, or less, or find balance. We want answers, and not opinions.

So we don't always get what we want. That's ok. The voice of the strong man in the text continues to rejoice, even when the world is falling down around him, to say "great is your faithfulness."

We continue to wait for things to change, for suffering to end for immigrants and refugees, for healing for the Navajo nation and justice for our black and brown neighbors, and for protection and liberty for our LGBTQIA+ siblings. We want our nation to be at peace and our cities to thrive. We want safety and prosperity for our neighbors and our families. We want to get back to our routines, and yet it may be a way off.

"The Lord is good to those who wait for him...It is good that one should wait quietly" (vv. 25-26). Sometimes we have to call it as we see it and just remain faithful together. We know that God is good, even when we are hurting. God's promises don't disappear just because our hearts are sick, just because our eyes grow dim (5:17). The author of this book still wonders what is taking God so long. has God rejected the people forever? When will the morning come?

It doesn't come through our own actions, deeds, or strength. Ultimately, it comes to us through that place of suffering, the cross. It comes through the living and risen Word, throughout the world, where the forgiveness of sin is proclaimed and pronounced to those who have suffered for far too long under the weight of guilt and shame. it comes through the power of the creative Spirit that is making all things new, even when we do not perceive it. In the meantime, we hold onto one another, and sacrifice and serve as we are able. We confess, and grieve, and lament together.

Together we have suffered. Together we worship. Together we pray and call on God. We are *faithful together*. No matter our different experiences, perspectives, understandings of the Holy divine, and the uniqueness of each individual, we are one humanity, solely dependent on the grace of our heavenly parent, the freedom gifted to us in Jesus, and the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.