

Hope

Lamentations 1:1-3, 3:19-26

From the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

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We worry.

Some people I know are practically worry-professionals.

We worry about the stock market, about the future of democracy, about rising prices in the grocery store. We sometimes feed our worry by playing the “what if” game. What if Illinois has another losing football season? What if my dog runs away? What if it snows five-feet this winter? What if my grandchild joins a cult, or enrolls at a college in Iowa? What if the cat-fight between our politicians continues? What if aging takes more of a toll on me than I can bear?

I sometimes worry about the future of the institutional church. The Pew Research Center reports in 2020, about 64% of Americans, including children, call themselves Christian. People who are religiously unaffiliated, sometimes called religious “nones,” account for 30% of the U.S. population. Adherents of all other religions – including Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists – total about 6% of the population in the U.S.

Depending on lots of things, Pew suggests in 50-years, the number of Christians in the U.S. may be as low as 35-percent. (They predict between 35- and 54-percent).^[1]

What does this mean for churches like First Pres? If there are fewer Christians and fewer and smaller churches, and if our church continues to get numerically smaller, we’ll have to make changes.

Nothing makes worriers more frantic than the word “change.”^[2]

Before we have a collective anxiety attack, let’s get to our passage from Lamentations. The writer of Lamentations is surrounded by a collapsed world. Her worst worries have transpired. Jerusalem has been overcome by invaders. *How lonely sits the city. She weeps bitterly in the night. Families have been ripped from hearth and home and flung into exile. Her foes have become her master. Her children have gone away.*

We readers cannot help but to feel our writer’s despair. Here in verse 21, however, lamentation is disrupted with an adversative conjunction. A but. A holy but. A small word on which the writer’s world swings right side up: *But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.*

And what does the writer call to mind? Only this fact: *The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases. God’s mercies never come to an end. The LORD is my portion, says my soul. The LORD is all I have, and therefore I will hope in God.*

The writer of Lamentations believes to her core that God is good. So, she makes a decision: She will wait. She will hope. The Hebrew word for “wait” and for “hope” are the same word.^[3]

We must note, that our writer doesn’t hope for hope’s sake. She hopes for a reason. She hopes in something worthy of hope. She hopes in God. And the reason she hopes in God is she knows God is creator, redeemer, sustainer. God is sovereign. God is God. And God promises to love, to redeem, to abide can be thoroughly trusted.

Hope isn’t just a warm feeling. Hope isn’t a fairy clearing of green grass filled with unicorns and rainbows. She may or may not feel hope. But note that she isn’t talking about how she feels. She’s talking about what she has decided. Because I believe God is God, I will have hope. I will hold fast. I will engage in the work of holy healing. I will actively wait. I will not despair. *I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come? / My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.*

(Rachel spoke powerfully about this in her sermon last week. Jeremiah invested in a field he would never see developed. He trusted God so much, that he reached into a future thick with trouble, and he planted a seed whose fruit he’d never harvest. That speaks of amazing trust.)

This is the kind of faithful waiting the writer of Lamentations is talking about. This hope transcends the moment, the war, the exile, the desolation. This hope transcends the bonfires of our worry. This hope doesn’t change the headlines, but reminds us the headlines don’t have the final word. God does. And that word is a good word, a living word. This hope may not flower in ways I anticipate. But this hope will, most definitely, yield a harvest. This is an audacious hope.

Prophets before and since the writing of Lamentations have wrapped themselves in this hope. Martin Luther King, Jr., on the last week of Lent in 1968, on the eve of his assassination, expressed his hope in God with these words, as he closed his speech to the people of Memphis. Even as danger swirled, he said, “I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

Why would we dare have such hope? Only because God is faithful.^[4]

Examples of Lamentation can be found in every age, from our past to our present, from the war in Ukraine and the hurricane and political ravages of Cuba, from the border, from the Congo, South Sudan, Pakistan, Chicago, from our own neighborhoods, and even from the dark corners of our very own hearts. *The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall—ashes, bitterness, poison! My soul . . . is bowed down within me* (Lam. 3:19-20).

The writer of Lamentations grieves. *But* she also practices, clings to, and waits on hope. “God is not just faithful; God is faithful in the toughest times.”^[5]

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The hope spoken of in Lamentations has made its way to us as a holy gift. Jesus practiced living in and waiting for that hope in God. He stokes the fires of hope’s eternal flame in his life, death, and resurrection, and he suggests that God’s kin-dom isn’t in some pie-in-the-sky future, but it is in the here and now, embodied in the hearts of you and me—a living hope.^[6]

This table becomes a gathering place and a departure point for pilgrims to come, to taste, to see, and to be reminded, *“The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, God’s mercies never come to an end.”*

Be encouraged.

Have hope.

The peace of Christ be with you.

*Great is Thy faithfulness
Great is Thy faithfulness
Morning by morning new mercies I see
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me*

* * *

A message from the Presbyterian Church in Luyanó.

Dear sisters and brothers:

We celebrate today World Communion Sunday. It is by partaking the bread that our eyes are open to the reality of the presence of Christ amidst us. And it is of great joy to experience love and unity that embrace us beyond difficulties, differences, even beyond language barriers. Isn't it amazing?

We keep our work recognizing we are not alone, hundreds of thousands people do the same to spread the Good News and bear witness of Jesus Christ. As sister churches it has been wonderful to exchange visits and programs, to keep communications, to do ministry in a way that honors our mutual relationship.

May God continue to bless these bonds we have created, for more years, to the glory of God. Amén.

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^[1] (Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping the world. [They] conduct public opinion polling, demographic research, content analysis and other data-driven social science research. [They] do not take policy positions.) From the Pew Research “about” page on their website. See: <https://www.pewresearch.org/about/>

^[2] Some changes, of course, are for the best. The birth of a baby into the home of an expectant family. The added duties of a promotion at work. Making the high school track team. These are, generally, good changes.

But some changes terrify us. A local person on Facebook wrote after one of this year's six shootings in Champaign, "What happened to the Champaign I grew up in?"

[3] Beth Tanner, p. 133, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4.

[4] *"They were beating us in our faces, on our heads, backs and hands. They were kicking us in our stomachs, kidneys and shins. (...) It had only just started and some of us could not stand up on our own: hunger, lack of water and this beating led people, who were once healthy and strong, to the verge of their physical endurance."* Jerzy Bielecki describing his arrival at the Birkenau concentration during WWII.

[5] Beth Tanner, p. 131, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4. Consider Julian of Norwich's famous words: "All will be well, all will be well, all manner of everything will be well."

[6] By the power of the Holy Spirit, *"I will not leave you orphaned,"* he assured his disciples (John 14). *"I am with you always, even to the close of the age"* (Matthew 28). *"Come unto me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. For I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls"* (Matthew 11:28-29).