

Lamentations 3:19-24
Therefore I Will Hope
Rev. Jonathan Cornell
9-14-14

Imagine yourself standing on the edge of a precipice, looking down at a gently flowing river, cool, refreshing, and blue. Before you is a decision: to stay put, safely on the edge where I am in no immediate danger, where there is ground beneath my feet? Or do I look down, seeing the friends of mine swimming in the invigorating water that envelops them in its current and leads them gently downstream, and in that moment choose to jump?

This is one way of looking at the subject that we are going to be spending the entire fall studying and reflecting upon together. And that subject is faith. Faith is a willingness to step or leap from the place of safety into the unknown of where we must place our trust in God to catch us and carry us. This is the image I have chosen for us to view faith, like leaping off of the precipice or letting go of the trapeze and be caught and brought in by the gracious embrace of God.

This week within this community, there was a moment, an event, that has challenged us to think deeply together about our faith in God. When events that shake our very foundations occur, it's important that we respond as a church. So as I sat down to prepare for this weekend, I knew that the text I had chosen was not the one for us. Though in God's great mercy, about 6 weeks from now I was going to be preaching on another text that deals perfectly with what we are facing together as a community. Is it ok if I skip forward 6 weeks? (Don't worry; we're going to cover all the material in between in the weeks to come.)

This morning, we are going to talk together about a subject that some of us are going through at this very moment. It's also a subject that every one of us will face at one time or another in our lives. That subject is hope in the midst of hopelessness. We will learn together what it is like to be in a circumstance where it feels like there is no light at all, and only darkness, and at the same time still feel hope. For some of you this may be immediately relevant to you. You may be going through something very difficult. For others of you, life may be pretty smooth, but I want to say to you there is still something here for you. Because every one of us will know someone (a friend, a coworker, a neighbor) who is confronted with an experience of hopelessness, and you will be God's instrument of hope to that other person.

I want you to imagine with me a man who is in a place where he does not want to be. His plans have fallen through, and where he is, he is tempted with the thought of giving up. But he doesn't. In his mind, there is a picture of a future, of a time when things won't be as they are now and life is better, and the thing that carries him forward is hope.

I remember having this feeling every fall about this time, when I would have to face the dreaded reality of having to enter that prison yet again called school. Did anyone else feel like this as a kid? But every year I had hope, that I would have good teachers, or the right

lunch period, or the thought of June carried me on. For others it might be a job that you dread, but the hope of a better career propels you forward.

Now I want you to imagine a person or situation that is so bleak, so hopeless that it feels as though you are plunged into deep darkness from which there is no way out. That is called despair. What does a person do who is in this situation?

There are people in our midst who are feeling like they are in this place right now. Others of you may not be there, but listen, there will come a time when either you or someone you know will need help because they are there. This message is for you, too. Listen so you will be equipped to know how to respond when it does happen.

There will come a day when you will need to have the courage to take a leap of faith. To trust that God is present and that life is never without hope.

With that in mind, I want to invite you to join me in looking to a part of the Scriptures, a little book in the middle of the Old Testament called Lamentations. You can already tell by the title what type of book it's going to be. Come on, everyone, let's get ready to Lament. But right in the middle of this book, coming after two and a half chapters of the author pouring his soul out in mourning and lament, there are a few brief verses that offer us hope.

The author says: **Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! My soul continually remembers it and 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."**

Here we have the expression of a man who is void of hope, and at the same time completely hopeful. We read of a man who is wandering, discontent, unable to find rest in his life, and he doesn't even have a place to lay his head at night. He describes his life as one of affliction. This man is the recipient of force and violence against him. The grief and anguish he feels he describes as being like wormwood and gall.

Wormwood is a shrub that is native to the part of the world he is from, and is known for its exceedingly bitter flavor. And gall is the greenish substance that your gall bladder produces that you only experience when you find yourself with food poisoning at a Brian Adams concert. No? Am I the only one who knows what that feels like? I tell you, I wanted to die. This man who writes these words feels this way, every day. Bitterness is the best way to describe this man. And he knows, and if you have ever lost someone close to you whom you depended upon or hoped for, then you know what it is like to have your soul bowed down within you.

Can you remember a time in your life when it felt like your soul was in chains and being dragged down into the depths? Do you remember the misery you felt? This man is saying that his life is like this all the time? We don't know who wrote these words. Tradition has

it that Jeremiah the prophet wrote them, but we don't know. There isn't a name at the beginning. But what we do know is that from word one, this is a book of poetry about grief that is tied to Israel's history of being taken from their homeland and dragged into exile in a foreign land; a time in their life when there was not much to be hopeful about.

And yet, I've said it before, the reason words matter so very much to Christians is that with three little letters we can go from hopeless to hopeful. Some of the most powerful words in all of Scripture are prepositions. In verse 21, the man says this from the depths of his despair: "But this I call to mind." There is a shift in his mindset. He says from the darkness of night which seems to go on unending, there is a dawn that will come, and it is the breaking in of dawning light this man says I will call to mind.

This is an interesting phrase, to call to mind. It reminds me of that scene from the Count of Monte Christo, where Edmund Dantes is imprisoned and has forgotten what the outside world is like until he meets Abbe Faria, who with his mind has been able to go on living because he is able to call to mind the beauty of the outside world, the teaching of the great thinkers, the possibility of humankind when they are free to flourish. This is what he knows is true, and so in his imprisonment at Chateau D'if, he calls them to mind. The ability, in the midst of our despair, to call to mind a time when life was different, or the possibility that things, can change is a powerful thing. And so the man says, "Therefore I have hope."

Do you want to know why he has hope? You're probably like, yes, so far you've been all doom and gloom, Cornell. This is the hope, and I'm not just talking about wishful thinking, I'm not talking about believing in the right doctrines around the right people. That's not faith, though it's important to have doctrine. This is what the man calls to mind in the midst of his struggle, he says it in the next verse: **that 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.**

What he is saying is that to place one's hope in God, to actively take that leap of faith in choosing to trust God – not just that God is always going to make things better, but that in the midst of even our darkest moments that we belong to God in mind body and soul – when this is the case, when we place our hope IN HIM, that is cause for celebration. We can celebrate that God loves us, that he is merciful toward us and that God is forever faithful. That's good news. Do you want to hear more about these three qualities of love, mercy, and faithfulness?

The first thing this man calls to mind, that he chooses to dwell upon, is that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. Steadfast means strong, steady, reliable over all sorts of circumstances. The opposite of steadfast is fickle. Steadfast means that the mountains may shake and fall into the sea, but this is sure, that God's love never ceases.

We don't know what life will look like 10 years from now. Who knows, everything we have could be gone: our jobs, our parents, our church. But this is what God promises:

even when these things go away, I never will. I will always be there, and will love you still. The God who holds the cosmos in his hands looks down upon you and loves you.

The second thing he calls to mind is that God's mercy will never end. But what if you've been really rotten, will he love you still? This is a serious question. If we disobey God, will God continue to love us? The man in this passage has seen all sorts of disobedience and he is living in the response of God, who sent the people into exile. But the man has seen the darkness of night that Israel has been living in, and he himself has lived it, too. And he sits with his pen in the dark day after day, and it feels like each night will be darker than the last. What this man experiences is utter bleakness. BUT THEN all of a sudden, when he feels as though hope will never return, the morning star comes over the horizon signifying the dawn of a new day, and this is what he realizes and writes with his hand—with each new morning comes God's new and fresh mercy. Not pie in the sky wishful thinking, but that the God who fashioned the world so uniquely and perfectly will not leave us, but with each new morning reminds us that what was true of the night, despair, will not be true of the morning, but mercy will ultimately have the day.

And finally, the man writing this sees the dawning of the new day with the sun emerging from the horizon, and he has nothing else to say other than to declare with his lips, "Great is your faithfulness." We may be unfaithful, but God is faithful. We may come up with all sorts of excuses why we can't do something for someone else or why we didn't do something for God, but what this man calls to mind is that God never makes excuses, and God never is not faithful.

So these are the three things that this man calls to mind, and I want to encourage you, if you only remember three things from this message, remember these three statements. And when you are confronted with a person who feels as though their life is like the never ending darkness of night, these are the three things we can say to remind others that there is a place where they can find hope. Those three statements are: God's love for you never ceases. God's mercies are new to you each morning. And God is faithful. And if we say these things to ourselves and one another when we are going through difficult times, I believe it will cause us to have hope.

But you might be saying this morning, *Those are nice thoughts, Jonathan, but what evidence do I have that these things are trustworthy?* Well, the evidence is right here to my left. In these two elements, bread and wine, we have the representation of the greatest expression of God's faithfulness the world has ever known. That on the night before Jesus traveled the lonely and dark road to the Cross of Calvary, he had the incredible wisdom to give his followers something tangible, something ongoing, something that would remind them that God so loved the world and each of you individually that he gave his only son to die for you. Why? So that you would know that God loves you, and God is merciful to you in that while you were yet in your sin, Jesus died, and that because he not only died for you but rose to new life for you, Jesus is the faithful one, Jesus is the one who is great, and so we hope.

And if you will call these things to mind over and over, you will be able to take the leap of faith and know that there is always hope flowing out from the city of God, and it's waiting to sweep you down its swift cool current and lead you to the place God longs for you to know. That place is called hope. Amen.