

## God's Faithfulness

### Lamentations 3: 19-25

The book of Lamentations, in the Old Testament, is a collection of five elegiac poems. In the original Hebrew, this collection had no title. It was known by the first word of the first poem. That poem begins, in English, “how lonely sits the city that once was full of people” and so the collection was known originally simply as “How?”

Again, this Old Testament book is a collection of dirges or lamentations often attributed to the prophet Jeremiah. The first two poems are dirges entirely without hope. All is despair. The third poem, from which today's reading comes, is a poem of personal despair resulting from a communal loss, the exile of the Jewish people to Babylon. It, too, is filled with despair, as seen in the verses immediately preceding today's passage:

- <sup>13</sup>He [God] shot into my vitals  
the arrows of his quiver;  
<sup>14</sup>I have become the laughing-stock of all my people,  
the object of their taunt-songs all day long.  
<sup>15</sup>He has filled me with bitterness,  
he has glutted me with wormwood.  
<sup>16</sup>He has made my teeth grind on gravel,  
and made me cower in ashes;  
<sup>17</sup>my soul is bereft of peace;  
I have forgotten what happiness is;  
<sup>18</sup>so I say, ‘Gone is my glory,  
and all that I had hoped for from the Lord.’

Many of those hearing this sermon are writers. You are very skilled expressing yourself with words, both prose and poetry. You will appreciate how powerfully the writer of Lamentations expresses the pathos, the depth and complexity of his feelings as a result of the end of dream. His expression of the shattering of life for his people can move us, even in translation.

The Message version translate today's passage in a clear and compelling way:

I'll never forget the trouble, the utter lostness,  
the taste of ashes, the poison I've swallowed.  
I remember it all—oh, how well I remember—  
the feeling of hitting the bottom.  
But there's one other thing I remember,  
and remembering, I keep a grip on hope:  
God's loyal love couldn't have run out,  
his merciful love couldn't have dried up.  
They're created new every morning.  
How great your faithfulness!

All is suffering. Only hope makes the suffering bearable. I am reminded of the author of the New Testament Epistle to Hebrews who defined faith in part as, “the substance of things hoped for”. Now, as then, despair and hope, sorrow and faith live together often in tension. They don't blend in easy harmony. Each keeps its identity, yet they sound together, as Kahlil Gibran describes in *The Prophet*: “the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music” -- the music of life.

Life is filled with suffering. We each experience it. Often unawares, we each participate in bringing it to others. For many in this world, the reality of such suffering is profoundly real -- so many in Africa and the Middle East. Those who are suffering include the families of Iraqis killed in the violence there and those of American soldiers and Marines.

Ety Hillesum was a young Jewish woman who died at Aushwitz in 1943. She wrote this in her diary: "How strange. There is always hope. It is wartime. There are concentration camps. [So many] are thrown into prison, ...taken hostage, ...sentenced to death, ...mounting human suffering. ...I know it all. And yet -- at unguarded moments, I suddenly lie against the naked breast of life and her arms round me are so gentle and so protective...."

Suffering for all people is genuine, almost overwhelming. In the midst of this kind of suffering, the author of Lamentations is able to write, "but this I call to mind, the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God's mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning".

So much of life is about living within tensions that pull in opposite directions. Truth seems fuzzy and life is mostly gray areas. This represents a segue to today's *Ask Jack* question. I'm beginning this series today and it will extend through the summer on those Sundays I teach. Many of you, in the congregation, have already submitted questions that includes a wide range of topics: the appropriate Christian response to the war on terror especially around the issue of torture, the role of women in the early Church, the divinity of Christ and how central that belief is to being Christian, and how our image of God affects how we pray. Hopefully there will be some more questions you want to *Ask Jack*.

Today's question is right on the front of the bulletin: Question: How did growing up military affect and shape my faith? You may know that my father was a career Army chaplain. I literally grew up in a military environment. This experience has certainly shaped my life and my faith just as your experience has undoubtedly helped shape your life and faith.

Chaplains aren't really soldiers. They generally don't carry weapons and, even though they are officers, they can never command soldiers in battle. Their purpose is to provide spiritual leadership, counsel, and religious rites, to those in the military. So, my experience of growing up in the military was probably a little different than some, but it had a profound affect on the shaping of my life and my faith.

First of all, there was the moving around all the time. The four and a half years I have lived in Kansas City are the second longest I have ever lived in one place in my life. I have moved over twenty times in my life, lived in fourteen different houses by the time I finished high school, and went to a different school every year between fourth and tenth grade.

Moving that much taught me how to adapt to new situations. I learned to lean heavily on my parents for support and guidance. I also learned to be something of an outsider -- never a loner, but also never in the *in-group*. There was loneliness sometimes, but there were many friendships and some good perspective.

The military culture generally promotes a strong sense of duty and loyalty. There is a tendency to accept and not to question the system. There is a certain strength that comes from being part of the group, but there are dangers as well.

With regard to religion, the military culture tends to measure the validity of faith by its power in time of crisis. That can be a good measure. We really need our faith to

sustain us when other resources fail. Military personnel and their families tend to live by faith especially during times of war. This was my experience watching my mother during my father's tours of duty in Korea and in Vietnam.

Why do we have a military? In the United States, generally speaking, the armed forces exist to provide security for our country through the threat of deadly force. That's why we call it the Department of Defense. The military is here to protect the lives and property of United States citizens.

There have been times we, as a nation, have tended to stretch the meaning of protection and defense to the breaking point – when we use our military might just to get our way in the world; when we supply arms and support that enable repressive governments to brutalize their people; and when the use of violent forces becomes the preferred option for foreign policy. This has been true many times in our past and it appears to be true to a large extent today.

Christianity has been drafted to support and justify the use of violent force throughout much of its history. Military chaplains and other church leaders have been complicit in this process, too. To read the gospels honestly, however, there is no room to justify the use of violent force within the context of the Christian faith. Jesus taught peacemaking, compassion, and love as the path to the reign of God.

As a military chaplain, my father chose to live directly in the tension between a military culture whose reason for existence involves the use of deadly force and a spirituality representing a religion that teaches peacemaking and non-violence. Many military personnel who are committed people of faith also live in that tension. I grew up in that tension, though have come to understand it more clearly as an adult.

How do they manage? Can one live in that tension with integrity? Some choose to ignore the clear and powerfully non-violent message of Jesus described in the gospels. Some choose to limit their definition of those to whom the gospel promise of justice and peace applies to those who are *like us* or at least those not opposing or threatening us. Others lose or diminish either their faith in God or their trust in the military.

How do I live in that tension? I am convinced my experience prepared me to live where I am now. I am sure that Jesus' message, within the context of the Roman Empire's oppressive occupation, eschewed the use of violence, especially deadly force – not only because it was not practical against the power of Rome, but because violence perpetuates itself. Violence breeds more violence and, ultimately, cannot lead to lasting peace. The use of violence is an admission that other avenues have failed. Former Secretary of State Dr. Henry Kissinger once wrote that the threat of military force is a powerful tool of diplomacy, but if that force is actually used, it has lost all value in diplomacy.

When the armed forces are sent to war, it is a sign that we have failed to find another way. Jesus calls us to find that other way. That other way is not passivity and seeking to be peaceful people. It is pro-active in opposition to oppression, injustice, and violence. It is pro-active in support of freedom, human rights, and mutual respect.

True peacemaking requires the same commitment and courage it takes for a soldier to go to war. True peacemaking requires the values of a soldier: commitment to service, courage, and self-sacrifice. True peacemaking requires the values of a saint: commitment to service, courage, and self-sacrifice. Successful peacemaking requires the same level of commitment to finding non-violent options as we already seem to have finding more efficient ways of killing people.

As we prepare to celebrate the 230<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this nation, let us as Christian

people lead the way to find tools, tactics, and vision to move the world away from violence toward peace. This action will hasten the realization that God's reign is among us. On that day, we will begin to live free of the fear that seeks security in military strength. It will take courage, commitment, and self-sacrifice. It will take faith.

The military is not the problem. It serves only to reflect the problem. Our society relies so heavily on the ability to threaten violence that we have lost the will and creativity to seek compelling, non-violent, avenues to peacemaking. We don't even know what the possibilities can be. We do know that the path of violence does not lead to peace. It only leads to more violence.

In our worship, we can hold that knowledge in our hearts together with the hope that God is faithful, that God's mercies never come to an end, that they are new every morning." We can trust that God is neither our God nor their God, but the deep spirituality we experience in the face of an enemy who has become a friend. And we can sing and rejoice with integrity that God is faithful and so very, very good. Amen.