

“Community: Lens of Hope”
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley
First Christian Church, Colorado Springs
October 6, 2013

Lamentations 1:1, 3; 3:1-3; 3:19-24

How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal.... Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude; she lives now among the nations, and finds no resting-place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress....

I am one who has seen affliction under the rod of God’s wrath; he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; against me alone he turns his hand, again and again, all day long....

The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of 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.’

Last time I preached, I gave myself a challenge to practice what I preached. The sermon was on The Ties that Bind – speaking about Jesus’ command to his dinner host not to invite those to dinner who would help him get ahead in society, but to invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind from the streets.

Meals bind us to one another – they show our dedication to be with and care for one another. Jesus was telling his host, his disciples, and *us* to commit ourselves to those whom God commits – the poor, those who especially need to hear of God’s love and grace. So, I challenged myself to share a meal with someone who I might not normally be comfortable around, someone who needed to hear the voice of God’s love. I sealed a statement in an envelope, telling you, the gathered congregation, that the next time I preached I would open the envelope and tell you the story about how I made it true.

Before I go into the details of that story, it turns out that there are some parallels with today’s theme that I’d like to tell you about to set the stage.

Today is, among other things, World Communion Sunday. This first Sunday of October is the day set aside by dozens of Christian denominations to be a day that we all receive Communion (as many churches do *not* practice Communion every Sunday), and that we do it intentionally recognizing our oneness in the Body of Christ – though we are many, we are one in Christ. Since it began in 1936, World Communion Sunday has celebrated this spirit of Christian

unity in the midst of a world in which nations have fought wars, racism has been far too widespread, and *peace* seems unattainable.

On World Communion Sunday, we come together aware of the grief and suffering that comes out of human existence, aware of the cries of people who have been displaced from their homes, their communities, from their own communion tables. In recognition of this pain in the world around us, indeed recognizing this pain *within* ourselves, we come to be together in community with our world.

World Communion Sunday gives us yet another opportunity to proclaim together that the unjust ways of the world are *not* the ways of God and Jesus, and that we are not alone and weak, but we are members of the body of Christ, strengthened in our unity, recognizing the beauty and *hope* of community.

World Communion Sunday focuses the hope of our world – by joining together as the body of Christ, celebrating Christ’s great love for *all* the people of the world, our hope is made stronger.

So we’ve got the hope of World Communion Sunday, and then we have today’s text, Lamentations. Laments. Grief. Sorrow. But, with great sorrow also comes great hope. The book of Lamentations is full of hope. It, like World Communion Sunday, is a method for recognizing suffering, and then *focusing* hope, just like our eyes focus light in order to see objects sharply, without blurriness.

I’ve been learning a lot of eyes recently, since I’ve been preparing to have laser eye surgery done tomorrow, and have been wearing glasses again instead of contacts. Some people use glasses to focus light into our eyes better, so that we can see clearly. They are a *tool* for us. Even though only some people use glasses through which to see the world, we all have lenses through which we see our world – literally the lenses of our eyes, but metaphorical lenses, too. I want you to think about something like World Communion Sunday and Lamentations as *lenses* that help you see the world more clearly – this is our opportunity for *all* of us to use a tool to re-focus, to change our focus for better vision. These verses from Lamentations, just like World Communion Sunday, act as a *lens for our hope*, focusing *hope* for us so that we can see it more clearly.

Lamentations is an example for us of faith and hope in God even in the midst of tragedy and grief. There are many realities in *our* daily lives of tragedy and grief, things that make us scared and uncertain in this crazy world. Some might be personal, some are things that affect the whole world. What are your own?

I could name about a dozen different things right now that make me feel unsafe and scared in this world....

1. the increase of natural disasters – more flooding, more drought, more fires, more storms, more tornadoes;
2. threat of attack, whether that be terrorists flying into buildings, or electronic/digital, chemical, bombings, etc;
3. mass shootings that could happen anywhere at anytime;
4. the threat of cancer or virus;
5. a government that can't agree on budgets, and the threat of unemployment for thousands;
6. the possibility of continued war for our soldiers;
7. the desire to live well without harming others, but not having enough information to do that – which companies have the best practices for their employees, for their factory workers, for their farm labor?;
8. protecting our children and women from being sexually abused or sold into slavery;....)

In the face of all of those real threats in our world, we have a great tool available to us in the collection of Lamentations, a tool that can inspire hope and remind us of God's presence and love for us.

Lamentations is a collection of 5 poems written shortly after First Temple in Jerusalem of the Jewish people was destroyed by the Babylonians. The Israelites were either exiled, or living in their homeland under the occupation of the Babylonians. The Temple was the center of their religious life, which for them was the center of their very existence. The destruction of the Temple and their exile from Jerusalem was an incredible tragedy, a catastrophe that became the symbol of all tragedies of Jewish history. This collection of laments isn't only for that event, but for every event of suffering – past, present, and future. It is written from many perspectives,

many people's voices. Within the many perspectives, it is clear that these laments are not one single person's suffering, even when it is from the "I" perspective. It is the collective suffering of the people Israel. And it is the collective voice of the people expressing their hope in the steadfast love of the Lord: "The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of 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."

We have our own sufferings, just like the Israelites, but these sufferings in our world do not mean that God is not present. That God is not available. Hope is there. Sometimes, we just need reminders that *focus* our hope and faith to see God's steadfast love more clearly.

World Communion Sunday and these verses from Lamentations show us how to focus the hope in our hearts, like glasses focus light into our eyes.

I haven't forgotten the envelope, I promise. *Now* it's time to tell that particular story. "I treated someone I wasn't comfortable around to a meal, because they needed me to be the voice of God's love."

There's a man I see regularly on my walk to church, or in the coffee shop, or in the alley. I've seen him regularly since I moved here, and yet I had never interrupted my life to talk to him. Pressured by the challenge I had given myself, I finally decided to change that. On my walk to church one morning, I saw this man standing on the corner, and as I waited for the light to change so I could cross, I made up my mind to talk to him. It was silly how nervous I was. How *uncomfortable* I was with this decision. I was really excited to talk to him, actually, to learn about his story. But I had no idea what to expect.

The light changed, and I crossed the street, gathering my courage. I walked up to him, and said "Hi! I see you all the time, and wanted to know your name." His smile in response immediately put me at ease. He told me his name and explained it. His self-chosen name is Cocoa-Brain. That's right, you heard me correctly, Cocoa-Brain. Cocoa-Brain was very happy to chat with me. He explained that he comes to Gold Hill Java and buys a bottomless cup of coffee every day. I found out that he knows our church because of the labyrinth – he used to walk it

regularly, and it helped him think things through. I asked if I could join him for breakfast the next day, and he said of course, he's there until 10 every day.

When I got there the next morning, he'd already bought his cup of coffee for the day, and didn't want any other food. I joined him with my own cup of coffee, and I had the pleasure of learning more about him and having a great conversation. I wasn't nervous for *this* meeting, just excited to learn more about him.

There are many interesting things about Cocoa-Brain, but for today, I'll focus on something that relates to our theme. Cocoa-Brain is homeless, and doesn't want to be. Homelessness has been difficult, and he's suffered. And yet, even in the midst of that suffering, he wonders what God is teaching him through it. Not having a home has given him some interesting experiences, and he's met people and talked to people that he would not have otherwise. Even while suffering, his homelessness has given him a sense of *community* and *hope* that he did not have before.

When I read over the Lamentations verses in preparation for today's sermon, they sounded an awful like Cocoa-Brain's experience. "The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of 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.'"

Through my experience with Cocoa-Brain, I was reminded yet again that my own selfish purposes for the interaction weren't important – this challenge wasn't for me. It was for the benefit of Cocoa-Brain, for *him* to feel and experience God's love. I was just a tool for it. Cocoa-Brain seemed to have a genuine appreciation for someone taking an interest in him as a person, and to be respected by someone who would use his chosen name. My wish is that he did find God's love through me, and that it served to strengthen his hope in the goodness of God and his fellow humans.

These three lenses from today, all centered around community, all taught me something about God's great faithfulness. I learned something about my community from sharing coffee with Cocoa-Brain. I learned something about God's work in our lives through the poems of

suffering in Lamentations. And I continue to learn something about hope in the world through World Communion Sunday.

They all show me people in this world as people who are suffering, just like me, more than me. They are people who also call on God, looking for answers, looking for hope, looking for purpose. They are all around the world, they are people right outside this door, and they are people sitting right in front of me today.

I learned that grief and injustice do *not* have the last word. Even if justice never seems to win a complete victory, as people of faith we are called to be watchposts, paying attention to how God's word and vision is revealed so that it can be lived out. We are called to live our lives with openness to one another, interacting with others *first* with love, before judgment.

World Communion Sunday. Lamentations. Talking with someone like Cocoa-Brain. These are all lenses that focus our hope and faith, that cut through haze of grief, suffering, and anxiety that clouds our vision, and that help us to see God's steadfast love more clearly.

Don't focus on the suffering. Pause, like the author of Lamentations, like Cocoa-Brain, and remember that great is God's faithfulness.