

## **Great is thy faithfulness**

A sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Lamentations 3:23

In Lamentations 3:23 is the famous line: "Great is thy faithfulness." We know it from the hymn by that name, written in 1923 by Thomas Obadiah Chisholm. He was born in a log cabin in Franklin, Kentucky and grew up to become a Methodist minister. The hymn is not in many hymnals because it is relatively new. But it has become a favorite of many because of the words and the tune.

Even though the hymn is a favorite, the actual text in Lamentations is even better. There is more breadth and depth in the third chapter of Lamentations and in the wider context. The whole question is: Where is God?

Where is God? The whole Old Testament is an answer to this question. In Genesis 12:1-3 the Lord comes to Abraham and says:

"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. . . . and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves."

These promises are repeated in Genesis 15:1-6 and 17:1-8 and repeated to Isaac and Jacob. It's the basic covenant promise. It is what Paul in Galatians 4:5-7, 9, and 28-31 describes as the one-sided covenant. It's like Psalm 81:10: "I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide and I will fill it." That's simply what God does. He does it because that's who he is. He is faithful to himself.

Paul points out that this covenant is different from the covenant with Moses. Exodus 20:1-17 says (paraphrase): "I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Obey the Ten Commandments." A two-sided covenant.

The people were made a great nation. They received a land, Palestine. They became powerful under David and rich under Solomon. Then things fell apart. In 721 BC the Assyrians came and ten of the twelve tribes disappeared forever. The Assyrians stripped the temple and the palace. Then in 587 BC the Babylonians came and took the last two tribes and tore down the city. No more temple. No more palace.

But the Lord had promised that he would stay with them and he did. In 539 BC Cyrus the Persian let a remnant go back to Palestine. But it was a small, ragged remnant. We hear about this in Ezra and Nehemiah, which are written about 444 BC. The city wall is flimsy and the temple is tiny. As we know from time of the Maccabees (about 169-164 B.C.), they are once again being overrun.

The question is: Where is God and his covenant and his promises? Where is his faithfulness? It's very similar to Psalm 73 where the psalmist asks: "Why do the wicked prosper?" And the psalmist points out (selected phrases from verses 4-12):

"I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no pangs. Their bodies are sound and sleek. They are not in trouble as other men are. They scoff and speak with malice and they say: How can God know? They are always at ease and they increase in riches."

The psalmist asks himself: "Where is God?" The text in Lamentations 3 really needs to start with the first verse. It begins with the question: "Where is God in my situation?" He describes his situation. He's in darkness, without any light. He says: "I am walled about so I cannot escape. I am shut out from prayer. My paths are crooked. I am desolate. I have become a laughing stock. I am filled with bitterness." Then in verse 18 he says: "Gone is my glory and my hope from the Lord."

Lamentations 3:21 is the big reversal: "But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope." It all switches. It's very much like Psalm 73:23: "Nevertheless, in spite of it all, I am still with thee. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

What is the context of this reversal? "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases." "Steadfast" is from the King James Version of the Bible. It means unchanging. The text has a tiny footnote which says: "God's love does not wander." It is "standfast." It goes on to say: "His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning." This is recalling again that one-sided covenant. What is mercy? Not tit for tat. No, God's mercy is a one-sided thing; it never ends.

"Great is thy faithfulness." What is this great faithfulness? You might think: "It isn't everything." But it is more than everything. It is that which is the promise of God. And his promises are different from ours because he keeps them. Ours are faulty. But he keeps his covenant, his mercy, and his unchanging love.

It's really like some other places in Scripture, for example Deuteronomy 33:27: "The eternal God is your dwelling place and underneath are the everlasting arms." Or in Psalm 118:6: "With the Lord on my side I do not fear? What can man do to me?" That's quoted in the New Testament in Hebrews 13:6, and it's the same as how Paul sums things up in Romans 8:31: "What shall we say to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?" Is that who God is?

Then comes the question: What are we supposed to do? The text says: "The Lord is good to those who wait for him." That's striking because it's not the way we usually think. We usually think it's up to us to make it happen. It's spelled out in Isaiah 64:4: "No eye has seen a God besides thee who works for those who wait for him."

This theme recurs. In Psalm 62:5: "For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is in him." In Psalm 46:10: "Be still and know that I am God." "Be still" means both that I am quiet, and it also means: "Don't move your feet!" God is doing it, and that's the way God works.

In a striking way, in Isaiah 50:10, it describes what we are to do: "Who among you fears the Lord, who walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the Lord, and relies upon his God?"

That's what faith is about – "who walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the Lord." That means "by faith alone." He does it in his way, which is hidden from us.

Paul picks this up in Romans 11:33: "How unsearchable are his judgments and how hidden are his ways!"

What is the sum of it all? What is it pointing to? This brings us to the last point. It says in 2 Cor 1:20: "All the promises of God find their Yes in him." All of this which has been stated in Lamentations 3 and also throughout Isaiah and Jeremiah and the whole of the Old Testament is pointing forward to being fulfilled in Jesus Christ. We look back because we know that all the promises of God find their Yes in him.

It is stated very concretely in Romans 8:32: "He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, will he not give us all things with him?" Obviously, yes.

Another great hymn, this one by Martin Luther, is "Out of the Depths I Cry to You," which says many of those things that are said in Lamentations 3. The second verse particularly has these lines: "We praise the God who gives us faith and saves us from the grip of death; our lives are in his keeping." This is much the same as

Lamentations 3: The Lord is the one who does it. He is the one who gives us faith. He is the one who saves us from the grip of death. He is faithful to himself and therefore to us.

The basic message comes back to us. The message is in music we sing but more profoundly in the text itself: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. Great is thy faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:23).

"The Lord is good to those who wait for him. . . . It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord" (Lamentations 3:26). Amen