

## Great is Thy Faithfulness

Lamentations 3:23-33

A Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Pentecost

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him'" (Lamentations 3:22-24).

We think of prayer as "asking," but prayer is also about "praising." We are familiar with the hymn "Great is thy Faithfulness," which has been around for about a hundred years. People are often surprised to find out that this hymn is based on these verses I just read from the third chapter of Lamentations.

But what is the Lamentations text about?

What it's about is evil. Evil, evil, what's really evil.

It's like Psalm 30:6: ". . . 'I said in my prosperity I shall never be moved.' By thy favor, O Lord, thou did establish me as a strong mountain; thou didst hid thy face, I was dismayed."

Suddenly things go wrong and we ask ourselves: "Why this evil?" "Why does evil happen?" And we also ask, as Psalm 73 does (paraphrase): "Why do the wicked prosper?"

You know of Rabbi Kushner's book, *Why do bad things happen to good people?* – even if you haven't read it. It first came out in 2004 and has sold millions of copies. A best seller.

Why is there evil? Not trivial things but evil, evil. On top of it, Christians die, Christians have trouble, Christians get sick. It doesn't seem to work. Where is God? That's what this passage in Lamentations is about.

It was written after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. The Babylonians had overrun the city. They destroyed the temple, killed many and exiled the remaining people into another land. The people of Israel remembered that the Lord had come to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and said to them: "I will give you a land, I will make you a great people, and you will be a blessing." Ha, it was all gone. The land was gone. Jerusalem was gone. The temple was gone. And the people were gone.

What is God doing? Where is God? And what about this evil? How can this evil come and destroy? And then here is that striking line: "Great is thy faithfulness."

In order to put this in context, it's important that we reflect on how we operate today, among us, especially in the Western world. Most of the time when we come to the question of evil, the answer is: Just get busy. Get occupied so you don't think about it. Do things and then your focus will be on something else. As long as you think right you can manage most

things. On top of this there is an emphasis in the culture on being happy. Don't worry, be happy. Do what is positive.

It's like Aesop's Fable of the ant and the grasshopper: It was a sunny summer day and the ants were busy drying the grain they had gathered. A starving grasshopper came by, with his fiddle under his arm, humbly begging for a bit of food. "What?!" said the ants, "What haven't you been gathering and storing food for the winter?"

"No," whined the Grasshopper, "I didn't have time to store up food. I was too busy making music. Before I knew it summer was gone."

"Making music were you," said the ants, "well, then dance."

And they turned their backs on the Grasshopper and went on with their work.

The Grasshopper had lived by the message: Be happy. Don't think, don't worry. Keep busy.

The second way in which we commonly deal with evil is that we have formulas. We think: Well, there couldn't be good without evil. We have to have the contrast to know the good. The larger process is good, and while there's evil along the way, we have to see it in perspective. Furthermore, most things can be managed. To solve the problem of evil, what we need is more education. With education, study, and work we'll solve all these problems.

Third, and just as serious, is to say: "Well when evil comes, that's just God's will." It's a kind of fate. It is what was supposed to be. You're being tested. Your number is up. It's really for the better. It is like that punishment you deserve, maybe.

Then in the fourth place, we rationalize evil away. We have mentioned before the book, *The Devil's Share*. It's by a Frenchman, Denis de Rougemont. He talks about the confusion of the modern world in which many believe in God but not the devil. He writes that devil has three tricks, three temptations, he uses to hook us.

The first trick the devil has is to persuade you that he doesn't exist. Having done that, he can operate freely in us, in virtue-signaling, in group think, and the like. We often make a joke out of the devil, as if only primitive people believe in the devil. Nothing serious to see here, folks. Move along.

Failing that, he comes to his second trick, which is to say evil is incarnate in one person or place. For example, Hitler is the devil incarnate. We focus on that. It's over there. It's bad, but we can deal with it.

Failing that, he moves to the third trick, which is to say every time there is a problem, the devil is in my computer, in my back. The devil is all over the place, in everything.

Then de Rougemont ends with this little chapter: Want to know where to find the devil? He's in the chair you're sitting in. That's where the devil resides. We choke at that. Surely not in us!

The difficulty with this little book is that it doesn't go far enough. Because as soon as he says what he says in this final chapter, we say to ourselves: "Maybe I have slipped here and there, but my intentions are good, and basically I have a good heart." So it's a problem for other people, but not me and my good intentions.

We move then to Paul, who writes in 1 Corinthians 4:3-5: "It is a small thing to me that I am judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me."

We end up, no matter what, in either spiritual pride or spiritual despair. And that is the problem. It is, as you know, directly out of Luther and Paul.

Over against all of this we come back to Lamentations: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases . . . great is thy faithfulness." In the original, these words "steadfast love" and "faithfulness" are key words emphasizing what God is like. The temple was destroyed. Jerusalem was destroyed. The land was taken. People were scattered, but God's promises are different from ours. They do not fail.

What he has done is deal with evil in a different way than you and I imagine. That is what he has done by dying and rising again. He saw the problem. It's far worse than we imagine. He saw the problem, and he solved the problem by the cross and with the resurrection. That's something that is simply outside of our understanding and beyond. And it's solved. It's finished. The whole problem of evil is taken care of by the fact that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ all is new. There is life and a living hope in him. Amen