



Faithful God

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Lamentations 3:19-26

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I've been reflecting on the 3500 sermons I have preached in this church. Some sermons are more memorable than others. Take the series of sermons preached back in 2012, which we titled *Life is Messy*. I heard more about this sermon series than any other I can remember. I still have my coffee mug with the *Life is Messy* logo on it. This sermon series was so popular because people identified with this *Life is Messy* theme. Family dynamics are messy. Interpersonal relationships are messy. Office politics can be messy.

Lamentations is a good book to read and ponder when life is messy. If I asked for a show of hands as to how many of you have ever heard of this book, I doubt many hands would go up. Lamentations is one of least read and most neglected books in the Bible, right up there with Philemon and Zephaniah. The last time I preached from this book was back in February 2004, some 17 years ago. It wasn't a very good sermon, if you want to know the truth.

You might have thought in one of my final sermons that I would choose a more familiar Bible passage. I picked Lamentations because life is not always pleasant and happy. Full disclosure: Lamentations is not a happy book. It's raw. It's real. It's unflinchingly honest. We need books like Lamentations when life is messy.

Let me cut to the chase and offer you my bottom line synopsis of Lamentations: Life is hard; God is good. Even when life is not good, God is good. I'll come back to this life-is-hard, God-is-good theme later in my sermon, but first the story.

The Babylonians destroyed Israel in 586 B.C. They levelled the sacred city of Jerusalem and committed horrific atrocities. They deported Jewish survivors to Babylon and conscripted them to work as slaves. God's people must have suffered the debilitating effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Lamentations was written in the aftermath of this trauma. As its title suggests, Lamentations expresses communal lament over the traumatic loss of life and homeland. I must forewarn you, its language is graphic. This would explain why this book is less popular, given our fixation on happiness.

This lament is composed as a series of five carefully constructed poems. The first four poems in chapters 1-4 are written in acrostic style, meaning each verse or series of verses begins with a successive letter in the Hebrew alphabet. The writer has obviously put a great deal of effort and thought into arranging these poems in alphabetical order. The use of the acrostic is a way of communicating a thorough compendium of grief—everything from A to Z (or *Aleph* to *Tau*).

Are you still with me? I've learned recently this question I sometimes ask has become synonymous with my preaching.

Today's reading from chapter 3 is part of the third acrostic poem in this series. The writer feels abandoned by God at the outset of this chapter. His prayers seemingly go unanswered. He feels caught in a maze, unable to find his way out. He feels locked in deep darkness with no means of

escape. His lament hits rock bottom in verse 18. I like the way Eugene Peterson translates this verse in *The Message*, “This is it. I’m finished. All hope is gone.”

Can people talk with God this way? The writer of Lamentations does. Give him credit. He brings his lament straight to God without fear of retribution.

We have lost our ability to lament. Instead, we complain. We whine. We grumble against God. Lamentations gives us permission to voice our lament to God.

Today’s reading represents a dramatic shift. It’s instructive that it comes at the precise midpoint of the book. On either side of today’s reading are two chapters’ worth of laments. In the middle of these laments are some of the sweetest words you’ll read anywhere in Scripture. The author turns away from his present circumstances to draw on God’s past mercies to inform future hopes.

Hopelessness turns to hope in verse 21, “Yet this I will call to mind, therefore I have hope.” Biblical hope is not wishful thinking. It centers on God’s character and God’s promises.

The source of his hope is God’s great love in verse 22, “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail.” The Hebrew word for love, *hesed* appears 250 times in the Old Testament alone. It is most often translated “steadfast love.” God’s love is not fickle or capricious. God’s love is loyal and constant.

How appropriate that we are talking about love on Valentine's Day. Do you remember the heart-shaped candy imprinted with slogans like "True Love" or "Forever Mine"? The manufacturer of this candy, NECCO went bankrupt in 2018. Another company bought their product line and reintroduced this sweetheart candy with new slogans such as "Tweet Love," "Text Me," and "BFF." Why am I not surprised?

God's love never gives up on us. According to Lamentations, "His compassions never fail." God prevails even when life is messy. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13, "Love always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:8).

The theme of God's steadfast love is reinforced in verse 23. God's mercies and compassion "are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness." *Faithfulness* is a word expressing reliability and devotion. Do I need to remind you that these words are penned by someone who feels like the bottom has fallen out of his life?

I can't read this verse without singing, "They are new every morning, new every morning. Great is your faithfulness, O Lord, great is your faithfulness." Or, if you rather, the refrain of the classic hymn *Great is thy Faithfulness* that our choir sang to begin today's worship, "Morning by morning new mercies I see. All I have needed thy hand has provided. Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me."

Our writer reminds himself that God is his portion in verse 24, "I said to myself, 'The Lord is my portion;

therefore, I will wait for Him.” The New Jerusalem Bible translates this verse, “God is all I have...so I put my hope in Him.”

Our lesson closes with an affirmation of God’s goodness in verses 25-26, “The Lord is good to those whose hope is in Him, to the one who seeks Him. It is good to wait for the Lord.”

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Two applications come to mind for your consideration this morning.

First application: Wait for God’s deliverance. “The Lord is my portion. I will wait for Him...It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.”

Waiting is not our strong suit. We are impatient people. We want God to microwave our every prayer.

If you haven’t noticed by now, God doesn’t work according to our timetable. This directive to wait flies in the face of our I-can-do-it, make-it-happen approach to life. God doesn’t always do what we ask when we ask. I know plenty of people who have given up on God because he did not do what they asked when they asked.

When we feel as though God is not coming through for us, our tendency is to run ahead and take matters into our own hands. Scripture is full of examples of people who take matters into their own hands and make a mess of things. Some of our messes are of our own making.

You may feel as though you are stuck in God's waiting room right now. You are waiting for a medical diagnosis, a relationship to develop or be restored, a heart to mend, a prodigal to return, or a mood to lift. The words of Psalm 27, "Wait for the Lord; be strong, take courage and wait for the Lord" (Psalm 27:14). Resist the temptation to run ahead of God.

Second application: Trust God's goodness. "The Lord is good to those whose hope is in Him." Remember, these words are affirmed in a book that recounts searing loss and deep anguish. Even in times of lament, we can declare with Lamentations that God is good.

We have come full circle to what I said at the outset of this sermon. Life is hard, God is good. God is good even when life is hard. God is good even when life is not good to us.

Did you catch what my son, Andrew, said at the end of today's Celebration of Ministry video? "It hasn't always been easy and there have been tough moments and rough roads, but God has been faithful." That's it! God is faithful. Life is hard but God is good.

It is often customary among African-American believers to exchange greetings this way. If someone greets you with the words, "God is good," you say in response, "All the time." Then, the person repeats back to you the words, "All the time." And you answer back, "God is good." God is good. All the time. All the time. God is good. In good and bad times, God is good.

Can we still believe in God's goodness despite this worldwide pandemic? Can we still believe in God's goodness despite a diagnosis of cancer? Can we still believe in God's goodness despite a difficult marriage, a dead-end job, or a major rift in the family?

I'm talking about *What Matters Most* in this last season of my ministry. What matters most? God is faithful. Life is hard, God is good.