**Good Friday**

**April 15, 2022**

**Text—Lamentations 3:1-33**

I have to be honest with you; I’m cheating a little bit with this sermon. Right now we’re coming to the end of a sermon series on the Minor Prophets, those short prophetic books that appear at the end of the Old Testament. In total, there are twelve Minor Prophets, but in this sermon series we’re actually taking a look at thirteen books of the Bible. That’s because the book of Lamentations, which tonight’s sermon is about, is very similar to the Minor Prophets in many ways. It too is a prophetic book, it too is rather short, and it too is a book that we don’t look at very often. Thus, even though Lamentations is not one of the twelve Minor Prophets, it still fits in well with what I’m doing with this series, and it especially fits in well with the themes of Holy Week and Good Friday specifically. In fact, it is a tradition in some churches for Christians to read the book of Lamentations throughout Holy Week, taking it a chapter per day. For this reason, I’ve decided to cheat just a little bit and include Lamentations in our sermon series on the Minor Prophets.

So what is Lamentations about? Well, as you can probably gather from the title, it is a book of lamenting, or grieving, over something terrible that has happened. In the original context of Lamentations, that terrible thing was the destruction of the city of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonian Empire. The kingdom of Judah had rebelled against God by their sin and idolatry, and it had resisted God’s calls to repentance through his prophets. Over and over again, God had warned the Judahites that if they didn’t repent and turn back to him in faith, he would punish them severely. But they did not listen, so God raised up the Babylonians to invade Judah and destroy its capital city of Jerusalem. The entire city was leveled in this attack: not one building remained standing, not even the temple of the true God. And then, to add insult to injury, the Babylonians took back with them thousands of prisoners of war: the wealthiest, most intelligent, and most capable Judahites to serve as slaves of the empire. The only people left behind were the poor of the land and those who didn’t have any particular skills that could benefit Babylon. It was a dark, dark time in the history of God’s people.

One of the people who were left behind was the prophet Jeremiah, who, as you probably know, wrote the very lengthy prophetic book of the Old Testament that bears his name. But what you may not know is that Jeremiah is also traditionally regarded to be the author of the book of Lamentations. In fact, Jeremiah is often called the “Weeping Prophet” because of the mournful nature of the text of this book. In Lamentations, Jeremiah grieves over the destruction of Jerusalem and all of the pain and suffering this has caused God’s people. He tells of buildings and fields laid waste, women abused, children starving, and young men murdered. He laments over the exiles who will be taken away to a foreign country, probably never to see their homeland again. And one of the worst aspects of this tragedy is that it was entirely preventable. Had the people of Judah repented and trusted in the Lord their God instead of idols, none of this would have ever happened. Judah was receiving the due penalty for its sins, and Jeremiah could only watch helplessly as God’s wrath came down upon its sinful and idolatrous people.

Jeremiah himself, though, had not been guilty of the same sins as most of the other Judahites. He had not bowed down to idols; he had remained faithful to the true God. He had spoken in God’s name to the people of Judah, pleading with them to repent before it was too late. The people, though, had largely rejected his message and done terrible things to him. He had been beaten, imprisoned, starved, and thrown down into a well. Jeremiah had clearly suffered horribly during his ministry. And yet none of that suffering could compare with the agony of seeing his beloved Jerusalem, the holy city of God, being destroyed right before his eyes. Jeremiah felt the pain of this loss as if he himself were being physically abused. In our text for this evening, Jeremiah declares, “I am a man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath; he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long. He has made my flesh and my skin waste away; he has broken my bones; he has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation; he has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago.” These are very strong words, but Jeremiah was feeling some very strong feelings. The sight of Jerusalem being destroyed made him physically ill, as if he himself were being torn apart just like his beloved city. How had it come to this, that the people whom God chosen were now under his wrath? How could God’s sons and daughters be punished so severely? It was almost too much for Jeremiah to witness, just as it would have been for any faithful Israelite. The suffering of Jerusalem was his suffering, and there seemed to be no hope of restoration for any of them.

A few hundred years after the book of Lamentations was written, another holy man of God was forced to suffer agonizing pain. This time, though, instead of the pain of witnessing what was happening to God’s people, it was the actual, physical pain of God’s wrath coming down upon him. This man’s name was Jesus of Nazareth, and he was being crucified for a crime he did not commit, for blasphemy against the Lord God. Of course, it was impossible for Jesus to actually blaspheme against God, seeing as how he himself was God in the flesh. But the religious leaders of Jerusalem rejected the claims he made about himself, so they wrongfully convicted him, sentenced him to death, and then handed him over to the Romans to be crucified. What Jesus then went through was far worse than anything that happened to Jeremiah, or to anybody else. Jeremiah was forced to watch as his city was destroyed; Jesus himself was literally destroyed by the Roman soldiers into whose hands he was given. They beat him, scourging him to within an inch of his life, and placed a crown of thorns upon him, mocking his claim to be the king of the Jews. They paraded him through the streets of Jerusalem, making someone else carry his cross only because he was too weak to do it himself. When they reached the outside of the city, they nailed him to that cross, and they lifted him up to hang there until he suffocated or bled out. While he was on the cross, the passersby jeered at him, telling him to come down from the cross if he was truly the Son of God, and then they would believe in him.

But as terrible as these physical and emotional abuses were, they paled in comparison to the spiritual suffering Jesus was undergoing. During his crucifixion, God the Father turned his back on his Son, so that Jesus suffered the equivalent of hell, the complete absence of God. All of the good things that God provides were taken away from Jesus as the entire crushing wrath of God against sin came down upon him. Think about those words we read in our text from Lamentations, how closely they describe what happened to Jesus on the cross. He suffered, he was mocked, he was abandoned. These verses are especially appropriate: “He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes; my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, ‘My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the Lord.’” There is no hope when God has completely forsaken you, as he did to Jesus. Everything good was taken away from him, and he had nothing left. All he could do then was die, because he had nothing else in this life to look forward to. He was paying the due penalty for other people’s sins, and he could not stand up to the wrath of God and live.

And yet, our text from Lamentations does not end on a note of despair. On the contrary, given the context of sorrow and mourning that pervades Lamentations, the end of our text gives us some of the most hopeful and comforting words of the entire Bible. In these last few verses, Jeremiah confesses that the steadfast love of the Lord never ends, that his mercies never come to an end, that his faithfulness is great. Jeremiah proclaims that the Lord is good to those who wait for him and to the soul that seeks him. Those who are suffering should wait quietly for his salvation; they should not lose hope in his deliverance or seek to avenge themselves. God will not cast his faithful people off forever; he will have compassion on them, because of the steadfast love he has promised to show to them. Thus, even in the midst of the horrible things Jeremiah was witnessing, and the grief that he had over Jerusalem being destroyed, he was able to place his hope in the steadfast love of the Lord his God. He knew that no matter how bad things looked for him and for his people at that time, God had not abandoned them completely. He would protect the people of Judah during their exile, and he would restore to them everything that he had taken away. Babylon would not win forever; eventually God would punish the Babylonians for their deeds and bring his people back to their homeland. If, as Jeremiah says, they could wait patiently for the Lord’s salvation, then they would see his faithfulness and steadfast love for them.

And the same was true for Jesus as well. Because even though he was suffering the worst experience anyone had ever endured up to that point, he did not lose his hope in the salvation of his Father. According to Luke’s Gospel, when Jesus died, his last words were, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” That is not the hopeless lament of someone who believes God has left him entirely; no, that is the hopeful cry of someone who knows that God has not abandoned him. Even as Jesus earlier cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he knew how all of this would end. He knew that God would be there to deliver him even in death. And that’s exactly what God did for his Son. He did not allow Jesus to stay dead forever, but rather raised him from death on the third day, proving once and for all that Jesus was his beloved Son whom he had appointed as the Savior and judge of the world. Although God forsook Jesus on the cross, Jesus did not forsake his Father, and his faithfulness was ultimately what allowed him to win the victory over sin, death, and the devil. Because he did not lose confidence in God’s promises even when things were at their worst for him, he was able to endure the pain and suffering until the end. Jesus did not waver, and in the end, we are the ones who benefit.

Because, as we know, Jesus was not allowing himself to suffer these things because he enjoyed it. He was no glutton for punishment. Rather, he did all of this out of love for you and for me, to atone for our sins and save us from the wrath of God. The people of Jerusalem in Jeremiah’s day were being deservedly punished, but Jesus had done nothing wrong. He had not committed blasphemy; in fact, he had never committed any sins at all. But he was willing to be treated as the worst sinner who ever lived in order to be our substitute, to suffer in our place so that we would not be forced to. He endured hell on the cross so that we would not be thrown into hell for eternity. He exchanged his perfect righteousness with our sinfulness, so that we now receive forgiveness for our sins and the exaltation that he deserves. And by rising again from the dead, he blazed the trail that all who believe in him will follow. We too will rise, and we too will inherit everlasting life, all because of his willingness to suffer on our behalf. As Lamentations says, Jesus was a man who saw affliction under the rod of God’s wrath, but he also saw that the Lord is good to those who wait for him. Jesus endured his suffering patiently, and he has now inherited lordship over the entire creation as his reward.

Jesus’ story thus provides hope for all of us who believe in him, that though we may suffer in this life, we will be exalted in the next, just as he was. Just like Jeremiah before him, Jesus did not give up his faith in God’s steadfast love, and he saw the fulfillment of all of God’s promises to him as his beloved Son. And since we by baptism are also beloved sons and daughters of God, we will inherit all of the same blessings as Jesus did. We will rise from the dead on the last day just as he did on the third day, and we will live forever with him in his glorious kingdom. There may be times when we feel like Jeremiah, seeing our lives fall apart around us. There may be times when we feel like Jesus, suffering terribly and feeling completely forsaken by God. But what we can remember from these two men is that they trusted in God’s promises to them, never to leave them or forsake them, never to allow them to be utterly destroyed. They would suffer for a while, but then they would be exalted when the time was right. And the same goes for all of us. No matter what sufferings we may experience in this life, we know that God is with us through them all, and that his steadfast love for us never ceases. Even the book of Lamentations expresses this sure and certain hope, and we can express the same hope in whatever laments we may bring before the Lord. We know that he hears us, just as he heard Jeremiah and Jesus, and that he is there to deliver us whenever we need him the most. Wait quietly, then, for his salvation, and he will have compassion upon you. He exalted Jesus to the highest place after he willingly assumed the lowest place, and he will exalt you out of your suffering to glory as well. Amen.