

## Thanksgiving in Dark Times

### Lamentations 3:1-33 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of the LORD's wrath. <sup>2</sup> He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; <sup>3</sup> indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long. <sup>4</sup> He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones. <sup>5</sup> He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship. <sup>6</sup> He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead. <sup>7</sup> He has walled me in so I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains. <sup>8</sup> Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. <sup>9</sup> He has barred my way with blocks of stone; he has made my paths crooked. <sup>10</sup> Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding, <sup>11</sup> he dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without help. <sup>12</sup> He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrows. <sup>13</sup> He pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver. <sup>14</sup> I became the laughingstock of all my people; they mock me in song all day long. <sup>15</sup> He has filled me with bitter herbs and given me gall to drink. <sup>16</sup> He has broken my teeth with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust. <sup>17</sup> I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is. <sup>18</sup> So I say, "My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the LORD." <sup>19</sup> I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. <sup>20</sup> I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. <sup>21</sup> Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: <sup>22</sup> Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. <sup>23</sup> They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. <sup>24</sup> I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." <sup>25</sup> The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; <sup>26</sup> it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. <sup>27</sup> It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young. <sup>28</sup> Let him sit alone in silence, for the LORD has laid it on him. <sup>29</sup> Let him bury his face in the dust—there may yet be hope. <sup>30</sup> Let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him, and let him be filled with disgrace. <sup>31</sup> For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. <sup>32</sup> Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. <sup>33</sup> For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.

Tomorrow is Thanksgiving. Do you feel very thankful right now? Are you going to have to put on a face and fake some thankfulness on your Thanksgiving?

The year 2020 – doesn't it feel more like this: "I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of the LORD's wrath. He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long." (verses 1-3) "He has broken my teeth with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust. I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is." (verses 16-17)?

The prophet Jeremiah wrote those words soon after he saw Jerusalem and the Temple of the LORD reduced to nothing but a smoldering heap of rubble. His soul was downcast. He was depressed. What hope did he have?

2020 feels like a dark place, almost a never-ending darkness, a time when our daily life has been decimated like Jerusalem and a time when our church feels vacated like the smoldering heap that used to be the Temple. Day in and day out now we get a daily reminder that there is a virus that is infecting thousands upon thousands of people and contributing to a daily death count. It's depressingly morbid. Add on top other major issues throughout the year ranging from wildfires to earthquakes to record unemployment to police shootings to riots to a controversial presidential election. I mean, where's the zombie apocalypse, right??? It's like 2020 is the stereotypical bully at the beach who kicks sand in your face over and over again and there's nothing you can do about it except shut your eyes, press your lips down hard, and hope that not as much sand gets in with the next kick.

We believe that God is in charge, that he holds the whole world in his hands. COVID, then, is not outside his control. We've prayed day after day, week after week, that he would bring it to an end and restore things. Yet, we watch the numbers of infections go up and the number of people worshiping in person here at church and online go down. So, what's he doing? Is he listening to us at all?

Jeremiah expressed his hurt, his depression, like this: "He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship. He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead. He has walled me in so I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains. Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. He has barred my way with blocks of stone; he has made my paths crooked. Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding, he dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without help. He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrows. He pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver... He has filled me with bitter herbs and given me gall to drink." (verses 5-13, 15) So I say, "My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the LORD." (verse 18)

Has 2020 left us exasperated to the point where our chorus is no different than Jeremiah's? Is the hope of normalcy, of banning together, being stronger together, to have good come out of all this – is that all gone? Is our hope from the LORD gone?

Jeremiah, probably as he was sitting in the ashes of Jerusalem, brings a ray of light into the darkness. “Let him sit alone in silence, for the LORD has laid it on him. Let him bury his face in the dust— there may yet be hope.” (verse 28-29) In the midst of all the tragedies, of all the hardships, of his world essentially coming to an end, Jeremiah says to stop complaining and listen. Listen, because there may yet be hope.

What hope is there? What is there to give thanks for in 2020? “Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:” (verse 21) “For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.” (verses 31-33)

God is not sitting there as Creator and Preserver of the universe and laughing as he watches the number of COVID cases spike. He’s not wringing his hands in defeat over those in ICU beds. He’s not plugging his ears or turning his back on us as we pray over and over again that he would bring an end to this pandemic. He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone. Which means that he knows exactly what he’s doing and how this is beneficial for all involved to bring them his salvation. How that all works together, you’ll have to ask God. But he never fails to do what he says.

He says that no one is cast off by the Lord forever. This means that the grief of 2020 is not forever, even if COVID continues into 2021 and beyond. Instead, God cast himself off on the cross for us as he exclaimed, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This assures us that God does not cast us off forever. That penalty was already exacted on Christ. God has no reason other than our rejection him that he would cast us aside. This gives us hope for the future.

Jeremiah also expressed this hope: “Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” (verses 22-23) Every day, COVID or not, is a gift of God’s goodness and a gift of his faithfulness. In fact, for all of us, his mercy was renewed day after day. For those listening today, you got to live in God’s unconditional love and forgiveness throughout this whole pandemic. Never once was his love removed from you, but instead it was reiterated to you over and over again. Each day, as we saw what our world was becoming, how out of control it’s been for us, how divisive, how broken, God offered healing and restoration to us from him every single day. He held out heaven for us, turning our eyes to the perfection that he has won for us and that he has in store for us – a future that guarantees that one day COVID will be completely forgotten when we reach our heavenly home.

As many of us do on Thanksgiving, let’s count the blessings, God’s mercies that were new to us in 2020. We have the blessing of continued bountiful harvests. Remember when we all were supposed to stock up on food for 2 weeks and you couldn’t find any toilet paper, hand sanitizer, or paper towels? Yet, we didn’t run out. We were taken care of. People gave of what they had. We reached out and helped one another. God preserved us day after day.

We are blessed by God that people still gather here to worship during a pandemic, our church building did not simply remain closed. In fact, not a single person so far has gotten COVID because they came to Light of the Valley to worship God. (That doesn’t mean it can’t happen, but we thank God that it hasn’t.) People have connected with Christ through us whom we had never met before – people well beyond our usual geographic radius. Babies were born and were baptized, having all their sins washed away and clothed with Jesus’ perfection and given an inheritance of eternal life in heaven through the merits of Jesus: Audrey Gomez, Matthew Davis, Scarlett Cropper, Dorthy Bergeron, William Hurley, Kiara Bagshaw. Adults and teens were taught the Word of God and they confessed their faith publicly as we gladly received them into the Christian fellowship of our congregation: Spencer & Kimberly Hurley, Nastasya Cropper, Debbie Lux, Joe Kover, Dennis & Janet Curnutt, Breann Davis, Nicholas Goble, Sierra Koopman.

Even as we give thanks for these things, you probably can’t block out the hardships or the sufferings of 2020. So, I want you to liken it to a surgery. Think of having to cutting into someone, inserting things into them, causing them pain in order to heal them. Think of all the successful surgeries performed this year for people connected to our congregation: Timmy Short, Amanda Koopman, Frank Bigan, June Hamblin, Jeff Evey, Kelly Knecht, Loretta Hildebrand, and others. They all had successful surgeries and procedures to give them another day of grace. Give thanks to God for the people from our congregation who got COVID and recovered: Mary Moore, Luther Kromschroeder, Madison Koopman, Dan Goble. Give thanks to God that at least 3.5 million Americans have recovered from COVID, and our public-health authorities think they are many more than that. God has healed millions!

Give thanks to God for so many preachers who moved online in order to reach their members in their homes and now that much more of God’s Word which conveys the forgiveness of sins and brings people from everlasting death to everlasting life in Christ is at the access of people all around the world. Give thanks for all the people in our church who stepped up during this time to use more of their time, talents, and treasures to make sure that people could safely worship and hear that his mercies to us are new every morning. Give thanks that so many people reached out to others to make sure that their physical and spiritual needs were met during this time.

God promises and does indeed work all things for our good. While we wait to see the full good that he works, he also promises that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus: not life nor death, not angels nor demons, not height nor depth, not any powers, not any virus, not any pandemic, not any wildfires, not any race riot, not any presidential election, nothing in all creation can separate any of us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Jeremiah knew this. That's why he wrote for us here in 2020 and for people in every age: I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. (verses 24-26) We thank God for that salvation and that hope that rests solely in him.

2020 has indeed been a dark and difficult year. Yet, we have so many reasons to give thanks. Our LORD stays the same. He keeps bringing us new mercies every single day. He keeps renewing us in the forgiveness he won for us which means that he will never cast us off forever. Though he unwillingly brings grief, he does it to serve our good and to bring others to know his salvation from a pandemic ridden world.

Tomorrow, on Thanksgiving, you don't need to fake being thankful. Take time to wait quietly for the Lord. Reflect on the fact that he never once has broken any of his promises but has always come through. Trust him to come through again and delivers all of us because his mercies are new every morning. His mercies give us countless reasons to give thanks to him day after day. Amen.

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November 25, 2020  
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