

## “Hope Among the Ruins”

“The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

I used to think that ghost towns were strictly fictional, something found only in western movies, until we traveled the Turquoise Trail in New Mexico. This route from Santa Fe to Albuquerque (also known as State Highway 14) is named for the gems that are mined in the area that are featured in jewelry in the southwestern USA. As we were driving along the trail, we noticed in the distance a group of abandoned buildings that are the ruins of Hagan, a ghost town that is one of 400 ghost towns in New Mexico. Hagan was a planned community of adobe buildings constructed around a coal mine that thrived as long as the mine was productive and employing local residents; but once the coal was gone, both the mine and the town were abandoned. Viewing the crumbling remains of Hagan, I wondered about the people who lived in those now-abandoned homes; the lives that were lived in those dwellings, the community that grew up in the harsh desert, the children who were raised there, and the hopes and dreams the people of Hagan had for their future. I also thought of the despair and hopelessness they experienced when the mine closed, when the community was being abandoned, when they were forced to turn their back on these homes and the lives they had shared in that place. While the area was very quiet, I could almost hear the voices of the ghosts of those former residents crying out to those who drove by on the Turquoise Trail: *“Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?”*

Those words are the cries of lament from a people sitting among the ruins of their once-thriving community. The book of Lamentations (found between the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel in the Old Testament) is a poetic response to a national tragedy. Its poems reflect conditions following the invasion and collapse of the nation, particularly of its capital city, and the destruction of economic and social life among its citizens. The setting may have been the period following the Babylonian military assaults on Judah in 597, 587, and 582 BC. Employing the language of lament, in which the people of Israel cry out to God amid suffering and despair, the cries of Lamentation witness to the suffering of the people and their grieving the loss of their home, their community, and their sense of safety and security: *“How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was*

*great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal.*” (Lamentations 1:1).

- “The book of Lamentations was written by and for people who had suffered an unimaginable trauma with personal, political, social, and theological dimensions. What if everything you relied upon for your security, comfort, identity, sense of God’s presence, and hope in the future simply vanished overnight? ... Life suddenly felt chaotic, brutal, meaningless, and hopeless. These emotions and the questions that arose from the traumatic destruction of Jerusalem are reflected in the book of Lamentations.” – Brennan Breed.

The people who cry out amid the ruins of their beloved city demand that those who pass by notice their suffering, that they do not avert their eyes or pretend that they do not see the devastation: *“Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the LORD inflicted on the day of his fierce anger.”* (1:12). The only people who do notice are the mockers who heap shame upon Daughter Zion (a personified Jerusalem ravaged by the Babylonian destruction), compounding her suffering: *“Jerusalem sinned grievously, so she has become a mockery; all who honoured her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; she herself groans, and turns her face away”* (1:8). The people despair that there is no one to comfort them; the Lord has not consoled Daughter Zion, and neither have any of her neighbours. The people find themselves in the depths out of which the people of God lamented in the Psalm 130: *“Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!”* (Psalm 130:1-2). The cries of suffering and despair in the book of Lamentations *“came to be seen as an expression of grief and tragedy at heart-stopping tragedy – and the tragedy that provoked its composition is massive”* (Kathleen O’Connor).

The book of Lamentations is a difficult, painful book, so it is not surprising that it is largely unknown and rarely read in many churches. Yet its cries of lament – along with the psalms of lament that are scattered throughout the Bible – are important words for us to embrace as we deal with the destruction and despair that accompanies our experience of pandemic. While our communities remain largely intact, there have been innumerable losses that have accompanied these fifteen months when so many normal aspects of our lives were either temporarily suspended or permanently destroyed. Millions of people around the world lost their lives, leaving their families in the depths of grief and mourning. Many have recovered but are still dealing with the aftereffects of the virus that medical science is still studying. Many celebrations

– weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, graduations – were either cancelled or radically altered, and our ability to share these milestone moments was taken from us. People who lost loved ones were often left to grieve alone, deprived of the loving embrace of family and friends who could not comfort them in as they walked through valley of the shadow of death. As we look with hope toward a gradual reopening of our community and a return to what was once routine, we are left to mourn and lament what we have lost, and to cry out to those whose lives appear to be unaffected by the suffering that we have endured *“is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?”*

The power of lament is in the language it offers us to cry out amid our deepest moments of hopelessness, knowing that our words are heard by the God who gives us the prayers through which we can take *“everything to God in prayer,”* the God who hears our cries, and whose covenant promise remains steadfast so that God’s people may *“hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.”* (Psalm 130:7-8).

The faith that motivates the suffering people to cry out in lamentations in the assurance their words will be heard by the God who provides the means to bring their experience of anguish before the Lord is heard in today’s First Lesson, in which in a sudden emotional reversal the “strong man” (*geber*) remembers something that reverses his outlook, lifts him up, and gives him hope. The strong man had been expected to defend the city from its attackers; not only did he fail in his duty, but his own suffering has left him without peace, happiness, energy, or hope:

- “I am the one who has seen affliction under the rod of God’s wrath; he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; against me alone he turns his hand, again and again, all day long ... my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, ‘Gone is my glory, and all that I hoped for from the LORD.’” – 3:1, 17-18.

The strong man sits amid the ruins of the city along with his own ruined hopes and confidence: *“The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.”* (3:19-20). But then he remembers the words that he was taught, the faith of his people in God’s steadfast love and the mercies of the Lord:

- “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every

morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’” – 3:21-24.

Such sudden reversals in outlook are typical of the lament form and express confident faith in the face of adversity. The lamenter remembers that the cornerstone of the faith of Israel is unflagging hope in the Lord’s continually renewing loyalty, grace, and mercy. The covenant fidelity (*hesed*) and mercy (*rahamim*) of the Lord do not end but are renewed each day. The sentences of praise to God correspond to the motif of praising God found in psalms of praise (“*Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name ... The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*” – Psalm 103:1, 8). What happens here is that recollection of a former avowal of trust becomes the stimulus for an expression of praise even in moment of deepest despair:

- “Turn, O LORD, save my life; deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love ... The LORD has heard my supplication; the LORD accepts my prayer.” – Psalm 6:4, 9.
- “But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.” – Psalm 13:5-6.
- “But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Turn to me and be gracious to me; give your strength to your servant; save the child of your serving-maid. Show me a sign of your favour, so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame, because you, LORD, have helped me and comforted me.” – Psalm 86:15-17.

Confident of the Lord’s goodness, the sufferer can hope in silence for deliverance bear up under the yoke that weighs the people down; for “*the LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.*” (3:25-26). While the cries of anguish despair will continue in the final chapters of the book (“*Our eyes failed, ever watching vainly for help; we were watching eagerly for a nation that could not save*” – 4:17) the remembrance of the Word of God passed down from their ancestors in faith is the continual font of hope so that even in the depths of their greatest despair the people may live in the assurance that “*you, O LORD, reign for ever; your throne endures to all generations*” (5:19).

- “In times of profound suffering and disorientation, hope comes and goes. It rarely triumphs at first appearance. At such times, psychological confidence may emerge prior to theological or intellectual resolution. Trust of God and of life may return before satisfactory interpretations of tragedy and catastrophe have been created. Survival is a process – halting, reversing, yet ultimately trustworthy for those willing, at least, to look to, to wail at, to stand before the God who sees.” – O’Connor.

While the words of the book of Lamentations may rarely be heard in Sunday worship and while the book may be largely overlooked, its message is at the center of one of our most beloved hymns of faith and hope. “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” was written by Thomas Obediah Chisholm, who suffered from ill health for most of his adult life. Yet his faith gave him the confidence to write hundreds of poems in praise of the Lord, at one point stating that *“God has given me many wonderful displays of his providing care, which have filled me with astonishing gratefulness.”* Even though he suffered ill health for most of his life, Chisholm lived to the age of 94 and wrote more than 1,200 poems that witnessed to his confident faith that *“it is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness.”* It was Chisholm’s friend William Runyan, a Methodist minister in Kansas, who set his words to the music of the beloved hymns that testifies to our confidence in God’s faithfulness and steadfast love even amid life’s most difficult moments:

- “Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father, there is no shadow of turning with thee; thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not, as thou has been, thou forever wilt be. Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see. All I have needed thy hand hath provided – Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.”

This hymn and the words that inspired it was a great source of hope in one of the darkest moments of my life. In the early morning hours of November 12, 1999, I receive the news that my father, Henry Laustsen, had died suddenly in our family home. In the shock of that news, I found myself on the other side of planning a funeral; instead of being the pastor working with a grieving family, now I was a member of those who were cast into mourning. While I contemplated a funeral service unlike any I had experienced, the words of this hymn came to mind; my father’s funeral service in our home church included both the hymn and the words from Lamentations. Since that time, I have frequently read the words of the strong man as I have gathered with families who stand where I was on that cold November

morning in New Jersey. They are the words of a people who mourn, yet who know that in their darkest hours that they are never alone or abandoned, for our Lord is the God of steadfast love who is with us always, whose faithfulness is everlasting, who gives us the confidence to live in trust and hope that nothing can separate us from God's steadfast, loving presence that we know is ours in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. As we stand amid the ruins of human relationships that have been destroyed when the one we love is gone from our sight, we continue to live in the blessed assurance that *"because he lives we shall live also, and that neither death nor life, nor things present nor things to come, will be able to separate us from your love in Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen."* (ELW Funeral Service).

- "The tradition of Jerusalem takes its stand on two basic affirmations concerning the human condition: the first is that suffering is real and is the existential lot of 'fallen' humanity – 'All flesh is grass ... surely the people is grass.' The second is that suffering is not the last word about the human condition and therefore that it need not and must not become our preoccupation, the object of our *ultimate* concern, for 'the Word of our God will stand forever.' [Isaiah 40:6-8]. Both of these affirmations must be sustained if we are to be faithful to this tradition." – Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering*.

As we continued driving the Turquoise Trail, we came upon another ghost town that could have suffered the same fate as Hagan; only there was something very different about Madrid: while it has also fallen into disrepair after its original abandonment, someone saw hope amid those ruins and began an artists' colony which today is the home of several shops and galleries and has made Madrid a popular tourist attraction (as well as the location of the movie *Wild Hogs* that starred John Travolta and Tim Allen). The people of Madrid acknowledge the town's past and the suffering of the people who had to abandon the community but live every day as a reminder that there is still the possibility of new life even in what seems to be a hopeless situation. While we still do not know what awaits us as we come through the pandemic, of what will be lost forever and what will be radically changed, we also know that there is hope even in circumstances of greatest despair, because our faith is rooted in the sure and certain hope that the steadfast love of our Lord abides with us forever, that great is God's faithfulness to God's people, and that therefore we are blessed with *"strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, blessings all mine, with ten thousands beside!"* There is hope among the ruins, because great is the faithfulness of our Lord that abides with us always in the steadfast love that *"bears all things, believes all*

*things, hopes all things, endures all things*” (1 Corinthians 13:7) that is ours in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.