

Scriptures: Lamentations 3:19-26; 2 Timothy 1:1-14

## **God is Working**

Usually I wait until the end of each month to look at lectionary passages and plan sermon series. I haven't done that in the last five weeks, because six weeks ago, I had a chunk of time, looked at all the lectionary readings from the end of August until the start of Advent, and scripted out which passages we would use. So the passage we just heard, from Lamentations, that's a work of God. Selecting that Scripture, and the one we'll look at momentarily from one of Paul's letters – the Holy Spirit's active in it.

Real quick, I want to talk to you a little about Lamentations. It was written by the prophet Jeremiah, after God's people had been carried into exile in Babylon, roughly 600 years before Jesus' birth at Bethlehem. Jeremiah has been known as "the weeping prophet." He experienced tremendous grief at what he saw happening around him to God's people. So he wrote the book of Lamentations. It's a lament – a poetic pouring out of profound grief – over what has become of God's people, of the ruins now in the place where once was the beautiful city of Jerusalem. The really heartbreaking thing is, it all could have been avoided, if the people would have stayed faithful to God. "I remember... and my soul is downcast within me. Yet... I have 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," (Lam. 3:20, 21b, 22-23).

Our New Testament lesson this morning comes from Paul's second letter to Timothy. By the time Paul wrote that book, he had been imprisoned for a second time in Rome. This time he was locked up in a dungeon by Emperor Nero – one of the most horrific rulers the world has ever known. Nero liked having Christians lathered up with lard, impaling them on poles, and lighting them on fire in his backyard as human torches for his wild, sin-filled parties. That's the context of where Paul's writing from today. If you have your Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to 2 Timothy 1:1-14.

### **Read 2 Tim. 1:1-14.**

#### **Timothy's Faith**

Timothy was a younger follower of Jesus Christ who Paul had met and mentored in Ephesus. So, in the introduction of this book, we hear that it's a letter from Paul, "To Timothy, my dear son: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord," (2 Tim. 1:2). After his blessing, Paul tells Timothy that he "constantly" remembers him in his prayers (verse 3), and longs to see Timothy (verse 4). Paul's lonely in prison. He's in solitary confinement, and this letter had to be smuggled out of the prison cell.

"I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also," (verse 5) Paul says next. Paul had met Timothy's family, Luke records in Acts 16. So Paul knew that Timothy's mom was a Jewish Christian, and that his grandma was also a Christian. Several weeks ago, you may recall this, when I preached out of the book of Jeremiah, I made mention about our faith being a family affair. Do you remember that?

Actually, I brought up an additional Scripture passage from Jeremiah where he talked about the worship of idols being a family affair. The kids gathered the firewood, the dads lit the fires, and the moms baked cakes for the Queen of Heaven (Jer. 7:18, paraphrased). Friends, if you think you can bring your kids here for an hour on Sunday morning, and an hour on Wednesday night, and that that's enough religion to get them to Heaven – if you're an adult and you're sitting out there thinking that way about yourself – that these brief times of worship together are enough to get you there, you're wrong.

If you think you can come to New Hope, to any other church, and expect to get to Heaven for doing that, you're wrong. Putting a Sunday face on, coming in, and then going out living like heathens, it won't work. That's religion. Coming to church isn't going to save you. Don't misunderstand me – there are a lot of good things that God does in and through the Church, but in its nearly 2,000 year history, the Church hasn't saved a single soul. Not a one.

### **Rekindle the Gift**

Only Jesus Christ does the saving! Holding on to human preferences and doing what we want to do, instead of what God calls us to do – that's not faith. Living faith is relational. What is the most basic relationship we have as humans? It's family. Real faith then, has to be a family affair. You have to actively practice it at home, so your kids see it, and your grandkids see it. Otherwise, what you give them instead isn't faith, it's religion. Religion isn't going to save anyone. Did religion save the Pharisees or Sadducees? No. Only a living, active faith – an active relationship – with Jesus Christ saves us.

So Paul wants to remind Timothy of a few things, and it's equally applicable to us today as well. "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God," some Bible translations read "to rekindle the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands," (2 Tim. 1:6). What gift is Paul talking about here? He's talking about Timothy's faith – his personal relationship with Jesus Christ through the in-dwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

Paul expands this idea. "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a Spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline," (verse 7). God gives us His own Holy Spirit to take up residence inside us and to lead us, if we're willing to be led. That willingness is the problem. We call it free will. God reigns, but He gives us the freedom to do things as we see fit. The basic problem, from our American point of view anyways, is that we don't like people – or God – telling us what to do.

### **Not Living to Full Potential**

We don't like other people telling us what to do. We don't like to listen, either. We like being "large and in charge," so to speak. And we love being able to have the last word! Let's be honest here – we know this. Along the same lines, we always want to be on the right side. And we'll say we're right, even when we're wrong, because we hate to admit when we make mistakes. It boils down to owning our decisions and taking the subsequent consequences which result from them, whether they're good or bad.

If I pull out of the church parking lot onto Mason Road heading east towards Sidney, and am in the lane farthest from the building, I'm in the right lane. You agree? Now, if I'm in the parking lot of the church, and pull onto Mason Road, heading west, towards Fort Loramie, and am in the lane closest to the building, what lane am I in? I'm in the right lane, aren't I? So being in the "right lane" is a matter of perspective relative to where I am located at a given moment in time.

There are a lot of people, friends, throughout the larger Church who need to spend some time praying, thinking, and reading the whole of Scriptures, but of the New Testament in particular, because I suspect many people are not living into this gift Paul's telling Timothy to rekindle. They're living in fear. I'm not saying they don't have valid concerns or complaints. But they aren't currently living up to their fullest potential.

He gives us His own Spirit of power, love, and self-discipline – by the way, that is an individual gift. The in-dwelling Holy Spirit gives us self-discipline, but if you aren't fully plugged in – if you're letting pride and arrogance, and other sins stick around in your life – you can't have the self-discipline. We can't "have our cake, and eat it, too." When we focus on self instead of others, someone misses out – like the widows in Jerusalem, their needs aren't met.

### **Not Ashamed**

"So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me His prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of His own purpose and grace," (verses 8-9a), Paul tells Timothy. That's a word the Church needs to hear today. Are we doing that? Is our focus truly on Jesus Christ? Or is it on something else?

Today is World Communion Sunday. In just a few moments, we will gather around the Lord's Table to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion with followers of Jesus Christ of every age, every race, every ethnic group, every political persuasion, and susceptible to every sin known to humanity. Yet most of the major Protestant denominations in the United States have been wrecked by internal strife over various reasons in the last twenty or thirty years. Again, to the various perspectives involved, they have or had legitimate concerns. But what does all that fussing accomplish? It results in more denominations, more labels, more name-calling, all based on differences. And what does all the fighting do to the combined witness of the Church in the world today?

The world sees the fighting, the trashing and throwing away of relationships and tells itself, "See, there's no difference between them and us." We live in a throw-away society. If someone says something wrong, we get bent out of shape, walk out, and terminate the relationship. In doing so, we – we're guilty of this friends – we let lost souls slip into eternity because we'd rather bicker within the walls than be focused on the need of the world for Christ, and making Him known to them. And public enemy number one – Satan – sits back and cackles with glee. He loves chaos and strife.

So what do we do? We pray. And keep on praying, for God's wisdom, and His guidance. I hope this past week you've been praying on the topics I sent out Sunday night by email. We keep doing that.

## Grace Given in Christ

And it doesn't hurt to pray right now. Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us, sinners, for being unfaithful to You, and being so focused on self. Amen. We aren't called to be comfortable. We're called to comfort others who need it more than us. We're called to extend grace, even to enemies – even enemies sitting across the aisle, on the left, or right side of it, depending on the perspective from which we view them.

It's "this grace given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel," (verses 9b-10). We're supposed to share it, and extend it, instead of being self-seeking. Has God, through the shed blood of Jesus Christ been good to you, New Hope? I know He has been, and continues to be. So be encouraged!

All the turmoil and upheaval we see spanning the Church, generally speaking, will be corrected – by Jesus when He comes again. In the meantime, we keep focused on Him. Paul tells Timothy, "Of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know Whom I have believed, and am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him for that day," (verses 11-12). That's us, New Hope! He's given us this moment in time to be His herald, to teach others about Him. In doing so, we'll suffer.

I want to close with what Paul says today: "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us," (verses 13-14). Right now, we are suffering. Right now, we weep with the prophet Jeremiah as we begin to see the ruins of what was, what used to be. But, friends, Jesus Christ has taken our shame away – He's made us a new creation in Him, we just need to live into it. And even more, He sends us the Holy Spirit to guide and comfort us. God takes great care of us! His love never fails!

**Prayer:** Lord, make us instruments of Your peace;  
where there is hatred, let us sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
where there is sadness, joy.  
O Divine Master, grant that we may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console,  
to be understood as to understand,  
to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Peace Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi*, public domain (accessed and adapted 10/1/22, from <https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/prayer/traditional-catholic-prayers/saints-prayers/peace-prayer-of-saint-francis/>).