

## Finding Hope

TEXT: Lamentations 3:1-3, 19-24

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on May 16, 2021*

This week's sermon topic was presented to me this way in an email: "I can't help watching the boatloads full of people wandering around out there in our poor world who are never going to get it, who will always take the easy or wrong road, who will always hate and hurt and destroy, and will so often do it in the name of Christianity. ... Sometimes it's hard not to feel hopeless, that [what I do] just isn't enough—like God has turned away, and left us on our own, and that negativity and brutality are going to take over the world."

I can't really argue with that. It's a concern grounded in the reality of our extraordinary times. I often feel the same way. The question that stands behind the concern is how we can find hope when we're feeling drawn toward despair—real hope that's grounded in something beyond a vague sense that everything will be okay in the end.

Hope is absolutely essential to our well-being—mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. It's telling that when Dante wrote *The Divine Comedy*, the inscription above the gates of Hell read, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here." Without hope, life is literally hell. So we're going to spend some time this morning talking about what exactly hope is, why it's so important, and how we can find it when we need it.

While there are Bible passages that mention hope, the one that Laura read is, in my view, the best example of hope in all of Scripture. The book of Lamentations, as its name implies, laments the fate of Jerusalem after Babylon subjected it to a years-long siege before finally burning it to the ground and carting survivors off to Babylon in 587 BCE. It was an event so cataclysmic and horrifying that it forever transformed Israel as a nation and Judaism as a faith. The author of the Lamentations isn't named, but most scholars believe the author to be the prophet, Jeremiah.

The first thing to note about this is that it is a gift to have an entire book of the Bible called Lamentations. About 40% of the Psalms are also Psalms of lament. Lament is not only a real thing; it's a sacred thing—a holy thing. When life comes down hard, when terror falls, when loved ones are snatched before their time, when evil wins a battle, when pandemics cut us off from life in ways too numerous to count; lamenting our situation to God and to others is not only okay—it's encouraged. We have example after example in the Bible. We can't heal until we acknowledge and give attention to the wound, and lament is a sacred tool for doing just that.

We had a small but beautiful example of that after worship here last week. With a focus on difficult family situations in the sermon and a lovely day, people hung around and talked. As I went from group to group to chat, people were openly sharing their family struggles. I got an email later in the day saying, "Now I know I'm not alone." Exactly. That's what lament does. It turns private pain into communal grief and lays it before God for healing and transformation.

The extra beautiful thing about the passage from Lamentations is that Jeremiah pulls no punches in his lament. He actually blames God for his misery and no lightning bolt comes and strikes him. And Jeremiah has been going on like that since the beginning of the book. And yet, in the aftermath of that horror and having ranted and raged and mourned for three chapters; Jeremiah says this:

The thought of my affliction and my homelessness  
is wormwood and gall!

<sup>20</sup> My soul continually thinks of it  
and is bowed down within me.

<sup>21</sup> But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:

<sup>22</sup> The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,<sup>[b]</sup>  
his mercies never come to an end;

<sup>23</sup> they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.

<sup>24</sup> “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,  
“therefore I will hope in him.”

That’s where the wonderful hymn “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” comes from. Like with *It Is Well With My Soul* that we sang earlier, this isn’t wishful thinking and it’s not coming from some privileged person who has never known grief or loss. It’s hope springing up like a phoenix from the ashes of intense pain. Once you know the context, the pivot from despair to hope in verses 19-24 shines more brightly than almost anything else in the Bible.

How did he get there? Jeremiah is not known for his sunny disposition. A jeremiad has come into the English language to refer to a doom and gloom rant that will ensure you don’t get invited to parties. So where did this come from? And, more to the point? How do we get some?

Hope hasn’t been studied a lot, but there is one study by psychologist C.R. Snyder that I find really intriguing. Dr. Snyder makes a distinction between hope and optimism. For the purposes of his study, he defined optimism as the general attitude that everything will all work out. But he defined hope differently. He saw hope as having a sense of agency.

For Dr. Snyder, hopeful people were those who believed they could actually do something to help bring about the desired result and who could see a path to making it happen. With that distinction made, Dr. Snyder developed an instrument to measure hope; and studies using it have found that those who scored high on hope had better academic achievement, athletic achievement, and a better overall sense of well-being—while the general optimist did not get those benefits.

Tying that back to the concern I read at the outset, it makes sense. For at least the person writing to me, and I expect for many others, the feeling of hopelessness is intimately tied to a feeling of helplessness—the sense that we aren’t able to do anything that could really make a difference in the enormous problems that face us.

Jeremiah was able to find hope, in part, by actively placing his trust in God. But as someone with a high profile in Israel, I think Jeremiah also knew that he could use his own faith to help strengthen the faith of others, and thereby bring hope to any who would listen. And Jeremiah’s words have now done that for God’s people for the past 2500 years.

Prayer and remembering the hopeful promises of God’s redemption and restoration can be powerful sources of hope. Of the saints canonized by the Catholic church, one of my absolute favorites is St. Jude. St. Jude is the patron saint of hopeless causes.

You may or may not be someone who prays to saints, but as a matter of psychology, assigning a patron saint of hopeless causes is pure genius. Because if there's someone specifically in charge of fixing hopeless causes, and you can enlist that help through prayer, then by definition there is no hopeless cause. Whether prayers actually go to St. Jude or whether the angel at the divine switchboard re-routes the call, the person who is now feeling more hopeful still gets all the benefits of hope that Dr. Snyder found.

Want an even better way to find hope through prayer? Try changing your petitions from "God, please do something about..." to "God, please show me how to help." Because when God showed up in Jesus in the flesh, that was the whole point. God is fully capable of miracles; but the way God is at work in the world 99.9% of the time is in and through human beings. God incarnate; God in Jesus; God in us. "But I'm just one person!" you cry. And Christianity began with just Jesus and twelve disciples and look where we are.

There's a fun little exercise in finance circles where you ask people to choose if they would prefer to receive a million dollars today or receive one penny today and double the amount every day for 30 days. So, one penny today, two cents tomorrow, four cents the next day, and so on for 30 days. People almost always go for the immediate million. But guess what? If you picked the doubling penny option, at the end of 30 days you would have \$5,368,709.12. If you tacked on just one more day, you'd rake in almost \$11 million.

Now imagine that those pennies are people. Day one it's just you speaking one kind word, planting one flower, helping one person in some way. You recruit one other person to do the same. Now on day two, two of you are doing a good thing and each recruiting one more. By day three there are four of you, and by day thirty there are 5,368,709 people helping the world be a better place. Will there be people who want no part of that? Yes. But change doesn't require everyone, as nice as that would be. Change just requires a shift in critical mass and anyone anywhere can start to build that critical mass with just a single, intentional act.

But let's not confuse "possible" with "easy." Just eight days ago in Murray, Utah, a sixteen-year-old boy was standing outside an apartment complex with a group of other teens, hurling racial slurs at a family of color. Also outside, playing with a group of children, was a 34-year-old white woman named Melissa Wood. Melissa saw the moment and she went to speak to the boy. She calmly asked him to stop and told him what he was doing was disrespectful. He stabbed her six times and she died at the hospital. "Take up your cross and follow me."

That boy was taken into custody and is being tried as an adult. It would be very easy to write him off as one of those people who will never get it and whose hate runs so deep that he can't be reached. Maybe that will turn out to be the case.

But one of the most hopeful messages of Christian faith is the promise that God gives up on no one. From the broad theme of redemption and resurrection to parables that portray God as going off in search of just one lost sheep, we are encouraged to believe that nothing we do in life can put us beyond the reach of God's love.

Can God reach that boy? For a hopeful take and concrete examples of what is possible, I would encourage you to visit [lifeafterhate.org](http://lifeafterhate.org). It's not a religious organization, but its work could not be more sacred.

Founded in 2011 by former members of white supremacy and neo-Nazi groups, their mission is “helping people leave the violent far-right to connect with humanity and lead compassionate lives.” Go to the Team page on their site and watch the TedX talk by Co-founder Sammy Rangel about his former life and how he went from someone so violent they had trouble finding a prison willing to take him to leading this organization.

Life After Hate was awarded a \$400,000 grant by the Department of Homeland Security under the Obama Administration in January of 2017. In June of 2017 the Trump administration stopped the grant. After the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in August of 2017, a crowdfunded grassroots effort raised \$429,500 for the group.

The work of Life After Hate and their supporters isn’t done by optimists. The optimists are still sitting around telling people that everything will work itself out eventually. The critical and life-altering work of Life After Hate is carried out by the hopeful—those who realize that there are things all of us can do, that hope is even more contagious than Covid, and that the way love wins is by us actively practicing it, even and perhaps especially when our emotional response is to return hate for hate. Hope and courage go hand in hand.

The world is full of some true horrors. Its prophets are stoned and crucified. With Jeremiah, we cry out; we rant; we lament; we practically scream at God for allowing the horrors to continue. God continues to receive our lament into the depths of perfect love until we find ourselves saying,

But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:  
The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,  
God’s 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 God.”

Maybe we throw in a prayer to St. Jude. And then we find one other person, and then each of us finds another, and on our way to five million maybe one of us touches the next Sammy Rangel, and another one named—oh—Jeremy, who was never popular at parties, records his transformation; and 2500 years from now a person in despair hears Jeremy’s story and finds permission to lament and, finally, to hope. Amen.