

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
13th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 1, 2018

New Every Morning

Lamentations 3:22-33; Mark 5:21-43

I just returned yesterday from a few days of R&R at Montreat,
where I ran into the Wilcoxon family.
Buz sends his greetings,
as well as his prayers for the Quattlebaum and Fourth Pres families,
for our loss of David.

Some of you may remember that while he was here,
Buz wrote a hymn based on the Ten Commandments.
You might be interested to know that his hymn has been published.
It is included as part of the Service for the Lord's Day
in the new *Presbyterian Book of Common Worship*,
which came out just a few months ago.

I pulled this new book out last week, on Tuesday,
looking for the section on Evening Prayer
to find a closing unison prayer for the Session meeting.
Rather than doing the sensible thing and going to the table of contents,
I just opened the book to about the area where Daily Prayer was found
in the old book.
My guess was accurate, as I opened to the Morning Prayer section,
pleased to find myself in familiar territory.

But then came a moment of displeasure and disorientation
when I turned a few pages and found that the Daily Prayer section ends
after Prayer at Midday.
In the old book,
Daily Prayer went on to include Evening Prayer and Prayer at the End of the Day.
Was there to be no Evening Prayer in the new book?
Have Presbyterians stopped praying after midday?
In these trying times, do we now just turn to drink and debauchery at night,
and forget about God?
Surely, I thought, there would be some explanation
in the Introduction to the Daily Prayer section,
so I thumbed back to see what defense the editors might offer.

As I turned pages back to this Introduction,
I made a discovery that taught me a lesson in not jumping to conclusions.
The editors had reordered the section on Daily Prayer
to make a profoundly biblical theological statement:

The new Daily Prayer section begins with Evening Prayer,
moves through Prayer at the End of the Day,
then to Morning Prayer and concludes with Midday Prayer.
This, after all, is the biblical pattern.

Recall that in the story of creation in Genesis 1,
we hear the refrain, “and it was evening, and it was morning, the first day...
and it was evening, and it was morning, the second day...”
and so on.

Remember also, in the story of Jesus’ passion in the Gospels,
we move from the shadows of Good Friday,
through the deadly quiet of Saturday waiting,
and the predawn darkness of the women’s dutiful walk to the tomb,
and finally to the brilliance of resurrection morning.

The pattern of the Christian gospel is to move from darkness to light,
from suffering to rejoicing,
from destruction to new creation,
from death to resurrection.

And so the Editors sought to guide our Daily Prayer by this pattern,
so that each 24 hour period of prayer begins as the sun is going down,
and ends — or culminates, rather — as the sun is rising on the new day.

As T. S. Eliot famously penned: “In the end is my beginning.”

The book of Lamentations is exactly what the name advertises — lamentation.
What we have read this morning in chapter 3 is the exception to that theme,
a moment of relief that rises out of the deep darkness of grief
and gives voice to hope that grief is not the end,
but that God will create a new beginning.
*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 context of this confidence in God’s faithfulness and enduring mercy
is the writer’s relentless experience of loss and grief.
“This arresting statement of faith seems, for the moment,
to wipe away the hopelessness and suffering
of the first twenty lines of the poem.”¹
Here is a sudden and striking reversal
that gives expression to the theological dilemma being experienced by
the speaker and his community.

Sometimes when we must suffer, we have a sense that God has imposed this suffering on us.
We feel we must be suffering because we have sinned,
because we have wandered away from the good path,
and we are now being punished, disciplined, corrected.

This can be a dangerous theological assertion to make
given the brutality of much of the suffering in today’s world.
Should one who is suffering sudden loss and grief and pain consider that God,
like the heavenly attorney general,
has suddenly separated the child from the parent
because the parent crossed the border illegally?

We simply should have known the rules and followed them.
And now that we haven't, there are consequences. The law is the law.
But is this how God treats God's beloved people?

According to Lamentations, it is not the whole picture.
We bear up under suffering, even if God has imposed it,
because we believe God has more in store for us on the other side:
*It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth,
to sit alone in silence when the Lord has imposed it,
to put one's mouth to the dust (there may yet be hope),
to give one's cheek to the smiter, and be filled with insults.
For the Lord will not reject forever.
Although he causes grief,
he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love;
for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.*

It is as if God is bound by the law of cause and effect, of action and consequence,
as if God's hands are tied by the moral law
so that God is unable to remove the suffering one has brought upon oneself.
This is hard to accept, given that often the only charge that can be leveled against us
is that we are human beings, behaving the way human beings behave.

The theological dilemma of this lamenter is acute.
And, I'm sorry to tell you — especially if you prefer cut-and-dried answers —
the dilemma is not cleanly resolved in our reading,
nor in the book of Lamentations as a whole,
nor in the scriptures as a whole.
The scriptures are messy,
because life as human beings in relation to God is messy.

Nevertheless, even in the intellectual ambiguity required by this passage
the poet of Lamentations does offer us a place to stand,
or rather a place to sit and be, in the midst of deep suffering.
*The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."
The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.
It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.*

Hope and trust involved waiting.
Sitting in silence and feeling the full weight of grief and pain.
Discovering that the full weight of grief and pain will not kill us
as hellish as it may be,
for after the dark night of agony,
the sun will rise and a new day will dawn,
and we will experience what has always been true:
*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.*

This is the one point in the poem that the writer speaks directly to God.
The rest of the poem is written in the third person about God...*his mercies*.
But now as the sun is rising, and God's presence is palpably felt,
the poet becomes a person of prayer: *You...Great is your faithfulness.*

This morning we have met another who has suffered in silence.
The woman who silently and with great stealth, slips up behind Jesus,
and ever so slightly touches his cloak.
It turns out she has been sitting in her darkness for 12 years.
For 12 years she has been suffering from hemorrhages
which, whatever their cause,
had resulted in her exclusion from the Jewish community as unclean.
Surely, the Jewish leaders didn't want to impose such a harsh restriction,
but a woman with a flow of blood was considered unclean.
The law is the law and they were only enforcing it.

We don't know anything about how she endured her suffering,
whether she did so in patience and silence, or with loud lamentation.
In this episode, she doesn't speak to anyone at all, other than to herself,
which gives the impression that she was living a life of utter isolation,
keeping her own counsel.
"If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well."
But after her long waiting, she is healed.
And Jesus commends her for her faith.
After her long night of endurance, the sun has broken over the horizon.
And the mercy of the Lord is new for her.

Such suffering is no respecter of status.
Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, also takes a lesson in waiting and hoping.
Have you ever had to live with such anxious waiting that an hour seems like a year,
when the seconds tick off the clock so loudly
that the passage of time is all you can hear.
Jairus, pleading with the Lord for help, must wait in agony. Wait and hope.
And as he waits for the Lord, who is busy blessing someone else,
he gets the dreaded news that his daughter has died.
But even at this point of agonizing news,
Jesus' response could come straight from the book of Lamentations,
the book of faithful waiting:
Do not fear, only believe.

The night is dark, but the sun will rise. And God's mercies are new every morning.
God's faithfulness is sure.
Do not fear, only believe.
And your faith will make you well.

So we come this morning to the table of our waiting.

At this table we experience the dark shadows of Good Friday,
and the long, agonizing quiet of Saturday waiting,
and the anticipation of pre-dawn darkness,
and the sudden brilliance of resurrection
as the light of God's mercy
breaks over the horizon of the world.

The pattern has been set...
And there was evening, and there was morning, a new day...

The bread that is broken is the bread of life.
The cup of suffering is the cup of salvation.

Come, taste and see that the Lord is good.
Great is God's faithfulness.

¹ Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Lamentations," *New Interpreter's Bible: Volume VI* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), p. 1051