

“Great Is Your Faithfulness”

What has happened to our country? How could we have gotten to this point? Our leaders have failed us. Our heroes have been taken away from us. Enemies threaten. It's really hard to imagine that things could get any worse.

Does that sum up how many people feel about 2016? Did you find something in there to agree with? Maybe as you think back on 2016, you recall the contentious elections. People on both ends, and in the middle, of the political spectrum have found much to be disappointed in through this election cycle. And, yes, leaders in general have proven themselves to be less than admirable in many ways.

Or maybe you think of what seems to be the big news lately—just how many celebrities have passed away this year. I think it is pretty difficult to really compare one year to another based on the amount or the impact of celebrity deaths, but there have certainly been a number of high profile examples in recent months.

And we could continue to list the shortcomings of the year that is so very close to its finish line this evening. There remains a threat from terrorists who would seek to inflict harm and damage. We have again witnessed natural disasters. We have seen Christians persecuted in some parts of the world. And all around us we find sinful behavior not only tolerated but even celebrated by many in our society. In some ways, it is hard to imagine that God would allow things to get much worse before he puts an end to them.

As true as all of these things may be about our current situation, the complaints with which I began the sermon this evening were not intended to portray only, or even primarily, the situation today. What I really had in mind was the time period just after the destruction of the city of Jerusalem in the Old Testament, in 587 or 586 BC. This was the time period in which the book of the Bible was written that we call Lamentations, likely by the prophet Jeremiah. And we refer to that book as Lamentations because for much of the book, the prophet laments over what has happened to his country, to his home, to God's own Old Testament capital city, Jerusalem. He looks over the ruins of the city and of the Temple. He sees the bustling town now reduced to a ghost town. The streets are quiet and empty. The shrieks of fear and terror have subsided, but only because the people have been killed or captured. The best and brightest of Judah had long since been taken into exile in Babylon, and after a bit of additional political maneuvering, Babylon had finished the job and brought that destruction on the city.

What has happened to our country? How could we have gotten to this point? Our leaders have failed us. Our heroes have been taken away from us. Enemies threaten. It's really hard to imagine that things could get any worse. Or listen to a few of the poetic verses from Lamentations itself:

“How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations! She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave” (Lamentations 1:1). “The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to her appointed feasts. All her gateways are desolate, her priests groan, her maidens grieve, and she is in bitter anguish” (1:4). “Look, O Lord, and consider: Whom have you ever treated like this? Should women eat their offspring, the children they have cared for? Should priest and prophet be killed in the sanctuary of the Lord? Young and old lie together in the dust of the streets; my young men and maidens have fallen by the sword. You have slain them in the day of your anger; you have slaughtered them without pity.” (2:20–21).

Judah had reached that point because of her unfaithfulness to God. For centuries God had pleaded with his people to obey his decrees. He had invited them to remain true to him and to enjoy the rich blessings that he would provide. But again and again they turned away. Again and again they turned to other gods. They sought their own pleasure and forgot God's commands. And, ultimately, after bearing patiently with them for many years, after countless warnings and threats, God carried out his harsh punishment against their sinfulness. Babylon carried them away and destroyed their land.

But even in the midst of all this, in the midst of his lament over the fallen city, the prophet pronounces some of the most comforting words in all of Scripture. These words gave the people of Judah the only comfort they could have in their sorrow, and they still comfort and encourage us today. Lamentations 3:22-23: **“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.”**

For Judah, this was comfort even in the face of desolation. For those who looked over the wreckage that had been Jerusalem, God’s faithfulness meant their own lives had been spared. For those who had been deported to Babylon as captives, God’s faithfulness meant that he was still with them. For them and for the world, God was still preserving a remnant of his faithful people through whom he would keep his promise to send a Savior. It was very clear. The destruction of Jerusalem was well-deserved. But because of God’s love and his mercy, that destruction was not complete. It was not the hellish punishment that rebellion against God ultimately deserves.

What good news that is for us! In all our troubles, in all our sorrows, God comforts us. We have heard throughout our service today how God calls us to repentance. He shows us our sinfulness and warns us against the consequences. He calls us to produce fruits in keeping with repentance. But our comfort is not in what we do. It is the Lord and his love and his faithfulness. As we sit at the end of one year about to begin another, there he is with us. There he is with his love, with his compassion, with his faithfulness. He will never turn away from his promises, day after day, year after year. We have a Savior from our sins. We have a future in heaven with him. We have everything we truly need.

And that means that even if this has been a challenging year for you in some or in many ways, if it has been difficult, if it has meant for you the loss of loved ones or financial struggles, or any other difficulties, God’s faithfulness is great. His love never fails. If the year to come is full of uncertainty, and it is for all of us whether we are prepared to admit it or not, we can rest assured that God will be with us to bless us. His mercies are new every morning.

The fact is that we have had many blessings to appreciate in the past year. We are not in the same situation as the lamenting prophet. We are not looking on the desolation of our home and our country. We have not suffered to the point of those people who endured the siege in Jerusalem and who were not even confident that they would find their next meal. We still live in a country that has enjoyed many blessings from God in terms of both freedoms and prosperity.

There is a danger to be aware of. The danger is that we focus on the wrong things, that we focus on our wealth or other blessings instead of those things that are truly important. The danger is that we become complacent and we stop being concerned with God and his will and his Word.

It took disaster to capture the attention of the people of Judah. They did not listen to God until he sent them away in exile, and even then many did not. In many cases, the sorrows and difficulties of this life do the same for us. They help us to put things into perspective. They help us to focus on what is really important. But in every case, we know of God’s love and his faithfulness only because he has revealed them to us. We know of God’s love for us only through his Word in the Bible.

That is why we have gathered here, to hear of God’s love in his Word and to receive his grace in the sacrament. That is why we plan to continue meeting together regularly throughout the New Year, to grow together in faith as we focus on that amazing love of God.

May he bless us to always say along with the prophet: **“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.”**