

FROM DESPAIR TO HOPE

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Sept. 18, 2016
Based on Lamentations 3:1-12, 16-26; II Corinthians 1:8-10***

The sermon this morning is the fourth in a sermon series entitled, “Navigating the Storm—How to Journey in Faith through Troubling Times.” The series began with a story of people literally navigating through a storm—the story of Noah and his family on the ark—and next Sunday we will return to another Biblical story that takes place on a boat in a storm—the story of the disciples caught on a storm in the Sea of Galilee. But the image of navigating a storm describes numerous circumstances in life. Our Old Testament passage this morning from the book of Lamentations came out of one of the stormiest times in the history of Israel—the conquest of the land of Judah by the Babylonian Empire and the exile of the people into Babylon. Bearing the brunt of the storm was the prophet Jeremiah. His story can be very helpful for us when we are dealing with storms in our own lives. Let us begin with a moment of prayer—

In America’s Got Talent this year, there was an act in which a guy threw flaming knives that landed within inches of his wife. You wonder why she signed on for this job.

So you might wonder why Jeremiah signed on for the job he got, since what he experienced was like getting flaming knives thrown straight at him. Jeremiah became a prophet during the worst of times in the history of the people of Israel. It was around the year 600 B.C. The land of Judah, where Jeremiah lived in the capital city of Jerusalem, was being seriously threatened by the rapidly expanding Babylonian Empire; and the message God gave Jeremiah was that Babylon was going to conquer Judah—the people just needed to give up. So Jeremiah was called to look toward what was coming and to shout out, “We’re going to lose. We’re going to lose.” It was like being a sportswriter for the Cleveland Browns. His message was not popular—especially because he not only said that disaster was coming; he said that the reason for the disaster was because the people in their sinfulness had forgotten God. No one likes to be told they are both guilty and doomed. Flaming knives of hatred, rejection, and violence were thrown Jeremiah’s way. He was despised by most of his fellow citizens, and he was literally beaten up on account of his message.

Then Jerusalem fell to the armies of Babylon. That proved Jeremiah’s words to be true, but it did not make him happy; because Jerusalem was his town, and the temple was his church, and it was all broken and burned to the ground by the Babylonians. Many of the people of Jerusalem were carried off into exile, which pained Jeremiah all the more, for although they had oft mistreated him, he deeply cared for them.

In the rubble of Jerusalem, it seemed to Jeremiah that his whole life journey had been for nought. He was a prophet for God, but what had come of it? Everything was in ruins; it felt as though God was beating him up and slinging arrows at him. In the depths of despair, Jeremiah wrote the words of Lamentations that we heard this morning:

“I am one who has seen affliction . . . God has besieged and enveloped me with

bitterness and tribulation . . . he has made me desolate; he bent his bow and set me as a mark for his arrow . . . He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes; my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is. So I say, 'Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the Lord.'" (Lamentations 3:1,5,12, 16-18)

If you ever have times of despair, you can identify with Jeremiah. Jeremiah's story makes plain that even people of great faith and commitment to God can have times when they are feeling very low. Indeed there is a direct trajectory from Jeremiah's feelings of anguish and abandonment to the experience of Jesus on the cross, who went through extreme rejection, pain, brutality, and the sense of being distant from God, as he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The Bible never suggests that the life of faith will be all sweetness and light. There are times when we may find ourselves in the darkness of the storm.

But even though we may be in the midst of great trouble, and may feel at times as if God is absent, in fact God is with us; and we can find new hope as we look to God. This is what Jeremiah does. In the depths of trouble, he reaches to the core of his faith and says,

"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.'" (Lamentations 3:21-24)

In a yet greater way on the cross, as Jesus says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," he is actually quoting Psalm 22—a psalm which concludes with a powerful statement of trust in God and a confidence in God's salvation.

So in our own lives, a time of trial and despair can become an occasion when we move to a yet stronger connection with God, as we lift our hearts to God in faith. The apostle Paul testified to precisely this experience of finding God's strength in the depths of trouble in that passage we heard from II Corinthians. He referred to a very trying time that he had in the Roman province of Asia, located in what we now call Asia Minor or Turkey, [*We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. II Corinthians 1:8a*]; and he said, "We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again." (II Corinthians 1:8b-10)

Tough times have a way of stripping away the illusions of life. We realize that many of the things we assumed were solid are in fact transitory, and we realize that our own strength is woefully insufficient. But perhaps, like Paul, our fragile circumstances move us to put our trust all the more in God; and if so, we become receptive to God's deliverance, and can find ourselves lifted up afresh in the power of God's grace.

I'm reminded of an old story about a family of eagles. It seems that baby eagle, when he was big enough to fly, was still afraid to leave the security of the nest. Daddy eagle knew, though, that the apparent security of the nest was only an illusion; there was no food in the

nest, and eventually a strong wind could blow the nest from its perch. Eagles needed to be able to fly out from the nest. But no matter how hard Daddy eagle tried to get baby eagle to fly, baby eagle refused to budge. Finally, one day, having become thoroughly disgusted, Daddy eagle came down and just booted baby eagle right out of the nest. As baby eagle plummeted towards the ground, he decided that it was time to learn to fly. Overwhelmed with terror, he stretched his wings, and suddenly felt a rush of wind braking his fall. He flapped his wings, once, twice, then again and again, and felt himself ascend upward, up past the nest, and he soared up into the clouds.

You and I, like that eagle, may also prefer the security of the nest; we prefer what seems safe and familiar, even when safety is only an illusion. But sometimes the harsh winds of difficulty and tragedy blast us out of the nest, and we find ourselves plummeting in despair. We may think it's the worst thing that ever happened to us. But it may be just that moment which will move us to stretch the wings of faith; as we do, we will find ourselves borne up by the Spirit of God.

Of course, God is rather different from the Daddy eagle in the story. I don't believe that God intentionally boots us out into thin air, nor does God just stand back passively, while we're falling, to see if we'll manage to come to faith. The true character of God is revealed to us in Jesus Christ, who came to humanity in the midst of our fall, to rescue us and enable to rise up into new life. If ever we find ourselves in a tailspin in life, we can look to Christ who is with us—to embrace us with grace, to strengthen us anew, and to empower us to live as people of God.

During the Olympics this past summer, I was watching the platform diving, wondering how the divers kept from smashing their head or their foot against the platform when doing those flips; and I was reminded of one of the most inspiring Olympic stories of all time, which occurred in the platform diving competition of the 2000 summer Olympics. One of the U.S. women's divers that year was Laura Wilkinson, who was in Rio this summer as a correspondent for NBC. Back then, in the Sydney Olympics, she was a 22 year old in the 10 meter diving competition. A few months before, in March, while practicing her dives, Laura had smashed her foot against the diving platform during a somersault, and had broken it in three places. It is pretty difficult to do high dives with a broken foot. Concerning the accident, Laura recalled, "The day I broke my foot I thought my dreams were over. I thought everything was lost at that moment, but God moves in mysterious ways." Laura trusted that somehow God would be at work through all this, and she persevered to struggle back from her injury. Before every dive, she would utter the words of Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." By the time of the Olympics, Laura was still wearing a special boot on her foot while climbing the ladder of the diving platform, because otherwise the rungs would cause great pain in her foot. Nobody gave her a chance to win the gold, especially against the phenomenal world-champion Chinese diver, Fu Mingxia, who had won the gold in the two previous Olympics. But in the competition, Laura did one masterful dive after another. Her second-to-last dive involved the same movement off the platform as

when she broke her foot. Laura said that that dive "took a little something extra from God, and God was there for me today." Laura won the gold medal. When an NBC reporter interviewed her immediately after the competition, the first words Laura said were, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

There are times in life when we may feel like Jeremiah—overwhelmed with trouble and feeling well nigh hopeless. But we find real strength and vision when we remember that Christ is with us, and we open ourselves to His Spirit in faith. Jeremiah put it well as he said, "The Lord is my portion, says my soul; therefore I will hope in Him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord." (Lamentations 3:24,26)