

Pentecost 17, Lectionary 27
Sunday, October 2, 2022
Epiphany 55th Anniversary

You know that time, you know those times, when there's a party, like when you're gathered at a Thanksgiving table or a Christmas feast, and someone does something to drag down the mood? Maybe it's that weird brother in law who's always been, well, kind of a brother-in-law type, or maybe it's a cranky aunt who sees the negative in everything...I don't know, maybe that's never happened at your party. But today, I'm going to be that weird brother in law or cranky aunt and preach on that first reading from Lamentations. Now in case you don't know, Lamentations is a small little book tucked quietly in right between Jeremiah and Ezekiel. It's a series of poems written by an anonymous someone who is crying out in grief and sorrow over the destruction of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem... Basically the destruction of everything that the people hold dear. It's quite peppy, really: The first words of the book are "How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow has the city become, the city that was once great!" The last words, five chapters later, are "Restore us to yourself, O LORD...unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure."

If your hope is stretching or breaking, stay away from this book. Or if your hope is stretching or breaking, make friends with this book. Because right here, in the middle of the Bible, there is good news that we are not alone, and that lament is always at home in the presence of God.

Happy Anniversary!

It is a strange place to begin today. We're celebrating fifty-five years of being the church in this place, where we've worshipped and played and prayed and worked. We've reached out into the community and tried to understand how to serve our neighbours here; we've taught our kids and tried to teach our adults; we've had giveaways and brunches and Christmas carols in the parking lot. We've played broomball with Muslims on an icy December parking lot and then shared a meal together.

Some of us met and married our beloved in this place, and how many of us have been baptized or confirmed or both here? We've sung in choirs and hung drywall and had paint nights and Sunday School programs. Fifty five Christmas trees have gone up and I at least have not heard of one falling down. We've had a handful of pastors, each of which has sometimes been kind of a handful. We've done traditional things and sung ancient songs, and they all warm our hearts and our faith with their connection to practices we've had for centuries now...or they make us scratch our heads and say "Why are we still doing this?" We've done new things and sung songs that someone wrote a year or two ago and that lift us up with their fresh new sound...and that made a few of us probably kind of wonder why we're trying this or that. We've been quick to say – come on, you've said it or heard it – "We haven't done it like that before."

But whatever we've done, we've done it all together. All of our staying the same and all of our changing has happened together; we've had fifty-five years together and we have been a community here at Epiphany...we've cared for each other and grown close and some of us have been through so much together. For some of us our very best friends in the world are right here with us in this

place...sitting right beside us or two rows up and three Winnipeggers to the left. Epiphany's just kind of in your bones; in your blood.

For those of us who are newer around here, we might be getting a deeper sense every week or every day of what is good and blessed about the place and the people called Epiphany. We've been joining in and being drawn in together.

Almost every time we've worshiped here the last words we've heard have been along the lines of "Go in peace. Serve your neighbour. Serve the Lord." And together – even when we're apart - we've tried in our own ways to bring good news of God's unending love into the worlds where we live. The Spirit calls us here whenever we come and gather, and the Spirit sends us out, following Jesus into a broken and beloved world.

It's really been good. Epiphany and our life together at Epiphany has been a gift and a blessing. There is gratitude flowing so deeply here today.

Happy Anniversary!

So what's with that Lamentations thing? We could have ignored it and no one would have noticed.

But we have had lamenting to do too, haven't we? Some of us have sat in this very place and said goodbye to people we have loved so dearly. Moms, dads, partners, kids, friends.... And this place and this community have carried our grieving and given us a place where our lamenting is OK.

There's been other things as well. That meeting that kind of went sideways or an argument that stirred up so much hurt that lasted so long....we've been a part of lament here too.

On those days when we have stood up and confessed our sin we have joined together in a kind of lament. Every time we have done that we have spoken honestly about the ways that our relationships are broken. Sometimes we've said "We have not loved you, O God, with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves." Or we have confessed that we have not cared for creation like we should, or we have thought more of ourselves and our own wants than we have of the person down the street or far away. Sometimes we might do it with scarcely a thought, but we have lamented the ways that we have hurt rather than healed.

And of course there have been those other troubles we have shared. There was that split eleven years ago when we couldn't agree about the place of our LGBTQ members in the church. And our division over that seemed – or almost seemed – to be stronger than our love for one another. I wasn't here but I can still hear echoes of the hurt in some of your voices now and then. Those of us who stayed and those who left learned in a very real way that when you follow your conscience, and when you try to act in the most faithful way you can, you can still find yourself deep in lament.

And since March 2020 we've had something to lament in so many ways as we've figure out how to live and we've worried whether we'll survive this pandemic that still keeps hanging on.

Maybe it's good that the first words from Scripture that we heard today come from that little book called Lamentations, because that has been a part of our life together. And lament and celebration are both at home in this place and at home with our God.

But then right there, from that same little book, we heard another word to keep us company today: “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of God never ceases, God’s mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “God is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in God.”

“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of God never ceases, God’s mercies never come to an end.” This is the news we hear all year as we gather here. At Advent: Jesus is coming! Because the steadfast love of God never ceases, and God’s mercies never come to an end. Christmas: Unto you is born a child, a saviour, because the steadfast love of God never ceases, God’s mercies never come to an end. In the days after Epiphany: The light still shines when it is so hard to see the way, because the steadfast love of God never ceases, God’s mercies never come to an end. Lent: Your sins are forgiven, because the steadfast love of God never ceases, God’s mercies never come to an end. Easter: Christ is Risen! Because the steadfast love of God never ceases, God’s mercies never come to an end.

Through all of our days, there is steadfast love and mercy that has walked with us and carried us along. There is steadfast love and mercy that has grieved with us and has celebrated so much with us. There is steadfast love and mercy surrounding us here, inviting us to a table of communion, gathering us around tables at lunch, and walking out into this new week with us. There is steadfast love and mercy that will walk with us and carry us along into and through whatever lament and joy and wonder and struggle and grace and life are coming our way. Happy Anniversary. AMEN.