

“How Do You Measure Faith”- October 6, 2019
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Worldwide Communion
Lamentation 3, Luke 17

The Lamentations of Jeremiah, a mere 5 chapters in length, are tucked in behind the great prophet’s book. They are seldom read in our lectionary. And yet they easily speak to the atrocious, horrific evils that are a part of our world as much as they were then. The days and nights of our global world are stained by bloodshed and violence in every corner, as well as at home. This passage lifts up the anger and dismay as armed forces invade countries, destroying cities and homes.

I think of Aleppo in Syria. When I first met the Fandi family in 2015, our first family sponsored by Stouffville Cares, the Assad regime was bombing their home town of Aleppo to bits. I asked them about it and Faisal showed me his cell phone with photos from friends back in Syria where one side of the photo showed the city with its ancient beauty, the second showing the buildings now in ruin, bombed out apartments, and streets filled with rubble. I think of Lamentations: “How lonely sits the city that once was full of people.” (Lam 1:1)

Aleppo is one of the oldest cities in the world, dating back to the sixth century BC and it is the largest city in northern Syria. Alexander the Great conquered the city in 333 BC. It was the end of the Silk Route and ran from Asia through Mesopotamia. In 2012, Aleppo could not escape the destruction of the Syrian Civil War, and the Assad regime destroyed Aleppo in its unrelenting search for rebels. It lies in ruins. The Civil War ended in 2016 when the Assad regime recaptured Aleppo, and the resistance movement was destroyed. Here is the parallel to Lamentations, Chapter 1: “The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to the festivals; all her gates are desolate, her priests groan; her young girls grieve, and her lot is bitter.” (Lm 1:4)

Then we come to these words in our Lamentation text, “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.” (Lam 3:21) Something has changed. The writer continues, “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning: Great is thy faithfulness.” Like the hymn we’ll sing at the close of worship, ‘Great is thy faithfulness, morning by morning new mercies I see’, the writer has remembered something in his life that re-engaged his faith. Jeremiah adds, “The Lord is my portion!” as if saying that God is everything that he will ever need. This is what he calls to mind. This is what brings him hope.

And yet, if you turn to the last two verses of Lamentations 5:21-22, it would seem he has forgotten all that he recalled; hope is not his: “Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old – unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure.” Our faith seems to flicker, like a flame. Sometimes it burns bright, sometimes it is almost out. Yet the source of the light will never be extinguished. For the light is Christ.

The disciples in our Luke reading are asking Jesus for more faith, to see them through what they know will be difficult times ahead. Jesus has been outlining to them the pitfalls of the road ahead. And panicking, for maybe they don’t think they’re nearly faith filled enough to answer this call, they say to Jesus, “Increase our faith!” And Jesus answers them, “if you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea,” and it would obey you.” The mustard seed image is also found in Matthew 17:20 “For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”

Faith the size of a mustard seed is enough faith for anything you might face. Jesus says that with faith the size of a mustard seed, you will be able to move a mountain, or transplant a mulberry tree into the sea. Faith packed into a teeny tiny parcel of a seed is enough, says Jesus. So why do the disciples feel it isn’t enough? Why do we sometimes think our faith isn’t enough?

Yesterday, I conducted an interment of ashes for a woman whose family I had met a year and a half earlier at the Celebration of Life service. Twenty people, including about 5 children, stood in a circle around the tombstone in the cemetery. The daughter drew the drawstrings tight on the bag that held the urn of her mother’s ashes, and slowly she lowered the urn into the waiting ground. Her husband played a song on his phone, about cardinals. She crouched on the ground, her hand holding the drawstring to the bag. She couldn’t let go of the drawstring. She didn’t want to let go of her mom. Her father came over and softly laid his hand on her back, to give her strength, to let her know she was not alone. I left the family there in their love, eyes wet with tears, and walked slowly back to my car. I was thinking of the line from today’s scripture – ‘increase our faith’. In that moment, I didn’t want to ask God to increase my faith, to make it more. I thought – you know God, sometimes I don’t want more faith – because it hurts. It seems the more faith I have, the deeper I go, and the deeper I go, the more it can hurt. Hurt is hurt, no matter how much faith you think you have or don’t have.

Yes, through my faith, I see the grieving of the broken hearts, I see a daughter not wanting to let go of her mom. And my heart aches. I wish that the perfect love that Jesus gave to this world – a love that redeems, a love that lifts up, a love that heals, a love that protects like a shepherd with his sheep – could take away the pain of what I had witnessed a few minutes ago. I know that God is there. I have done this service of interment hundreds of times. The words of the service give grief a container of hope: The love which created us, the love which redeems us, and the love which sustains is very much present with us now.

Could I have felt the woman's sadness even more if my faith was bigger than a mustard seed? No. My faith, the size of the mustard seed, is just as able to feel the sorrow, as if it were a100 times bigger.

Some will say that faith grows. That it deepens. The disciples wanted more of it. But once the gift of faith is given, as in 'that hour we first believed', it's a one time unlocking of our hearts to let Jesus in. We don't do it over and over - because the gift once given is all that is needed. It doesn't have a shelf-life. It doesn't expire. It doesn't diminish. It is the same today as on the day it was freely given – to you.

A commentary wrote, "We hear Jesus answer the disciples, "Why, you do not need more faith," he says. "Even this much faith (his thumb and forefinger inching together) is enough!" If we hear Jesus speak with the voice of love, we hear him telling the disciples that, in fact, they already have enough faith to do whatever is required of them."¹ "He tells them, through image and story, "You already have the faith you need. Now fulfill its purpose: live it."²

You already have the faith you need. Now go out into the world, and live it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 4, Pastoral Perspective, 142.

² Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 4, Pastoral Perspective, 142.