

*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." The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him; let him put his mouth in the dust—there may yet be hope; let him give his cheek to the one who strikes, and let him be filled with insults. For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men.*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Columbine. Tiananmen Square. The World Trade Center. Residential Schools. The names have become seared in the collective consciousness of our society. Each of them represents some great tragedy, some terrible loss of life. In Columbine, the unimaginable happened, as two students go on a murderous rampage, killing 12 of their fellow students, injuring more than 20 others. In Tiananmen Square in China, a pro-democracy demonstration results in a backlash from government forces that results in a death toll estimated to be 2,500, with up to another 10,000 wounded. In the World Trade Center attack, another 2,974 people died. The residential school crisis has revealed not only those 215 children buried in Kamloops, but even more in Saskatchewan, with the expectation that more unmarked graves of forgotten children are yet to be discovered.

Sadly, we know they are not isolated incidents. The events of Columbine have been repeated in places like Virginia and even in Montreal. Massacres have taken place in Syria, Rwanda, in Thailand, and in other areas of the world. Terrorist attacks have resulted in great loss of life at various times and in many places. Hatred, fear and bigotry lead to strife and death again and again in our world.

As hard as it is to understand the loss we see in these events, it is just as hard (maybe even harder) to cope with small, tragic events too. We feel both horror and pain at the death of a child at the hands of some evil individual. We mourn when a friend or neighbour dies in a car accident. Of course, the hardest of all things to deal with are the 'personal tragedies': the loss that comes when those we love—or when we, ourselves—are affected by illness, suffering, or death.

Many, many years ago the prophet Habakkuk cried out to the Lord, saying: *O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.* (Habakkuk 1:2-3 - ESV) Scripture tells us that *What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.* (Ecclesiastes 1:9 - ESV). The sorrows of this world have been repeated over and over again. They will be repeated until the day when the Lord comes in His glory to deliver us from the pain and suffering of this sinful world.

Does this mean we simply give up in despair? How do we cope with the tragedy, the pain, the sorrow we see all around us? How do we cope with our personal tragedies? Where is God in all of this? The answer is not a cliché, or a mere cure-all. It may not be the logical or measurable answer that the world seeks. But we find our strength to face troubled days—and all our days—through faith in Christ; the faith that enables us to say with Jeremiah: *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."*

If there is one thing that has come out of the last 16 months of dealing with COVID, it is the collision between reality and our expectations. We expect life to be smooth sailing, a joyful sea cruise on a wonderful, calm, sunny day. Unfortunately the normal course of our lives is disrupted by the storms of life; by the problems and worries that leave us with all sorts of unanswered questions. Jeremiah recognized that those questions are nothing new; they are as old as sin itself. They are the same questions that confronted that woman in our Gospel lesson, who struggled with that discharge of blood for 12 years. In Jewish thought, a person who suffered was getting what they deserved. It was divine justice. But then, the woman would ask what so many have asked: if God loves us, how can he let bad things happen in our lives? It can't be that God was angry with that woman—remember that Jesus praises the woman for her faith. And what about Jairus? It was devastating to watch his daughter's life slip away as she became sicker and weaker. He seemed hopeful as Jesus accompanies him to his home. But as they travel

he is saddened to find out that they are too late and his grief is already starting to overwhelm him. Jesus doesn't tell Jairus that He, the Lord of Life is going to raise the child to life again. He simply tells him: ***“Do not fear, only believe.”*** (Mark 5:36 - ESV)

Jeremiah wrestled with these questions as well. The book of Lamentations is exactly what the title of the book says—a lament. It is the cry of a faithful child of God over the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Jeremiah saw the horrors of his day. There is devastation and slaughter among the people, from king to commoner. He suggests that starving mothers are reduced to cannibalism, or at least taking the food out of the mouths of their children. (2:20; 4:10). The best and the brightest are dragged off into exile in Babylon. The worship at the temple comes to an end, and the chief priest and temple leaders were taken away and executed. Surely there can't be any greater tragedy than this! How can anyone cope with such evil at work in the world?

We are misled by the devil into thinking that if there is suffering in this world of sin—or if things go wrong in our lives—then that must mean that God doesn't love us or care about the things that are happening to us. Then, when some great tragedy strikes, we despair of even God's help for us. That is why Jeremiah's experience is so important for us. I'll tell you right up front that reading Lamentations is heavy. Jeremiah doesn't have any misguided ideas. Jeremiah speaks of loss, including his own loss. Yet he knows that God is just. He knows that sin has its consequences, yet he is able to assure us: ***for [God] does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men.*** Above all, Jeremiah knows that God is gracious, merciful and forgiving. He says: ***“The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him; let him put his mouth in the dust—there may yet be hope; let him give his cheek to the one who strikes, and let him be filled with insults. For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love.”***

Notice that Jeremiah doesn't shy away from the fact that there are—and there will be—problems in people's lives. He speaks of bearing the yoke, a symbol of burdens in life. To be brought down to the dust is similar to our saying that we've hit rock bottom, that things can't get any worse. But Jeremiah knows there is still hope. Jeremiah turns to God in the midst of his pain. His lament is a prayer to God. And Jeremiah expresses the confidence he has: ***The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.***

That is our confidence in all the crises of our lives. No matter how dark the days may be, God still reveals His mercy to us. Many years ago, I visited with a woman who had been a shut-in all the time I served as her pastor. She was an older German woman who had severe angina. She couldn't walk more than a few steps without pain and without being out of breath. Her life hadn't been easy, either. She told me how her first husband had been forcibly conscripted during the war, and she never heard from him again. Her family tried to flee for safety. On that journey, her daughter became sick and died. She finally made her way to Canada, remarried and had another child. Shortly after that child was born, her second husband died. As she was telling me all of this, she summed it all up with a German phrase that simply meant, “but thanks be to God”.

How can anyone say that, especially in the face adversity? We find our hope in the Lord who calls us as His own. Through our Baptism into Christ the Lord says to us: ***“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”*** (Isaiah 43:1 - ESV) In the midst of a world that doesn't make sense, we hear Jesus say to us: ***“Do not fear, only believe.”*** (Mark 5:36 - ESV) God's answer is simple: Trust me. I will look after things. Evil will not win. My power will win. My purpose will be fulfilled. Yes, God has looked after things. So often, we seem aware of God only when we think we don't see Him—specifically, in those times when things aren't going well. We forget about His mercies that are new every morning. We forget that we have walked down the stairs countless times without tripping, only to complain when God didn't stop us from falling one time. We forget the many miles we have driven without an accident—but then blame God if we are in a collision. We lose sight of the fact that God's mercies fill every day—the days when there is food on the table; the days of good weather and joyful experiences. He blesses our work, our leisure, our family and all that we do moment by moment. He watches over us to give the good that we often take for granted.

Yes, His mercies are new every morning. They are the mercies that are ours because of God's greatest act of mercy, as He gives His own Son for our redemption. We see the terrible power of sin at work around us and in us. But God has dealt with sin, once and for all, at the cross; that cross on which Jesus Christ gave His life for us. This is why we do not fear; this is what we believe: Jesus paid the price for sin, so that divine justice is satisfied. We believe in the dying and rising Saviour who has redeemed us from sin, death and hell, giving us life as God's children. It is faith in Jesus Christ, and all He has done for us that gives us courage to face the days when life doesn't make sense. Through faith, we can laugh at Satan and his attempts to destroy our hope and confidence. Through faith, we can rejoice, even when the world around us weeps. We can walk confidently into each day, certain of God's victory. We are forgiven. We are redeemed. We shall not die, but live. And nothing

can take away that hope and confidence that is in our hearts through faith in Jesus Christ.

Until the day when we join with the saints in the glory of God's kingdom there will be days of crisis, struggle, trouble. But we face each day with the confidence of Jeremiah: *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."* In the struggles of his St. Paul said: *But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.* (2 Timothy 1:12 - ESV) Through faith in Him we live—and that means life in its fulness now and life in His glory, when everything makes sense in accordance with God's divine justice, His all-knowing, perfect will, and His abounding grace and mercy. Amen.