

Lenten Devotional March 29, 2024

Scripture

Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-33

1 I am one who has seen affliction under the rod of God's wrath; 2 he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; 3 against me alone he turns his hand, again and again, all day long.

4 He has made my flesh and my skin waste away, and broken my bones; 5 he has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation; 6 he has made me sit in darkness like the dead of long ago.

7 He has walled me about so that I cannot escape; he has put heavy chains on me; 8 though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer; 9 he has blocked my ways with hewn stones, he has made my paths crooked.

19 The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! 20 My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. 21 But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: 22 The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; 23 they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 24 "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."

25 The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. 26 It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. 27 It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth, 28 to sit alone in silence when the Lord has imposed it, 29 to put one's mouth to the dust (there may yet be hope), 30 to give one's cheek to the smiter, and be filled with insults.

31 For the Lord will not reject forever. 32 Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; 33 for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.

Devotion

Jon Mathieu '21

This is a hard passage to read, for more reasons than one. The lamenter's sufferings are many and specific: isolation, bodily injury, emotional bitterness, unanswered prayers, homelessness. As difficult as that gauntlet is to consider, I am perhaps even more alarmed by the jarring words of faith and praise that follow. After enumerating the gut-wrenching sorrows, with no warning the writer insists upon God's steadfast love and accordingly has hope.

Perhaps you have been spared from these types of experiences, but when I read this text I am brought back to the "toxic positivity" of many well-intentioned churchgoers from my past. In the face of abject heartbreak after a diagnosis or a death, many bystanders try to be helpful by offering trite statements of positivity. *Everything happens for a reason. There's another angel in heaven. It's all part of God's plan.*

Despite the kindness of those who speak these words, they often have a toxic or corrosive effect because they invite the griever to bypass their negative emotions. Or, worse still, they generate guilt or shame in the mourner for not having enough faith to embrace the positive viewpoint.

Is the author of Lamentations just performing a grand spiritual bypass?

Upon a closer reading, I think not. Just before the turn to words of faith, the writer not only lists their hardships, they note: "My soul continually thinks of [my affliction] and is bowed down within me." Whatever hope has arrived, it is not serving to hide, ignore, or obliterate the pain and anguish.

And so we are left with tension. Heartbreak and hope. Real pain and God's love. Good Friday's execution and Easter Sunday's empty tomb. This lament suggests that the alternative to toxic positivity is not unmitigated despair. It is the affirmation, if only in parentheses, that "there may yet be hope."

Prayer

God of steadfast love, teach us to feel our negative emotions. Not to hide or ignore them, but to sit with them. As we do, please make space in our broken hearts for faith, joy, and love. There may yet be hope. Amen.