

Great is Thy Faithfulness
Lamentations 3:21-33
June 27, 2021
First Presbyterian, Luling

It seems like a million years ago, but the math works out to 29 years ago that I was a senior in high school. As a senior, I took AP Calculus, which ended up getting me credit for a semester of college calculus. Our Calculus teacher was Mrs. Anderson, and we were a class full of high achieving students, most of us a little high strung when it came to academics, with a heavy load of AP classes and activities. The spring semester of our senior year brought the AP tests, and how we did on those tests determined if we would get college credits or not. We were pretty tense.

Mrs. Anderson was a really good Calculus teacher. She was still teaching us Calculus toward the end of that spring semester, but she spent a lot of time and energy encouraging us, too. My memory is fuzzy at this distance, but I remember my fellow students regularly despairing that they would ever pass the AP test, that maybe they should just not take it, etc etc etc. They did not mean this as a criticism of Mrs. Anderson, it was a completely self-directed failure of confidence. Mrs. Anderson replied calmly, exactly the same way to every student, as well as to all of us together on particularly challenging days. She would say, "You can do this. You're an Anderson Ace." Yes, that was way too cheesy to be directed at high school students, even 30 years ago, but she'd been telling us this all year. And it—obviously—stuck. It stuck so that we rehearsed that in our heads as we faced the AP test, "You can do this. You're an Anderson Ace."

At the time, I took this phrase as the encouragement it was, to me as a student. I would not be the first twelfth grader in the world to be a tad self-centered and self-focused. Mrs. Anderson intended it as an encouragement, certainly. It helped me clear my mind and focus on the calculus problems in front of me. What I've come to realize is that the phrase said just as much, if not more, about Mrs. Anderson than it did about us as individual students. Mrs. Anderson had taught us that she was reliable, that she believed in us, that she herself had confidence in her math teaching, and that she was an encourager.

We heard "You can do this. You're an Anderson Ace" for a school year, and it stuck. It made a difference; *she* made a difference. The people of Israel had heard "I will be your God, and you will be my people" for generation after generation after generation. They believed it. They internalized that. They would hear it as a personal encouragement. All of that is true.

They also heard and learned and internalized what God had revealed not just about them but about God, by claiming them as a people. They learned that God's steadfast love endured forever. They learned that God was good. They learned that God was compassionate. They learned that God's steadfast love not only endured forever, but was abundant. Those are all things that the passage from Lamentations claims about God. All things we can also find in the psalms and prophets and other writings. All things that had formed the bedrock of the Israelites' faith in God.

Or so they thought. They thought their faith was as unshakeable as their God, but their faith has been challenged as never before. We've talked several times in the past few months about what it would have meant to the Israelites to be in Exile, to be separated from all of the

outward signs of God's promises. No land, no Temple, only a scattered and demoralized people. Their experience was not squaring with their knowledge of God. What had happened to them was not matching up with what they believed God had revealed to them about who they were and about who God was.

How? How could this be? The title of the book of Lamentations in Hebrew is exactly that: *How?* Because that is the first word of the book in Hebrew. How could this have happened to us, when you are our God, and you're not acting like God is supposed to act?

Our passage that we read this morning is the only hopeful passage in the entire five chapters of Lamentations. The rest, before we read, and after we read, are despairing. How could this be? How did this happen? Look at us, how miserable and beaten down we are. We're sad and doubting what we thought we believed about ourselves and about God.

But in our section, they remind themselves that it is good to hope, that it is good to remember who they believe God to be, that it is good to be silent while it seems that God is silent, that it is good to remind themselves and God about who God is and what God had promised to them.

Nothing then changes about their circumstances. Nothing really changes about their attitude, because in the chapters that follow, they are just as sad as in the chapters that precede. Their situation is undeniably bleak. And it for sure seems like God has abandoned them.

But no matter how they despair, no matter how betrayed they feel, they recite to themselves, "God's steadfast love endures forever." "I will be your God and you shall be my people." And they're coming to learn these words aren't an encouragement to them, but a revealing of God's character. They still, deep down, trust in the steadfast love of God. If they didn't still have faith in God, they wouldn't be crying out "How can this be? Where is God?" They still, deep down, trust that God will see them through, that God will not abandon them, no matter how much it feels like that is exactly what has happened. Just like the disciples showed their faith last week by crying out to Jesus in the midst of the storm, the Israelites show their faith by crying out to God in the midst of this storm that will last more than a generation.

What words of faith have you internalized, so that they come to you as an encouragement, and as a reminder of who God is? Maybe the words of a hymn. How great thou art. Great is thy faithfulness. Jesus loves me, this I know. Precious Lord, take my hand. Maybe the words of Scripture. The Lord is my shepherd. O Lord, you have searched me and known me. I lift up my eyes to the hills. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

The Israelites knew what the calculus students figured out, what we all know: that sometimes the words that have stuck with us, and the God who gave those words to us, can sustain us when our feelings and own faithfulness falters. Thanks be to God for those words, and even more, for the God those words reflect to us.