

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

HOPE IN THE MIDST OF DESPAIR

Lamentations 3:22-33

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Analysis by Michael Hoy

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.

Author's Note: This is the only time in the three-year lectionary that a text from Lamentations appears. The five chapters of Lamentations lift up the grieving and raw cries of the people to God in the wake of the fall and destruction of Jerusalem. It is not reading for the faint of heart. The hopeful optimism of this text comes briefly here in the very midst and

middle of mostly grieving and despairing words, and that is perhaps not by accident. If readers are looking for a direct word of God to these laments from within the text, they will not find it; but we would be amiss to conclude that there is no Word of God.

DIAGNOSIS: Down

Step One: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Dark Times*

With the loss of hope, the people cannot find any way out of the darkness. Their lives, and ours with them, are afflicted by grief. The first people of Lamentations are those who lost Jerusalem. Their cries go up to God for relief from the burdens of this travesty. But many lament today still. Do we hear them? Do we hear our own laments? Or do we continue to move blindly in the dark tunnels of our own era, unaware until we cannot escape our own time of trial?

Step Two: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Despair*

Worse than crying in the darkness is the sense that all hope is lost. Even the one who speaks these words of our text knows what it is “sit in darkness” (3:6; cf. 3:28), to have his prayers “shut out” (3:8), to be “desolate” (3:11) and filled with “bitterness” (3:15). “My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, ‘Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the Lord” (3:17-18). We are cast into the depths of despair.

Step Three: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Silence*

Most troublesome of all is not only that God is “silent” in the midst of all these cries, but that God has “imposed it” (v. 28). In the more honest acceptance and confession of this plight, this rejection (v. 31) is precisely what we deserved from the one who “causes grief” (3:32). “I am the one who has seen

affliction under the rod of God's wrath" (3:1).

PROGNOSIS: Not Out

Step Four: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Rejected One*

Yet the One who surely knows that rod of affliction and our place under its burden is also the very rejected One who bears to us the final Word of hope. He who has put his "mouth to the dust," given his "cheek to the smiter" and taken on the "insults" at the cross is the crucified Strongman in our midst, Hope Incarnate. His promises of hope and mercy flowing "new" every morning do not come from a distance, but by being in the midst of our most desperate hour, even under the wrath of God. Through him, the light of hope shines in our darkness.

Step Five: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Good Hope*

At the foot of the cross of this One we also find hope that is "good." Three times the word "good" occurs in succession (vv. 25-27); it's also connected to the hope that comes from waiting on the One who himself waits on us with his mercy and steadfast love.

Step Six: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *En-lightening the Times*

Because God's "mercies never come to an end," because God is great in the faithfulness of this mercy, because God's "compassion" is in accordance with God's "steadfast love," these are times to spread the message of hope and mercy and promise to others. It is time for us to walk in the midst of those who are lost in the darkness, and there to bring the cheering Word that "there may yet be hope" (3:29) because we know on Whom that hope is founded. Then the darkness will give way to God's own brilliant light.