

Living the Faith
October 2, 2016
Lamentations 3:19-26; 2 Timothy 1:1-14
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Both passages read today address people who are in a place of shame and disgrace; people who are feeling unsettled and displaced, people questioning the security of their futures.

In the Lamentations passage from the Old Testament, the author mourns the experience of being in exile. In 587 BCE, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, and the city that was promised as secure for the people of God has lost all sense of safety. The beginning of the passage is filled with the grief and pain of loss, and the humiliation of being defeated and conquered: *The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.*

Similarly in the 2 Timothy passage from the New Testament, Timothy, Paul's protégée, is discouraged as he struggles to lead a new church. Timothy is feeling overwhelmed and despairing as those around him with false teachings are growing in number and he sees his church dwindling. His mentor, Paul, is in prison. Religious persecution is abundant. People are arguing and disagreeing about doctrine, rival teachers are creating challenges that seem to discredit the church and lead Christians astray. Timothy wonders if the struggle is worth it. Where are they really headed?

Paul (or an author attributed to Paul) writes this letter as one of consolation and encouragement to Timothy, remembering his tears and addressing his fears and struggles. These are some of Paul's final words – Paul has lived and loved and suffered for the Christian faith and is aware, while imprisoned, that the younger followers seeking to build the church also face challenges.

We, too, find ourselves today questioning the meaning and efficacy of our faith in a world where God sometimes seems absent. We witness bad things happening to good people, suffering among the innocent while the lawless and immoral seem to succeed and run free with no consequences. There are huge challenges facing our world – hunger, poverty, human rights abuses, unequal distribution of resources, human trafficking, diseases for which there are no cures, environmental degradation, war and political conflicts, to name just a few.

The political environment at home and abroad are indeed far from settled and secure. People have had to flee their homeland for safety by the millions and other parts of the world to where they are fleeing are unsure how best to respond. We become frustrated and impatient; hopeless and faithless. Like those in the lament and like Timothy, we ask, why? For how long? The waiting seems unbearable.

This past Friday, the funeral for Shimon Peres was held in Jerusalem. Peres, who died at age 93 from complications due to a stroke, embodied the history of the Israeli state. A protégé of David Ben-Gurion, the founding prime minister of Israel in 1948, Peres also served as prime minister, foreign minister, defense minister, and until two years ago, president. He was remembered for his pursuit of peace that resulted in the 1994 Nobel Peace Prize he shared with Yizhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat for the Oslo Accords.

The peace process stalled, though, and today the region looks little like the peace once envisioned, amid continuing occupation, settlement construction, and terrorism. One eulogist, Amos Oz, wondered about the fate of peace in a new era: "Where are the leaders with the courage to come forward to make the peaceful solution come to pass?" Oz pleaded. "Where are the heirs to Shimon Peres?"

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel and President Mahmoud Abbas of Palestinian Authority shook hands and exchanged pleasantries, something no mediator has been able to invoke in recent years. President Obama, also in attendance, acknowledged that Shimon never saw his dream of peace fulfilled, and that the work is now in the hands of Israel's next generation and its friends. Funerals provide an opportunity for remembrance and for people to come together, despite differences, in honor of the deceased. We are reminded of the faith and dreams of those who have gone before us, and are compelled to carry their visions forward.

Light shines through the darkness in Lamentations as the tone of the passage changes. The author writes, "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, and his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." The people of Israel in 5th century BCE lived between memory and hope. They remembered and depended on God's grace, mercy and steadfast love and lived with the memory of what God had done and the hope that God would do it again. They told and retold the stories of God's mighty acts in their history and celebrated with feasts and festivals. They remembered, and in remembering, they had hope. The author of Lamentations, by remembering with confidence God's promises, has a change of attitude and becomes willing to wait, certain that the suffering will pass.

Similarly, Paul reminds Timothy of the faith of his ancestors, his grandma Lois and mother Eunice, which is part of his identity. Paul encourages Timothy to not be afraid, to face suffering for the sake of the gospel, and to believe in what Christ has already done in pouring out his life for all and abolishing death. As Jesus celebrated his last supper he instructed his disciples to "Do this in remembrance of me." In Jewish and Christian tradition, the God who has been faithful will be forevermore faithful.

Timothy has been given a gift of faith from his ancestors, who also were given the gift of faith. It is a gift because faith is passed down; it is a divine treasure handed

down from one generation to the next. Timothy's faithful roots give reliability and confirmation to his cause. Because those were faithful before him, Timothy must continue the faith and pass it on. Even if others are going against him, Paul encourages Timothy that the message of good news with which he has been entrusted is worth holding and sharing.

Today is World Communion and Peace and Global Witness day, traditions that grace us to remember and have hope. Traditions that remind us that though we may be surrounded with doubts, worry and fears about our world and our lives, we needn't feel shame in believing the good news. The good news is that those who walked before us, the saints of the past, have shown us the way to Christ. Can you recall the saints in your past or present that have guided you in the faith? Can you thank them that they loved you enough to share the stories of their faith, stories of overcoming adversity, stories of Christ, stories of living the faith?

Last week marked the highly anticipated opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. The large bronze structure on the National Mall houses a collection that takes visitors from the early days of slavery to modern times. It includes artifacts such as a hymnal that belonged to Harriet Tubman, a dress made by Rosa Parks and a stool from the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, the site of the famous sit-in against segregation.

The director of the museum says that the museum sends a message of hope and possibility at a time when we are experiencing dissension and discord. We have been able as a country with the opening of the museum, to transform the difficult times in our past into extraordinary cultural expression. Reflecting on and remembering the courage, faith, and endurance of those before us gives us hope.

Closer to home, the Sunday school room door downstairs still has the plaque that reads, "Irene's Room." Irene was the beloved Sunday school teacher here for many, many, years, and she was Sunday school teacher to our beloved Molly. Now Molly is our Sunday school teacher. The Good News is being passed on. This is Good News.

The Old Testament passage reminds us that *the Lord is good to those who wait. It is good that we should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.* Paul tells Timothy that God has graced him with a spirit of power and love and self-discipline. God has graced us with this as well. It is this power and love and self-discipline that will allow us too to remember and wait. There is no shame in this sound teaching. Let us receive the gift of God's grace and boldly proclaim our faith, which has been passed down to us as a gift to continue passing down.

Please join me in singing hymn #731, Give Thanks to Those Whose Faith is Firm