

Sermon for 2 October 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost/World Communion Sunday
Scriptures: Lamentations 1:1-6; Psalm 137 (UMH 852-- *Response, spoken* :
How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?; 2 Timothy 1:1-14;
Luke 17:5-10

"Faith"

In what seems like a rush to include everything left out all year, the lectionary readings for these last few Sundays of the Church year pile one harsh and dismal text after another on us.

Lamentations, I've learned, gives superb insight and artistic power to grief, and horror, and tragedy.....resources we mercifully reserve until, in God's good time, these are acutely needed ... and then the church sets them before us and says, "Here. You need these. Use them prayerfully, and share when that's proper as well." Israel produced this in response to its own life with Jahweh, and now we share it by the Spirit of Christ, for all who pass through the dark. Be not afraid. It is part of each journey, , as our Savior learned and taught. "How lonely sits the city..."

Psalm 137 surely comforts and aids the spirits of countless people and groups, nations even, who face defeat and destruction as well. Age to age goes on through time asking, "How can we sing?" and this year seems freshly hungry for such a song, as we read the news and watch the crowds, and the children, the pain, the terror, worldwide ... Every Sunday carries this burden, as we gather, to be open and honest with the Lord and one another about what life and death are doing to us and so many others.

Then, as we've been doing these last few weeks, we share texts from the early church, in today's case words that, if not literally St. Paul's own, offer those of others who spell out for us what it means practically to run church, to grope for mission and gain courage from one another in the fellowship of table and word, text and touch, that Christ's risen body spreads over us. "Be not ashamed" of the stories we have told and the trials we have met alone ... Learn from mistakes, give thanks always, bear burdens jointly ... It's all valuable thinking, and keeps us on course more than we realize, year by year.

But the story that flashes with fire today is another of those not-so-gentle Jesus tales. "The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!'" Give us practical suggestions. We need push-ups, routines, memory verses ... And what does he say? Keep on your work clothes. Feed your supervisors first. Then go and get yourself something to eat.

Does he really mean talking back to God when we're hurting? Does he mean looking in the mirror and saying sincerely, "You are loved. You are

good. Don't ever forget!" I'm the mouthpiece here, and every sermon is going to be different. Last week I had to learn all over, and more than once, that I speak before I know what I'm saying ... that I don't even remember what I said... that I told the truth sincerely and it was the right time ... and then later, it was the wrong time ...

How do I say to you, my sisters and brothers in the body, that the older I get, the less reliable I am? I know you say this ... after all, I've been your pastor almost two decades now, which means I'm two decades older than when I first climbed up those steps with Ed Ankeny and this particular stint of Bethesda's story started..... but I mean it more than personally, for either of us. I mean we are beginning to say things in meetings and hear things from doctors ... and get new slant on how not just one thing, but lots of things, affect our fellowship.

This means we talk a different language among ourselves, and by ourselves. So we hear Jesus saying tough things. We need our ex-Marine, Ben, here to explain ... we're under orders. Paul says "It is no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me." If faith is not a formula, but a way Not a map, but more like breathing, then no wonder we're always on the job, in training, learning new things and seeing differently, every day. Yesterday I told the Lord I needed help ... today I'm seeing how much more I'm supposed to work out for myself, because I've got fresh vision at least in some ways, and a couple of benefits have come my way and now I can handle some things better... and I'm actually less confident, because I've seen a little more how things work out... and I've begun to be less afraid ..

...and you could call it "under orders" in a way, but in another way it seems more free.

Faith. This is World Communion Sunday, and what it means is that, after hundreds of years of argument and a lot of sincere prayer, a lot of Protestants felt they could get the same benefit and show the world the same gratitude that Roman Catholics had been doing all along ...except that they were ornery in their own way, and the Protestants were ahead in some ways too And so one step towards unity was made, just as we look around and see a lot of hope our ancestors never dreamed of peeping out here, and there, and ... watch what the master does, work for Learn to breathe deeply. Be strong. Look in the mirror and say, "I love you." Talk to the real One among us. Come alive.

Faith.

Let us pray.

Amen.

