

A two part sermon

part one
DESOLATION TEARS

Lamentations of woe and despair pour from the passages we just heard. Both the Lamentation 1 text and Psalm 137 present the haunting moan that permeates a place where you don't want to be. It is the weeping and the howling of despair and dread.

There are pain laden tears without comfort.
There is suffering.
The people are in captivity and bondage.
There is severe aloneness and the penetrating sense of abandonment, and all is heightened with hopelessness.

When these passages were written, God's people felt forsaken by God.
They were prisoners in a strange place. They were homeless.
Homeless.

These words speak for all of us who are or have ever been in that dark place of desolation and despair.

There are many things that can take us to such a place of dread:

It could come after a frantic cell phone call.....

Or, being in a foreign or very different place,... all alone and not knowing a soul.

...a young child separated from her parents in a large crowd.....
Or..... the torture of waiting for a missing child.....

It could be.... the first day at a new job and it feels overwhelming.

Or.... being lost and it is dark, and it doesn't seem safe.

....A broken relationship,.... or emotional...separation.

The early stages of Alzheimer's disease and realizing that reasoning and memory will fade away..... or being the care giver.

The starkness of divorce, when life has lost its gravity all that was secure seems to float away.

Getting older and being unable to do what you once could, is much like being taken away to captivity. Aging can put us in a place where we would rather not be, a strange place where life is very different.
...Months now disappear like days used to, like hours used to, like minutes do for a child.

And, there is the intense sorrow and grief that is consuming from the death of someone dearly loved, which also means there are long lonely nights and too many quiet places.

It could be silent phone on a Sunday afternoon.

Or....Being ignored,..... isolated,.... shunned..... or abused.

For most of us we know this place of lamentation.

It is a place of extreme sorrow, despair and dread. And, all too often we expend what little reserves we have in trying to figure it out / trying to put the pieces together/ trying to make sense of the situation. Somehow, we want to contain it and rationalize what happened so maybe it can be filed away.

But, dread can not be reduced like a math problem.

There are no adequate answers, and in such a place we feel hopelessness knocking at our soul.

The Psalmist, in the last verse of Psalm 137, used horrendous imagery to wale the hopelessness.

When not a speck of hope can be conjured up for even one's child, then that is the place of complete dread.

Some of us have been there, some have seen it and the rest fear that it may be lurking around the corner,..... someday.

part two
SEED OF HOPE

The 1970 Simon and Garfunkle song, "Like a bridge over troubled water", presents a comforting image. Yet, the challenge is finding that bridge..... and getting on it.

What soothes the anguish of dread and despair is hope and love.

Lamentations 3 points that out, but those are only just empty words without the key ingredient,..... which is faith!

Faith.

Paul eloquently expressed his faith in second Timothy 1:

"For this reason I can endure the suffering, for without reservation I proclaim that I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted in him."

Faith!

That deep inner awareness that what is risked and entrusted is secure!

A real faith in God is the confidence that God is love, that God is God, and that God will be there when needed! And, that includes the belief that God will comfort and provide.

Yet, how much faith is enough?

Sadly, many Christians often state, when going through difficult times, that they need more faith.

That perception renders "faith" as a currency, like money or coupons, that must be given to God in order for God to act.

And, it also paints God as a cold, heartless agent for hire who puts the burden on us to come up with more faith currency to pay for divine action.

God is love, and love doesn't demand payment.

SO,.....How much faith is enough?

Jesus said in Luke 17 that faith the size of the very tiny mustard seed could move a mulberry tree.....or, as was quoted elsewhere, a mountain.

Well that isn't very much faith? ?? That is just a little faith?

What does Jesus mean here?

Andrew Greeley suggests that saying that one has a little faith is like saying one is just a little pregnant. In other words, it is a all or nothing thing. Either we have faith.....or we don't

Moreover, no one else can give us faith, nor can we give faith to someone.

Faith is something we have to acquire..... or not.

Rational thinking and observation is necessary in the process of getting to the point of faith, but that is not enough.

The Biblical accounts and stories help, just as recalling the experiences of believers who lived before us,.... such as the early Anabaptists or our parents or friends. A good book about faith journeys is insightful. It does help to remember and hear about other people's faith. Yet, awareness or analysis and reason are not enough.

One time I was in the mountains of Appalachia, facing a swinging rope bridge that went over a very deep gorge. I saw / observed my brother use the rope bridge to get to the other side. I saw that it was strong enough, and that one could survive the journey. My mind said it was safe,..... but my knees didn't believe my brain's conclusion. I didn't try it. I didn't have faith – I never risked putting my confidence / my self into the experience.

And, keep in mind, faith is NOT recklessness or carelessness, just as it isn't lousy theology that demands we put our minds in the freezer and leap thoughtlessly into helpless stupidity believing God is ready and willing to catch us. It isn't prudent or wise to test such a theory or even to put God to the test. Jesus didn't even do that. Real faith includes our whole being—mind, body and soul.

Faith is discovered by using Good Judgement and sound reasoning, and it pivots on experience or desperation,..... and desperation rarely gives good counsel.

Moreover, when it comes to relationships with each other or with God, then faith demands love. Relationships are too dynamic, too complex..... and too personal for only logical conclusions to be our guide. Relationships are much more than simply trusting the strength of a bridge.

Love allows faith,..... or perhaps,.... with relationships, it is that love is intertwined with faith.

And, when all is well,..... we take such things for granted.... we don't even ponder the connections. We carry on in love and faith.

But,..... when we find ourselves in the darkness of despair / when relationships are broken and life is out of control and we've lost hope, then we need help..... and we need love.

And, it is during those times that a tiny seed can be very surprising indeed.

During the funeral on Thursday, I referred to the story about the two who encountered Jesus as they were heading away from Jerusalem on their way to Emmaus.

There were deep into the darkness of grief over the death of Jesus, and that darkness blinded them from recognizing their friend Jesus.

Yet, a small something within them / in their soul prompted them to ask this apparent stranger who had accompanied them on their journey, to join them for supper.

I think they tapped into that latent seed that spoke to them, saying "It's worth the risk to ask him to stay..... there is something about this guy, maybe it's love.... don't let him go.

During the meal, they observed Jesus breaking the bread,... and seeing him do that opened their eyes and they recognized Jesus, and... I bet that sure was a surprise,..... because they thought he was dead.

They encountered Jesus / they were surprised by the presence of Jesus – God's love in the world. They were in the presence of love –God, and so it turned out, their speck of faith was merely asking this wayward stranger to join them for supper.

Typically, when we are in the grip of despair and hopelessness, we don't do acts of charity, nor do we reach out to strangers.

I'm suggesting that small seed of faith.... that what they were doing was good and worthwhile, surprising grew into something huge.

They recognized Jesus, and thus acquired hope.

In a few minutes, we will do communion, and when we are doing communion today,.... we will be joining believers in Christ all over the world in communion, too.

Basically, communion is something we do in remembrance of Jesus—to remind us of Jesus,..... but actually it is much bigger than that.

Communion is bigger than Jesus.

We are not only joining Christians worldwide, but we are also revisiting a long tradition in our church, in Mennonite churches, in all churches.

All these connections, including the reminder of Jesus' last supper, are pulled into this event..... and we do this..... not out of necessity or obligation, but instead because.....just maybe..... who knows..... we'll recall the love of the community of believers..... who were before us, who are around the world.... and who are with us now.....

And, just maybe.... we'll sense the presence of Love – God with us, too.

Silly,.....???? or a seed planted..... that may surprise us.