

Sermon #1,264: Lamentations 3:18-26 (Historic O.T.)
5-7-17, Easter 4, "Jubilate," Bethany-Princeton MN
(Hymns: 377.1.2.4.7.8, 380.1-3, 456, 376; comm. 359, 356, 354)

JOY IS A GIFT

Prayer: Thy gift is joy, O Spirit, Thou wouldst not have us pine;
In darkest hours Thy comfort doth ever brightly shine.
And, O how oft Thy voice hath shed its sweetness o'er me
And opened heav'n before me and bid my heart rejoice! Amen.
(Paul Gerhardt, ELH #400 v. 3)

Lamentations 3:18-26.

- 18 And I said, "My strength and my hope
Have perished from the LORD."**
- 19 Remember my affliction and roaming,
The wormwood and the gall.**
- 20 My soul still remembers
And sinks within me.**
- 21 This I recall to my mind,
Therefore I have hope.**
- 22 Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed,
Because His compassions fail not.**
- 23 They are new every morning;
Great is Your faithfulness.**
- 24 "The LORD is my Portion," says my soul,
"Therefore I hope in Him!"**
- 25 The LORD is good to those who wait for Him,
To the soul who seeks Him.**
- 26 It is good that one should hope and wait quietly
For the salvation of the LORD.**

Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. By Your Word of truth, lead us to the joy that is from You. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

"Joy is a gift." We might think this means some people are gifted at being joyful, as if you look at a person and say about his joyfulness: "It's a

gift." This would make joy into a talent or ability. We've all shaken our heads at someone who whistles through troubles and say: "She's just got that ability to be joyful."

Sometimes we say this to excuse our pessimism or grumbling, as if to say that whereas someone else is gifted that way, we just aren't. God didn't make us to whistle through our troubles. We just aren't "wired" that way. This is one way that we excuse our failures – or refusal – to rejoice.

We think it's impossible when we read in the Bible about the apostles "*rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer*" in Christ's name (Ac 5:41), and that while he was in prison St. Paul wrote, "*Rejoice in the Lord always!*" (Ph 4:4), or that the apostle Peter and St. James write to "*count it all joy when you fall into various trials,*" and "*rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings*" (Ja 1:2, 1Pe 4:13). We're not sure we could do that; the apostles must have had a gift for joy that we don't have. But remember, these same apostles are shown in the gospels grumbling, showing their jealousies, impatient with people, often despondent, ready to give up all hope, and frequently unready to suffer.

So it couldn't be that they were just naturally more joyful. That's not what it means that "joy is a gift." We don't get to make the excuse that we just aren't gifted that way. Joy is a gift -- from God. He doesn't give it only to some Christians. Joy is one of the "*fruits of the Spirit*" (Ga 5), a fruit of faith. If the Holy Spirit is there, giving faith, joy is there. It might be unnoticed or unfelt. Along with other fruits of the Spirit – like love, peace, gentleness and patience – we hardly notice. It seems all we see in ourselves is the opposite, our "*works of the flesh*" – jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, envy, etc. Often our sadnesses, disappointments, or frustrations which cause us to be pessimistic or depressed can convince us that we are not joyful people and just don't possess this gift.

Perhaps it seems strange to learn that "joy is a gift" from a book called Lamentations. A lament is a sad song. But what we have here is one of the most unrestrained outpourings of joy in the whole Bible, and it does come from out of the depths of sadness. That's the context for this joy.

The person writing these words was the prophet Jeremiah, who's known as the "weeping prophet" because of this little book of Lamentations. In

our Bible it comes right after the book of Jeremiah which he also wrote. Jeremiah is a noisy book, in which:

- Jeremiah warns of God's judgment. The people laugh and mock.
- The Babylonian army attacks. Jeremiah urges repentance.
- The people shout him down and put him into a deep well to die.
- Jeremiah cries out from the well, is rescued, but is silenced while the people negotiate for peace against his preaching, against God's will.
- The Babylonian army comes, has no mercy on anyone, kills all the fighting men, turns the temple to ashes, and takes all the people away.

Only Jeremiah is left, which is when the book of Lamentations comes in. Lamentations is not a noisy book. It's quiet.

Where the temple was, it's quiet. Where there were homes, it's quiet. The streets are quiet. The only sound is Jeremiah's weeping.

We come in where Jeremiah begins by exclaiming, "**Perished!**" His first word brings us into his misery. He says "**Remember my affliction,**" he calls it "**the wormwood and the gall,**" something bitter like poison. He continues to "remember" – he says it over and over: "**My soul still re-mem-ber-s ... and sinks,**" into depression. Again he says: "**This I recall to my mind.**" This remembering makes it worse. He broods over everything that's lost and gone, all that's wrong.

We know what this is like. Isn't the reason we lack joy that we are dwelling or brooding on the past, what we've done or what's happened to us? It isn't just sadness that is the opposite of joy; it's also guilt, or regret, or it's anger and bitterness, or it's worry and dread. You can't stop thinking about what someone said to you or did to you, or what you said or thought about someone, what you did that nobody knows about, the hurts you suffer that others don't know about you, how things are failing in your life, and you lack hope for the future and are so worried and full of dread because of everything that's happened up to now.

God instructs Jeremiah to write that this remembering leads to more misery: **“My soul still remembers/And sinks within me.”** It will not help lift you out of it. But God can use it for a good purpose. When you think about what is lacking, why life isn't as good as it should be, why there is loss and grieving and sorrow and pain, it leads to one answer: sin. It's because sin is in the world. Some of our misery is because of our own sins that we commit, and we must be sorry to God for these sins. But much of it is not from our own sins, but as a result of sin being in the world. Though we may not be personally responsible, still it can only humble us. The world is not as good as it can be because I am not as good as I can be. Since *“in me, that is, in my flesh dwells no good thing” (Ro 7:18)*, I deserve no good thing in life. That's how we are to respond. This leads us to bring our sins to God and lay them before them, and we see them laid on Jesus.

That's why, in the midst of such misery and depressed thoughts, Jeremiah suddenly breaks into this confident prayer and full-hearted, full-throated praise:

**Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed,
Because His compassions fail not.
They are new every morning;
Great is Your faithfulness.
“The LORD is my Portion,” says my soul,
“Therefore I hope in Him!”**

Where does this “sudden joy” come from? From Jesus! Jeremiah is writing 600 years before Good Friday and Easter. But here he's preaching Gospel.

You have to go way back into the 16th chapter of the book of Jeremiah to find the dreadful curse that God spoke, in which He said, *“I have taken away from this people loving-kindness and mercies,”* and then said to Jeremiah not to lament or mourn. That was the Law – the message of what His people's sins deserve, God's wrath and displeasure, temporal death and eternal damnation.

But now Jeremiah is doing a lamentation – which actually provides hope because it's a prayer, bringing the lament to God. We hear the opposite

of what God said before: Instead of taking away compassion and mercies, here are the Lord's "**mercies**" and "**compassions**," which he says "**fail not**," in other words far from being utterly removed they are never at an end, His people are never without them. *This is the Gospel!*

God does this in Christ. The Lord's "**mercies and compassions**" are his unique love, His forgiving love, grace, His completely unselfish, all-giving love to people who are helpless, can't do one good thing to deserve it, but still need it. God is moved not by one good impulse of ours that would deserve anything good, but He's moved solely by His own love and pity for us, seen perfectly in Christ who went to the cross with these our sins, nailed them to His cross, buried them in His grave and left them there when He rose.

This is "**new every morning**." This is the gift that brings joy with it. So joy really is a gift from God, it's a gift of the Gospel, it's found first in Jesus.

He is the Joy. "**The LORD is my Portion**," says **my soul**, but only as we meet Jesus in His Word and faith is given to us. "He is my Portion," means He's all my joy, not part of it. It doesn't mean we don't have other joys: in our children, our marriage, in beauty, rest and leisure, in a job well done, in art, music, in a rainbow, a quiet lake, in a friend, and, kids, in your toys and games. But these joys are empty without Jesus. They are fleeting; don't last without Him. He fills them with true joy, that as we first enjoy Him and will never stop enjoying Him, so He'll make them true joys and free us to delight in them, He gives us the playfulness and freedom to enjoy His gifts when he frees us from sin and fear, knowing that all we need for our happiness hereafter He will restore to us.

Not only will we have perfect joy in heaven, but by His Gospel He is making us a "**rejoicing**" (*Is 65:18*); so that joy is not just something we will have but something we'll be, by His own making. For this we **hope and wait quietly**. This too is joy. Amen!