

## **Sermon Draft**

**Text: Lamentations 3:22–33**

**Sermon: Amazing Grace**

In the Old Testament Reading, we hear how, even in the midst of the horrors of the exile, God is the source of salvation for his people. In the Gospel, we see Jesus embody this overflowing compassion of God. Without his knowing it (v 30), power flows out of him to heal a bleeding woman, and with his full knowledge and intent (vs 24, 36), Jesus raises a little girl from the dead. In Jesus, the named and the unnamed, the visible and the hidden, the honored and the despised, those living with lingering sickness and those caught in sudden death all receive the abundant mercy of God. In the Epistle, we find that even the Church in Corinth finds itself brought into this overflowing mercy of God.

God's faithfulness and his abundant love flow through the readings for this day.

Between 1931 and 1935, the Hoover Dam was constructed. When you walk along the sidewalk on the top of the dam, you can see the dam's face on one side and Lake Mead on the other. Here, you are at the nexus of great power and productivity.

Amazingly, such power and productivity arose from a time of crisis in America: the years of the Great Depression. During the depression, the unemployed traveled across America to find work building this dam. Southern Nevada became home to workers from forty-seven states, and out of this national suffering came what was to be known for a decade as the tallest dam and the largest hydroelectric plant in the world.

A time of great suffering became a time of revelation. In the midst of suffering, people saw great power and great work.

Our text this morning offers a glimpse of God's great power and work in the midst of suffering. Israel has been exiled to Babylon, her city Jerusalem laid siege, her walls torn down, her temple destroyed. Out of this suffering comes a voice of lament, the Book of Lamentations. And in the center of this book is a revelation of the amazing faithfulness of God. From the cry of God's people in the midst of suffering and judgment comes a word of faith that remains firm for future generations. God's great faithfulness gives us hope in the midst of suffering.

If you have ever been to a funeral, you know that every funeral is different. Grief has many voices. The same is true in Scripture. Today we hear from the Book of Lamentations. This book contains five laments, and each one is different. Our text is part of the third lament.

This third lament is personal. It's the cry of a man who has seen suffering (3:1), the suffering of the exile and God's judgment upon his people. Having seen these things, this man cries out in grief.

In his lament, he ends up speaking about God. Note that he speaks about God rather than to him. God is the one hiding in the brush like a "*bear lying in wait*" or "*a lion in hiding*" (3:10). God is the one who has been like an archer. He has marked out this man as prey and driven his arrows into his kidneys (3:13).

Physically, mentally, emotionally, this man has experienced the judgment of God and reached the point where his endurance and his hope from the Lord have perished. He can't speak to God. He can only speak about him. Looking at God through the lens of his life, seeing God through the experience of suffering, he is no longer able to pray. What's the point?

But then the man remembers something. Well, actually someone. He remembers God. He calls to mind God's faithfulness, God's mercies, God's steadfast love. These words are not new to this man. They are old words, the language of love that God gave to Israel, found in her history books, spoken in her psalms.

When God redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt, he revealed himself to them at Mount Sinai. Moses asked to see God, and God gave him a glimpse. As the Lord passed before Moses, the Lord proclaimed these words in his hearing: **“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness”** (Ex 34:6). This was the cry that Israel remembered in times of sinfulness and distress (Ps 25:6; 86:15; 103:8). This is the cry that this man remembers and, from this memory, something amazing happens.

God restores a relationship with this man. Suddenly, the man is speaking to God rather than about him. In our text, we hear the beginning of his prayer, the prayer of a person in relationship with God. The man says, **“Great is your faithfulness”** (v 23). Not great is God's faithfulness. Great is your faithfulness.

This God, who had pursued him like an enemy, suddenly is near to him in faithfulness and love. God will not forsake his covenant or his love toward his people. This God, who once delivered his people from slavery in Egypt, will deliver them from exile in Babylon. This God, who judged his people for their sin, will forgive them and bring restoration. In the face of great sin and great suffering, God's faithfulness is great, a greatness his people rely on.

In our world, people often read God according to their lives. That is, they use their life experiences as a way of determining and measuring God's love. If God has delivered them from suffering, then God is powerful. If God has prospered their business or family, then God is loving. When life begins to break down, however, so does their God.

Our reading from Lamentations calls us to return to God. Rather than read God according to our lives, we encounter God according to his promises, and his promises never fail. As the text says, ***“For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love”*** (vs 31–32).

God's revelation of his name to Moses has led his people to pray to him in the midst of suffering, from one generation to another. In fact, so great is this love that, when the man speaks of God's steadfast love, he speaks in the plural. "***The steadfast loves of the Lord never cease***" (v 22). God continually shows his steadfast love and we rely on him.

Of all people, we know about the steadfast love of our God. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has shown us his everlasting love. There upon the cross, God revealed his love, once for all time. Using a Roman instrument of torture, God wrote his faithfulness in the landscape of our history. His love is so great that he bore the judgment of our sin for us. His love is so great that he promises life eternal to us. It's love that brought you here today and love that sends you home.

While in this world, we have suffering. But in the midst of suffering, we have hope. There is no judgment we endure where Jesus is not at the right hand of God interceding for us, and there is no suffering we bear that Jesus has not ultimately overcome.

Living in hope does not mean that the suffering has been taken away. In fact, for this man, the suffering is still present. He continues to lament. But this time, when he remembers his suffering (3:40–54), he does so with hope (vs 55–66).

Earlier, he was at the end of his resources. He was without peace (v 17), without happiness (v 17), without hope (v 18). When he opened his mouth, all that came out was an expression of emptiness, “*my endurance has perished; so has my hope from the Lord*” (v 18).

Now, however, his soul is full. Full of the promises of God. “*The Lord is my portion,*” he says (v 24). Often, one’s portion was something you would gain in battle. After fighting, the spoils of war were divided, and each warrior received his portion.

This time, however, the Lord has fought for him. The Lord has fought and the Lord has won. And now the Lord chooses to give himself as a portion to his people. They receive not the winnings of battle but the one who wins the battle. The Lord is their portion.

When God is our portion, we live with hope. The one who created the universe, the one who defeated death and the devil, the one who forgives our sin is on our side. He fights for us.

Is it any wonder that this man's language suddenly bursts with hope? Even in the midst of suffering, this man speaks of God's goodness. Because God is good (v 25), life is good (vv 26–27). Life in the midst of exile and suffering? Yes, even there God's faithfulness is great and guides our lives in hope.

On the night when Jesus was betrayed, he gave his disciples a promise. After he had washed their feet, warned Peter of his denial, and prepared them for his own betrayal and death, Jesus gave them this promise: ***“In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world”*** (John 16:33).

On the floor of the Hoover Dam there is what is called a celestial map. This map commemorates the day that President Roosevelt dedicated the dam. Rather than giving a date, however, it gives the configuration of the stars on that day. The designers of the dam thought their project was so great and so daring that they needed to help future generations locate its occurrence in time.



According to astronomers, the celestial map will enable people to date the dedication for the next fourteen thousand years.

This morning, God has given us the promise of his faithfulness. It can be read by the faithful, not by looking at the stars but by looking at a cross. There, outside the city of Jerusalem, God the Father condemned his only Son to death that he might bear for us the sins of the entire world. Now, risen from the dead, Jesus Christ proclaims God's steadfast love to you and to all nations. God's faithfulness to this promise is great. It is great in its power to forgive you your sins. It is great in its extent, lasting from generation to generation. And it guides your lives in hope until Christ returns. Then, he will bring about a new creation, where all those who believe in him will live in the wonder of his great faithfulness and love.

Amen