

## **Lamentations 3:19-26**

<sup>19</sup> The thought of my affliction and my homelessness  
is wormwood and gall!

<sup>20</sup> My soul continually thinks of it  
and is bowed down within me.

<sup>21</sup> But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:

<sup>22</sup> The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, <sup>[b]</sup>  
his mercies never come to an end;

<sup>23</sup> they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.

<sup>24</sup> “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,  
“therefore I will hope in him.”

<sup>25</sup> The LORD is good to those who wait for him,  
to the soul that seeks him.

<sup>26</sup> It is good that one should wait quietly  
for the salvation of the LORD.

## **Luke 13:18-19**

### **The Parable of the Mustard Seed**

<sup>18</sup> He said therefore, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? <sup>19</sup> It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.”

## **Luke 17:5-6**

<sup>5</sup> The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” <sup>6</sup> The Lord replied, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

**October 2, 2016**

**All About That Faith**

**Lamentations 3:19-26, Luke 13:18-19, Luke 17:5-6**

**Kerra Becker English**

What does it mean to have faith? That's an important question I think. Jesus says that with even just a little bit of it we could uproot a mulberry tree and have it plant itself in the ocean. That's a weird thought. We're more accustomed to the Matthew version of this story about our faith being able to move mountains, a bigger task, but perhaps a more accessible metaphor.

There's a lot that I'd like to say about faith, about what it is and what it means, but as soon as I do, I am also confronted with what it isn't, and how it can be used to condemn us simply for being under the limitations of our natural world. Take that silly mulberry tree for example. I wonder if any of the disciples actually took Jesus literally and attempted a faith experiment on that particular tree. Did it actually go anywhere? Lift itself up by its roots and amble over to plant itself in the sea? I rather doubt it. Maybe they understood that he was saying that faith is the impetus behind our hope for things to change, to not necessarily remain the way they are forever. But for some, the certainty of Jesus' words would have them believe that faith is all one needs to complete an impossible task – like heal someone without the benefit of modern medicine, or nab the only decent parking spot in the Walmart lot. Real life proves otherwise – way too often for me to absolutely make Jesus' case here.

And yet, I find myself really gravitating to what he says. I want to believe that even the tiniest bit of faith and trust in the world's goodness is enough for us to hope for impossible

things. I want to believe that the Kingdom of God is less about religious power grabs, and more about the sure and steady growth of the mustard tree that gets filled with birds making a home in its branches. I want to believe that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, and that the souls who seek God, who live by faith in God and trust in God's goodness, will have the benefit of being blessed with perceiving the good things in their lives as truly good.

I really, really, really want that to be true, and not just in an optimistic, let's only focus on the good things kind of way, but in the way in which the trajectory of the universe, the unfolding of God's plan is somehow, and in some way bending toward the good. It sounds a bit naïve I know. One doesn't have to look too long or too hard at what's going on around us to cast doubt on that understanding of faith. The horrors of the world, past, present, and for the foreseeable future make us wonder if God is still paying attention, or if God has ever paid attention. I can put myself in that mopey "Lamentations" kind of spirit pretty quickly – focusing on affliction and homelessness, calling attention to the wormwood and gall, and recalling in great detail all the bitterness of my own life story.

Funny, isn't it that this particular exhortation of God's steadfastness, God's never ending love, God's mercies fresh as the morning and sure as the sunrise appears in this Old Testament book of sorrows? This is where the exclamation, "Great is Thy Faithfulness" comes from – and it comes from the mouth of one who has seen really atrocious kind of things. This is the same book that talks about poverty so severe that infants are dying of hunger at their mothers' breasts, and the author asks God, "What are these mothers supposed to do, eat their own children for food?" Trust me, it's in there. You can look it up.

But then again, maybe that's what makes faith, faith. It isn't the promise of more prosperity when you already have a full closet, pantry, and bank account. It's the promise that

God continues to be with us, even when we are at our most destitute. Faith in THAT, even the teensiest amount of faith in that, is enough, more than enough, Jesus says to do surprising kinds of things. That's what trust looks like when your friends have betrayed you, denied you, and abandoned you, AND you're about to be tried and found guilty of a crime you never committed, AND you can still look around and notice God's plan for love in the world. Jesus had faith, probably more than a mustard seed size dollop of it, and of that you can be sure.

Now, I dare say that my own faith may not be quite so resilient. Jesus even had his own moments when the word "forsaken" surely applied. He knew abandonment, fear, and pain just as surely as we do. But it was faith that allowed him to keep going, to continue on the path, to complete the journey until its very bitter end.

Having faith like that can make us look like such fools. I get it. As a pastor, I know how dangerous it can be to pray for specific outcomes in the ICU or for a young person to not get caught in the crossroads of dangerous behavior. Ultimately, we don't know how it's all going to turn out. We yearn for our prayers to be answered, specifically, and now – but that's not exactly where I think Jesus was going with this. Faith is not a magic spell, and the natural world will still do what it does with a fair amount of regularity. He wasn't telling us to literally uproot trees and move mountains with our super-spectacular prayer vigils, or prove that our God is better than someone else's god by testing the magic of our prayers. Jesus is always the wise one though, telling us to pay specific attention to those things that seem beyond the usual scope of our understanding. Faith is powerful and potent, a force for good and a force for change.

It makes a difference that we put our trust in God's goodness. Of that, I can be sure. That's what keeps me coming back to my faith over and over again. In the even more mysterious words of Jesus, he encourages us to trust the signs of the times, to allow ourselves to see, really

see what God is doing. He gives us the authority to bind or loose on earth so that those things will be felt in heaven. When we work for justice and mercy, we are faithfully doing God's work here on earth.

The stories that particularly move me about the faith journey are the ones where a person puts trust in something much bigger than him or herself. They are about the quest for authenticity of living that seeks to imitate Jesus' journey here on earth inasmuch as the person pays close attention to his or her connection with God, and really understands that connection as one of loving trust.

I've just finished reading a novel called "The Alchemist" by Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho. People tend to either love or hate this story. It is simplistic in some ways for sure, and yet I found it to be a beautiful story about a shepherd boy named Santiago and his journey toward fulfilling his own Personal Legend, and discovering his own God-given treasure. I don't want to give it all away in case you want to read it, but he has several encounters where he is counseled by the wise ones who paraphrase both Christian and Muslim truths about life and faithfulness. He is taught to watch for "omens" – or as I would call them – mimicking one of the saints of my first parish – divinely coordinated coincidences. Those are the times when something happens timed so perfectly or with such precision about our own lives that it seems like there's no interpretation other than it had to be an encounter with the Divine.

One of these wise sages of the book says to Santiago at a crucial crossroads, "*The Soul of the World is nourished by people's happiness. And also by unhappiness, envy, and jealousy. To realize one's destiny is a person's only real obligation. All things are one. And, when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.*" Again, flashing back to Jesus' own metaphor for faith, even the mountains will move, even a tree will walk itself to the

ocean when you are walking by even a smidgen of faith. That's why you can have hope in times of great anguish. That's why and how some have survived great traumas in life. They felt the universe conspiring with them – not against them. They saw God's light in the morning sunrise. And then they moved mountains. I believe this is true. Call me a fool. Call me a blind optimist if you'd like. But trusting that God has a plan for my life, and I can be actively and surprisingly involved in that plan has filled my life with joy and helped me discover the treasures of my heart as well.

So I encourage you to find that mustard seed sized speck of faith and live by it. Another movie quote I saved from quite some time ago says, "I think if you tell life what it has to be you limit it, but if you let life show you what it wants to be, it will open doors you never knew existed." (Tortilla Soup, 2001) Let life show you it's treasures. Amen.