**Lamentations 3:22-32** December 31, 2017

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** New Year’s

 *Lamentations 3:22Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. 23They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 24I say to myself, “The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.”*

 *25The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; 26it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. 27It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young.*

 *28Let him sit alone in silence, for the Lord has laid it on him. 29Let him bury his face in the dust—there may yet be hope. 30Let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him, and let him be filled with disgrace.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

 Our nation is a forward-leaning nation. It was a source of wonder to Europeans 200 years ago, that America had no history. America was not subject to its history, but would live out and shape its own history. America looked forward, not back, from the very beginning. Then with the continual opening of new lands in the United States, to the Appalachians, the Mississippi, the West Coast, to Alaska, for the first hundred years, our nation was built on the idea of over the next hill, around the next corner. Expansion. Bigger and better. We are a future oriented nation. But New Year’s is the one time of the year when we, even if only briefly, pause to look back, to remember, to consider.

 That’s what the top ten lists are all about. In those lists we remember the year. Remember the top ten best movies and songs, most horrific crimes, worst natural disasters, best human interest stories. Reflecting on the past helps us understand. It is part of what psychologists do. Psychologists dig around in a person’s past to help them understand the present. Reflecting is also part of what we do here every week in worship. Worship is a reflection on our past week, and who God is and what he has done, and who he would have us to be.

 The book of Lamentations is an appropriate book of the Bible for New Year’s reflections. Even though there is no signature in the book of Lamentations, it has been assumed since the beginning that the prophet Jeremiah was the author of Lamentations, which is why our English Bibles squeezes this little book in between Jeremiah and Ezekiel. But to understand Lamentations, you must understand at least a bare minimum about Jeremiah.

 The women who were in our Wednesday Bible Classes this fall remember Jeremiah. He was the last prophet to Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel. For 40-plus years his ministry was a continual warning to Judah. He preached that if they did not change their ways, they were doomed. God would visit destruction on them, not just in eternity, but also in this life.

 Jeremiah was the squeak of worn-out brakes, the clunk of a transmission about to pack it up. His message was, “There is something wrong here, really wrong! And if you don’t fix it, the Lord will bring disaster.” Problem was, most everyone ignored him. That was the book of Jeremiah. Lamentations was written at the end of it all, after the other shoe had dropped, and the Lord had allowed Babylon to devastate Judah and Jerusalem.

 If you keep in touch with world news, one of the news stories you probably saw this past year was the civil war in Syria. Thankfully, ISIS was driven out of most of its territory. But you also saw the terrible destruction left behind: bombed out buildings; people bearing covered corpses on stretchers. For the five seconds that you saw those pictures, you heart went out to those people. It was terrible! Then the newscasters went on to the next story.

 Stay with those people picking through the rubble. Sit down with them and listen to their stories, their tears, their shock. That is the book of Lamentations. Jerusalem has just been destroyed. The temple, the houses, the city wall all torn down. There had been no bombs or explosives, no mere touch of a trigger or button that had caused the devastation. A foreign army had come into their city and in a furry smashed everything—without bulldozers or explosives, but with the sheer malice of their bloodstained hands. What horror! Jeremiah was one of the survivors. He is one of the people sifting through the rubble for the bodies. He sits on a pile of rock which he might have once called home, and surveys the wreck. He is wondering where the next meal will come from.

 You might think that after 40 years of being ignored, and now this, you might expect Jeremiah to say, “I told you so.” You might expect him to let loose with one last rant. Instead, in Lamentations, he still points stubborn people to God. He says, ***“Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”*** Rather than curse the people who had frustrated him and ignored God, he still pointed them God and God’s mercy. Rather than despair over the destruction, he maintains faith in God.

 Jeremiah looks around and says that the first sign of God’s great love is the fact that they were still there. Jeremiah knew that our sinfulness is repulsive to our holy God. Here we should not think only of the things we decry in the world around us, like mass shootings, drug dealers, bullies, and sexual harassment. But notice how Jeremiah invites us to stop pointing at others and look at ourselves. The fact that God allows *us* to live is a sign of his faithful love. ***“Because of the lord’s great love we are not consumed.”*** We could be consumed, we ought to be, but we are not. We daily sin against a God who gives us all things, who does nothing but love us. Yet in his great love we are not consumed.

 Our existence is a sign of God’s unfailing love and compassion. At the start and end of our reading Jeremiah repeats those two aspects of God: “unfailing love” and “compassion.” “Unfailing love” highlights that God’s love does not change, cannot change. He isn’t going to change the living room furniture around on you. He isn’t going to renegotiate salvation. His love is not like ours which rests on people for a time, but then moves on. His love for us is a constant, whatever we might do.

 The Christmas message highlights God’s unchanging love. From the beginning, God never wavered in his plan to send a Savior. And God has not changed the game plan. Faith in that Savior saves us.

 His compassion says that he knows our situation, what we have done to ourselves, and he is concerned. God will let people taste the bitter harvest of their chosen sin, but he ever hopes for change, he invites repentance.

 We see compassion in Jesus. “Compassion” literally means “to suffer with (s.one)”. In Jesus’ arrival at Christmas, he chose to suffer with us. He endured the temptations of the flesh, and said no to all of them. He went a step farther and suffered in our place when he died on a cross.

 But if God’s love is faithful and his compassion great, shouldn’t life should be a never-ending succession of joy. Maybe this past year has been a joy for you! There were so many good things! There were new children or grandchildren, renovations to the house, a pay raise, a new car. It’s been a good year.

 But not everyone’s year feels that way. For some, even life-long Christian warriors, health challenges continue to slow them down and isolate them from friends and family. Others, old and young, experience chronic pain more persistent than a shadow. At least shadows disappear in the dark, but chronic pain is always there. Many young people feel anxiety on a level that makes every day difficult. Others couldn’t put a decent present under the Christmas tree this last week for their kids, and they had to rely on others. And while they were all smiles and gratefulness when the well-wishers dropped off the presents, part of that was a disguise for feelings of shame. Some may have had a good year, but not all of us have.

 That is not the kind of year end reflection that Jeremiah takes part in. He doesn’t measure by material success. He says, ***“Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”*** Never fail? Every morning? Is Jeremiah serious? Is he good at pious sounding thoughts while ignoring earthly reality?

 We’ll let the prophet speak some more, ***“It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young. Let him sit alone in silence, for the Lord has laid it on him. Let him bury his face in the dust—there may yet be hope. Let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him, and let him be filled with disgrace.”***

 Jeremiah does not see a conflict between God’s compassion and hard times. God tells us that it is precisely those hard times that bring us close to God. When those tough times come, God’s Word says, *“Let the young man bear the yoke… let him bury his face in the dust… let him offer his cheek to be stricken.”*

 Jeremiah says that hard times are a time to reflect, to do a self-appraisal. Yet Jeremiah is no Pharisee. ***“Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed.”*** He knows that he has need of God’s grace and forgiveness. He knows that he too should fall under God’s wrath. But he has been shown mercy. And everyone else who yet has the breath of life also has the opportunity to be right with God through faith, in the forgiveness offered by Jesus Christ.

 That is what it means to bear the yoke, to rub your face in the dust, to offer your face to someone who would strike it. He speaks of repentance, repentance that God encourages when we get down to the worst of times.

 When Jeremiah says the words of this reading, about the need for repentance and humility before God, he is not looking down his nose at the people around him. In fact, I am not even sure that he is talking to anyone else. Maybe, when Jeremiah was speaking the words of our reading, maybe he was speaking them to himself.

 He had had good years, especially early in his ministry, especially the first 13 years when godly King Josiah ruled. Then it was easy to say, ***“The Lord’s compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”*** Now Jeremiah was looking back on the last year when his city had been besieged and starved and brutally torn down to the foundations, maybe as he was thinking of all that the prophet was speaking to himself. He was reminding himself that the Lord is compassionate. His mercies are new every morning, even on the worst ones, even on the mornings when you don’t want to wake up, when the body aches or the soul feels despair.

 Perhaps he didn’t *feel* like God was on his side. But he knew it was true, so he repeats what he knows about God. God is merciful always. And the answer to the question of why it has to work like this is found in the last verse, ***“Though he brings grief, he will show compassion.”***

 God’s goals in every event of life, good or bad, is that we are drawn closer to him. So if we are remembering the ten best things that happened to us in 2017, or the ten worst, we can say the same thing in both, ***“His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”*** And that is one that we can also expect in 2018. Amen.