

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 22, Year C

First Reading

Lamentations 1:1–6 (track one)

How lonely sits the city
that was full of people!
How like a widow has she become,
she who was great among the nations!
She who was a princess among the provinces
has become a slave.

She weeps bitterly in the night,
with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers
she has none to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her;
they have become her enemies.

Judah has gone into exile because of affliction
and hard servitude;
she dwells now among the nations,
but finds no resting place;
her pursuers have all overtaken her
in the midst of her distress.

The roads to Zion mourn,
for none come to the festival;
all her gates are desolate;
her priests groan;
her virgins have been afflicted,
and she herself suffers bitterly.

Her foes have become the head;
her enemies prosper,
because the LORD has afflicted her

for the multitude of her transgressions;
her children have gone away,
captives before the foe.

From the daughter of Zion
all her majesty has departed.
Her princes have become like deer
that find no pasture;
they fled without strength
before the pursuer. (ESV)

Habakkuk 1:1–4, 2:1-4 (track two)

The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not hear?
Or cry to you “Violence!”
and you will not save?
Why do you make me see iniquity,
and why do you idly look at wrong?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
So the law is paralyzed,
and justice never goes forth.
For the wicked surround the righteous;
so justice goes forth perverted.

I will take my stand at my watchpost
and station myself on the tower,
and look out to see what he will say to me,
and what I will answer concerning my complaint.

And the LORD answered me:

“Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so he may run who reads it.
For still the vision awaits its appointed time;

it hastens to the end—it will not lie.
If it seems slow, wait for it;
it will surely come; it will not delay.

“Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him,
but the righteous shall live by his faith. (ESV)

Second Reading

2 Timothy 1:1–14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God according to the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus,

To Timothy, my beloved child:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well. For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me. Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 17:5–10

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” And the Lord said, “If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.

“Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Lamentations text

In this week’s OT reading we move from Jeremiah to Lamentations. From the prophet’s vision of the destruction of Judah to its aftermath. The author of Lamentations isn’t named, isn’t known, but the book comes to us from the pen of someone who lived through the collapse of Jerusalem before the army of the Babylonians and the movement of God’s people into exile. It’s tone is one of sorrow and deep repentance, but it also carries a note of hope. There remains an unshakeable faith in God’s willingness to forgive and restore.

This week’s reading, from the very beginning of Lamentations, sings of the forsaken, the abandoned, the “lonely” city of Jerusalem, identifying her with a widow, a princess who has been reduced to the station of a slave.

I’m struck by the shift in the image of Judah as wife from the representations in Jeremiah, which echoed the image of the Northern Kingdom we find in Isaiah and Hosea. In the three prophets the kingdom to whom they spoke was described as the unfaithful wife, the wife abandoning her husband for other lovers. While we might think that verse two carries that same judgment, I would differ. It reads thus in our translation:

She weeps bitterly in the night,
 with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers
 she has none to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her;
 they have become her enemies.

“Among all her lovers” is how they’ve translated “among those who loved her.” In the only other two instances of that form of the participle in the OT, it is translated to refer to “those who love” (love me in Proverbs, love Jerusalem in Isaiah). It’s tempting to shift to something more judgmental in translating it here, but it is neither consistent with the prophetic use of the word, nor is it in keeping with the tone of this lament.

This isn’t to say that the theme doesn’t raise its head a few verses later. In verse 8 we find:

Jerusalem sinned grievously;
 therefore she became filthy;
all who honored her despise her,
 for they have seen her nakedness;
she herself groans
 and turns her face away. (ESV)

But even here the parallel reference is to those who honored her. (Parallel to those who loved her.) Yes, she has become filthy, but in verse two it is her abandonment by those who loved and honored her, not by her false “lovers” that the text speaks.

Why does this matter? Well, it matters to me in that Lamentations begins with Judah weeping as one utterly forsaken and friendless. It doesn’t begin with reference to the sin that brought this state about. The repentance begins with sorrow, not with guilt and condemnation.

It might be said to me, “Well, Jeff, that’s a rather selfish motivation for repentance. It would be better if the people recognized their sin and repented of that, rather than turning back just because they’re lonely. And I guess I might say, “That may be so, but it’s not something God demands, or even expects.” God doesn’t seem to worry too much about just what it is that drives us back into His arms, as long as we come. That certainly seems to be one of the points of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It is only his hunger and degradation that turn the son’s steps toward home, not sorrow at what he’s done to hurt

his father. And the father doesn't even wait for the confession of sin, just throws a robe around him and puts a ring on his finger.

We hurry to load this passage and any act of contrition with condemnation, but the learning that I take away from this week's reading from Lamentations is that any sorrow that returns us to the Father's embrace is acceptable. I could go on to talk about the way that our experience of God's faithfulness and forgiveness are the most effective goads to real repentance, but that'll wait for another Divergence, I think.

Habakkuk text

Habakkuk is thought by most to be a prophet who spoke/wrote in the time shortly before the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. While the descriptions of the wrongs about which the prophet complains to YHWH appear to be local, the "wicked" about whom he writes are more likely to be the "Chaldeans" than any local wrongdoers. The local descriptions can be accounted for by the way that other prophets have also described external threats in local imagery.

The book as a whole falls into two larger sections, Habakkuk's pronouncement (chapters 1 and 2) and his psalm (chapter 3). Within the first sections we have two subsections, Habakkuk's complaint (chapter 1) and YHWH's response, (chapter 2). While we hear YHWH speak in the first person in chapter two, we hear it as the prophet's *report* of God's reply. This keeps chapters one and two within one large unit.

Our readings for this week contain the opening verses of both of the two subsections in Habakkuk's pronouncement, his complaint and God's response. We conclude with what is surely the only phrase that is well known from the entire book, "The righteous shall live by his faith."

While that phrase makes for an excellent maxim, it's meaning is not nearly as obvious as it seems. A reading of this text without the later influence of associations of certain Hebrew terms with Greek words used as equivalents renders our translation very differently. "For behold, his life is swollen, it is unstable within itself. But the righteous shall live by his steadfastness." The Hebrew term *nephesh* did not carry the meaning of "soul" in Habakkuk's time. It meant "life," or "throat." Only later did it take on the meaning of "soul" when it became associated with the Greek "*psyche*." Likewise, Hebrew's *emune* only later became associated with the Greek *pistis*, meaning "faith." It's early meaning meant "steadfastness."

Finally, the meaning of this verse is further shifted away from that of the popular maxim by the reality that Habakkuk speaks of one nation oppressing another, not one person

being trampled by another. So the referent of “his,” the “he” of the first part of the verse is Chaldea, not some individual, and the “righteous” is therefore Judah, not another individual. Judah shall live by its steadfastness. Standing in the face of the oncoming arrogance and might of the Babylonians, God says to Judah through the prophet, “Be steadfast, you shall not die.”

While this is surely an encouraging message (of sorts) it doesn’t seem to mean at all what I have heard others use this verse to say over a good many years.

I will link the article that helped me understand all this here if you’d care to wade through it. Honestly, it was a rough slog, reading through all the structure and syntax, but if you’re up to it, [HERE IS THE LINK](#).

Second Reading

Finally, Second Timothy. The tone of this letter is as different from 1 Timothy as day is from night. You can hear the deep affection in which Paul holds Timothy as he encourages him from his own imprisonment in Rome, not too long before his death. The goal of the letter appears to be very similar to that of 1 Timothy, to offer guidance and encouragement to Paul’s child in the Lord who struggles to guide a congregation. It was no doubt this similarity that led many to mistake 1 Timothy as being from the pen of Paul, but the differences are (at least to me) so obvious that it only appears to me that the author of 1 Timothy used 2 Timothy as a model for his own letter. It is beyond the scope of this weekly study to try to describe those differences in detail.

In this week’s reading Paul speaks to Timothy as “beloved child.” Even here the difference from 1 Timothy speaks volumes. Paul’s opening speaks to a personal relationship with Timothy, not one grounded in “true” doctrine. Then we get a passage that is often quoted among Christians, “...for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.” While that is true standing on its own, I think that taking it out of context diminishes it greatly.

First, it is preceded by this phrase, “For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands...” Too often I hear the verse about power and love and self-control used as a self-sufficient admonition to someone who is struggling. It isn’t how Paul meant it. It’s a reminder of what is in store for the one who “fans into flame the gift of God.” In other words, we don’t seek power and love and self-control, we fan into flame, we work to re-awaken the gift of God we have received. Everything else flows from that. Too often we get things out of order or forget the foundation and start framing the building without it.

Second, the verse about power and love and self control is followed by a very specific reason, “Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God.” (Actually, that’s only the beginning of a very long run on sentence, of which Paul is really fond, but that does seem to be the core of that long sentence.) Power, and love, and self control are there to empower one thing. Testimony. Testimony about our Lord.

It seems to me that Paul’s imprisonment has shaken Timothy, shifted his vision from what God revealed to him in the laying on of hands to his current circumstances, including the threats to the welfare of his father in the faith, Paul. Before Paul can instruct him in the things concerning his (Timothy’s) leadership, he needs to re-ground Timothy in the truth that first inspired him.

That finally brings me to something that helps me bring this passage into the present moment. Some of us can’t look back to a moment like “the laying on of hands” at which we can remember receiving a “gift of God” that led us into ministry in His name. Some of us can. Whether we remember or not, it is really easy in an environment that is as challenging as the one in which we find ourselves to become so focused on our situation that we lose track of our testimony. Paul would encourage us to recall those things of God to which we would testify, and the faith that filled us when we received that “gift.”

In response to this reading I would ask, “What is your testimony? What has God done in your life that led you to change? What was so powerful about that moment that you still cling to that gift you received?”

Gospel Text

We have in our reading a strange combination of teachings that don’t, at first glance, appear to have much to do with one another.

The first is Jesus’ teaching on the power of faith. Luke has conflated two different teachings into one. In Matthew we find them both, with faith, you will do what has been done to the fig tree, and with faith you will also say to the mountain “be cast into the sea” and it will happen. In Mark there isn’t the direct reference to causing a tree to wither, but in response to Peter’s alarm at the withered tree Jesus says, “Have faith in God.” And then after that He says that with faith the disciples may also move mountains.

For some reason Luke has combined the two, eliminating any reference to moving mountains and instead of withering a fig tree, saying that a mulberry would plant itself in the sea. The elimination of any reference to a mountain being cast into the sea or a fig tree withering make more sense in light of my understanding of Luke's overarching hope, to tell the story of Jesus and the early church so as to heal a growing rift between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the late first, early second centuries. It is nearly impossible to imagine in the wake of the destruction of the Second Temple (70 A.D.) that any person with Jewish roots could hear of a mountain being cast into the sea without grieving over the razing of the Temple Mount. Likewise with the withering of the fig tree, which also had a close symbolic relationship to the Promised Land. Luke, writing as a Gentile, would have had ample reason to excise such painful images from his version of the Gospel while still maintaining the enormity of the power that can be wielded in prayer.

Then we come to the teaching about humility, and servants saying "We have only done what was our duty." Why would this follow so closely on a teaching about what can be accomplished through faith? To answer that, I will take you back to Luke 10. Jesus has sent the 72 out to preach the Kingdom in the surrounding towns and villages and they have returned in great excitement, saying, "Even the demons are subject to us in your name!" And Jesus says that He has given them great authority, but "Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

An experience of great power is balanced by a teaching of great humility.

This says two things to me. First, that the teaching about a tree, or a mountain, casting itself into the sea at our command given faith the size of a tiny seed is meant to be taken rather literally. That is, faith enables us to do enormous things, things that make no more sense than seeing Long's Peak pick itself up and dump itself into the Pacific. It says to me that when we settle for accomplishing only that which we can do in our own strength we have not acted in faith. Obedience perhaps, but not faith. It is only these greater things, things we couldn't possibly do on our own that make it necessary for Jesus to caution us to remember that we are only doing what was our duty.

The second thing that all this says to me is that our excuse not to try to do enormous, earth-shaking things, the one that says, "Oh, I couldn't try that, I'm not that gifted, not that special," well, that excuse just doesn't work. It is precisely because I am not worthy, I am not that gifted, that God wants to move mountains at my command. He wants to create seismic shifts through you, through me, so that those around us will know that we don't deserve the credit, we were just doing our duty. The teaching on humility only becomes necessary in the wake of seeing mountains move.

The other thing this teaching does is that it takes the pressure off. If I'm only trying because it is my duty, then I can't be accused of doing it because I have an inflated image of myself. I think that's one of the accusations the enemy likes to use to keep us from living into the power that is part of our inheritance in Jesus. There's that little whisper in our ear that goes, "Who do you think you are, to try this?" And Jesus teaches me the perfect response. "Nobody special, just doing my duty."