

# THEREFORE WE HAVE HOPE

**Lamentations 1:1-11; 3:19-26, 31-33**

*Preached by Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville  
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Before we read this passage, imagine that you are a resident of Jerusalem 2600 years ago, in the year 586 B.C.E. You have just been an eye-witness to one of the most momentous and most tragic events of human history: the destruction of the city of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army. You are a poet, and as you reflect on what you have seen, you begin to paint in word pictures the scene of utter devastation in front of you. Your poem is preserved for posterity in a small book called Lamentations. This is how you describe in poetic imagery this national tragedy: *[Read Lamentations 1:1-11.]*

In your poem, the first two verses contrast the city as it had been with the city as it now was. It had been full of people; now it was lonely. You personify the city as a woman; she had been like a wife, but now she is a widow. She had been like a princess; now she has become a slave. She remembers all the precious things that had been hers in days of old, but now her people have to trade their treasures for food. Her gates are desolate, her sanctuary has been invaded, and even the roads to Jerusalem mourn.

Your poem, with its language of lament and its images of destruction, provides a way for the people to grieve over the losses they have experienced. It gives the Jewish people a way to express their grief and their anger and their unbearable sadness.

I invite you now to return to this time and place and to explore with me the contemporary relevance of this poem from long ago. What scenes in our own time are similar to the destruction of Jerusalem as described by that poet 2600 years ago? Ground Zero in New York City on 9/11? Bombings in Baghdad and other places in Iraq? Suicide bombings in Jerusalem and the bull-doing of homes in the West Bank? The destruction of whole villages in Darfur? The devastation in New Orleans caused by Hurricane Katrina? The October storm here a year ago?

These human and natural disasters raise the questions: Where was God in all of this? Why didn't God intervene? If God is sovereign over all of life, why does God allow such horrible things to happen? Does God have the power to control the force of evil? Or has God relinquished control in order to give us free will? We ask those questions, but we cannot find conclusive answers. We don't know why such things happen. We do know, however, that God is with us, that God did not abandon us, that God will never forsake us.

The book of Lamentations gives us words to ask our questions and words to verbalize our grief. But the book of Lamentations is not all gloom and doom. Tucked away in the middle of this short book is a message of hope. Pretend again that you are the poet, and this is the message you believe God wants the people to hear: *[Read Lamentations 3:19-26, 31-33.]*

In your poem you are proclaiming that we have hope because the steadfast love of God never ceases, and God's mercies never come to an end. We have hope because God is faithful and God's mercies are new every morning.

You can now return to the 21st century. That poem from the 6th century B.C.E. gave hope to the Jewish exiles in Babylon who were grieving over the destruction of Jerusalem in 586. That message can also give us hope. God does not willingly afflict suffering on anyone, and God's mercies never come to an end. God's steadfast love sustains us and gives us strength. And God can bring something good even out of tragic events.

In the current issue of the magazine *Presbyterians Today*, there is an article about ABC news reporter Bob Woodruff and his wife Lee. You may recall that in January, 2006, less than a month after becoming co-anchor of ABC's World News Tonight, Bob Woodruff was severely wounded while covering the war in Iraq. He was hit in the face and head by "improvised explosive devices," commonly referred to as IEDs, and as a result he suffered traumatic brain injury. He nearly died, but miraculously survived. Perhaps you saw the story of his recovery in the ABC news special a year later entitled "To Iraq and Back."

Bob and Lee Woodruff have been members of the Presbyterian Church in Rye, New York, since 2002. In the article in *Presbyterians Today*, they reflect on his miraculous recovery and on their faith that helped them get through that horrible event. Lee Woodruff says: "I believe that the power of faith is to believe that there is something bigger than you. That there is something that you can lay your trust in, lay your hope in, lay your dreams in. Whatever that may be,...I could feel it, and it was all of those years of being dragged to Sunday school against my desires and listening to all of those sermons and believing, at the very most basic level. And that belief...was my springboard." (*Presbyterians Today*, October 2007, p. 26)

Lee and Bob Woodruff also talk about the silver lining that emerged during his recovery. Traumatic brain injury has become the signature injury of this war---more than half of all U.S. casualties in Iraq are the result of improvised explosive devices. Bob Woodruff's high profile in the media shone a spotlight on this particular injury and the need for providing good medical care and long-term rehabilitation for those thousands of American soldiers who are coming home with this new injury. Shining a light on this need has been a silver lining in the midst of tragedy. The Woodruffs have also established a foundation to help military families who are trying to cope with traumatic brain injury. God can bring something good even out of horrible events.

As we come to the Lord's Table on this World Communion Sunday, we come with Christians all over the world---in Rye, New York; in Iraq; in New Orleans; in Darfur; in Jerusalem and the West Bank; in New York City. We come in thanksgiving to the God whose steadfast love sustains us, no matter what happens to us. We come in hope, because God is faithful and God's mercies are new every morning.

