

“New Every Morning” / Lamentations 3:19-26 / 6 October 2013

Amidst the rubble of an abandoned city, after a great enemy has come and ransacked Jerusalem, when all the dreams of the Hebrew people seem lost, the writer of the Lamentations wails, and curses, and blames God but then pauses and says: “Ah, but this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God's mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faith-fulness.” You know, the world itself is not new every morning. Many wake up with the exact same sorrows year after year. But the strength and the courage we need to live in an old world—that comes in fresh supply each day. It is new every morning.

On this World Communion Sunday, as the sun makes its westward trek again across the skies of our old world, think of all the people who will gather today at Christ's Table. Some in solemn assembly in great stone cathedrals older than the nation in which we live, grand gothic rooms where kings have been crowned, where a pipe organ makes the windows rattle. Others meet in thatched pavilions, their church buildings humble, but their wild-sounding drumbeat and their swaying dance so filled with joy. Some, too, will gather in the raucous blare of electric guitars in the vast, windowless multipurpose rooms, called “sanctuasiums,” in the mega-churches surrounded by acres of parking lots. Many, like us, will gather in our lovely but simple neighborhood churches, surrounded by the beauty and tradition of our faith. All Christians from Peoria to Pyongyang, from Pitts-burgh to Spitsbergen, we are joined to each other across the miles, made one at Christ's Table. Despite the troubles of our world, we celebrate a presence, a grace, that is new every morning.

The early sun has already touched the faces of our orphan girls at Hekima Place, in Kenya, driving the sleep from their bright eyes. They, too, are gathered around this Table. We've got a Kenyan cross here to represent their unseen presence among us. That sun touches the heads and shoulders of our many friends in Haiti, as they put on their best shirts and march off toward church, to gather around the Table. We have two Haitian crosses here to remind us of them.

It was the first Sunday in October—World Communion Sunday—in far off Africa. October was my most homesick month in that land of endless summer. A team of American short-term missionaries had arrived at the mission station. They were Mississippians who spoke a kind of English that even I struggled to understand; and the several Cameroonians who understood most English, well, they just nodded and smiled when these folks talked. Wil Howie—whom many of our Haiti Team people as former director of Living Waters for the World—Wil was always among them. They sat with us in our Cameroonian church, on that Sunday, listening as the pastor preached in the Bulu tribal language, mystified but trying to look attentive.

When it came time for the offering, the deacons in their blue gowns came dancing down the aisle with baskets at the ends of long sticks. People dropped their coins into the offering baskets. Or, if they had a larger bill, they might reach into the basket and make change for themselves. (Please don't try that here!) But some folks had no money to offer. They had other things, like a chicken or a plastic bag full of beignets. The deacon taking up the offering would start the bidding on that item right then and there, like an auctioneer: “Five hundred francs for the beignets! Four hundred? Sold to the lady in yellow for three hundred and fifty francs!” He would give the item to the person who won the bid and drop the money into the basket. This could go on for quite some time because the church treasurer sat in a chair at the communion table, and as the offerings came in, she would carefully place her reading glasses on her nose, spread the coins out on the communion table and count them, mostly tiny brass coins called “centimes” that take a long time to count, and which amount to very little value. When the treasurer decided that they had collected enough money for that week's needs at the church, she would give the drummers a signal to begin pounding out the Doxology, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow...” Everyone would stand to sing; the offering was over. But if there wasn't enough, then the offering would continue until there was enough, and sometimes that took a while.

It was a coincidence that the Mississippians had visited us over World Communion Sunday. The rare celebration of communion in an African Presbyterian church made for an incredibly long

service, but the offering took no time at all. We had twelve white Americans fresh off the airplane with lots of paper money in their pockets. I was serving as interpreter for a dentist sitting right beside me, and the man dropped a 10,000 franc note into the basket—the equivalent of \$20. Moments later, the deacon came back and asked me to interpret a question for him. The deacons said, “This guy gave us 10,000 francs. Could you ask him how much change he wants.” They'd never seen \$20 in the plate. They were only asking for the amount needed for the coming week. They didn't even have a bank account for extra money. It's like that line in Lamentations about God's goodness being new every morning, just enough for the day ahead. Life is that way: we get what we need as the need arises.

The writer of Lamentations had seen it all: violence, near starvation in a besieged city, warfare, defeat, carnage, the ruin of the sacred place, the collapse of everything that gave him faith in God. He begins today's reading by calling himself homeless. And yet, amid the collapse of his world, he has the courage to say, “My life is wrecked, but each morning I awake with what I need for that day, and not much to spare.” The best you can ask, and surely the most you get, is enough...just enough. Enough strength for the trying hour, enough courage for the awful task, enough imagination for the day that stands before you. There's no spiritual bank account to keep anything left over, so all we need to ask for, and all we ever get, is as much as we need for the day—for the situation—at hand. You and I do not know what that ever-circling sun will bring with its next visit, but we do know this: There will be enough to live our lives faith-fully and with joy. “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God's mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning.”

I think some of us are surprised to learn that whole chapters of the Bible are filled with cursing and lament. But if the Bible didn't contain the gamut of human emotions, then it would ring hollow to our ears. A very pious minister bought a used lawn mower off his neighbor, but he came back a few hours later and said that he couldn't get the mower started. The neighbor said, “That machine only starts up if you curse at it. You really gotta let loose some zingers.” The minister, a little sanctimoniously, said, “But I haven't cursed in over thirty years.” The neighbor said, “That's not a problem. Just keep trying to start that mower, and it'll come back to you.” Most of us remember pretty well how to curse, but we may forget that our Sacred texts—especially the Psalms—have places where there is cursing, because God is not threatened by our frustration and anger. Our Holy Book is filled with songs of joy and trust, but also grief, and guilt, and blame, songs that ask why. The Scriptures are filled with songs of lament. Why do you think we moderns are so embarrassed by sadness? We feel the need to fix it in others and hide it in ourselves. We know very well that it takes years to grieve the death of a loved one, years to mourn the failure of a dream, years to let go of hopes that should have been and never came to be. When our faith itself changes, old beliefs collapse and go away, it takes years to recover from that loss and find a better way to believe. People need to grieve their losses. The imperfect folks who wrote the Scriptures knew it. The Africans know it, for if you're struck with great sadness in Africa, neighbors will show up in great numbers to shave your head, to cover you in black, and to sit with you silently—offering no advice, trying to magically fix nothing. Maybe we Americans are just so used to getting what we want that owning our sadness looks admitting defeat. But when the song of lament wells up in our throat, there is wisdom in singing it. When sorrow bids you join in its mournful dance, there is wisdom in dancing. Perhaps they only own their joys who truly own their sorrows.

The strength and the grace needed to live each day are not handed out in advance. You can't save them up like a squirrel storing away nuts. They're new every morning; but they *are...new...every...morning*. It's faithfulness, not flashiness, and most of the time there's no magic to it at all. God's mercies don't usually come in the form of miracles and revelations. They come in the words of a stranger, the kindness of a friend. They come in moments of quietness and rest. They come in an unexpected burst of laughter. They get delivered each new day, and whether we notice them or not, they will be enough for the day at hand.

Oh, the things the sun will see as it makes its westward journey over the nations of the earth on

the World Communion Sunday. Oh, the things you've seen in a lifetime thus far! It's a troubled world, and everything wrong with it is just the sum total of all the little things wrong in our private lives. And yet, and yet! "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God's mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. New every morning!" Each new day, you will find the strength and the grace that you need for that day. Then turn around to be that strength and grace in the life of another. Amen.