

September 3, 2023
These are the Best of Times
Lamentations 3:19-26

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way ..." so Charles Dickens begins *A Tale of Two Cities* about the watershed upheavals of the French Revolution.

Over the past couple of years, we have seen a lot of change ourselves. While Covid didn't create the inflation, housing crisis, political polarization, and social changes we're going through – in everything from community involvement, to volunteerism, to basic civility – it certainly amplified and sped things up. As a church, we have seen trends in terms of attendance, culture wars, and volunteer engagement change as well.

Some people tell us this is the worst of times. With war in Ukraine, inflation, record heat and fires, flooding, angry politics, deep cultural rifts in society ... and in churches, lower attendance, less volunteers, and deep divisions, what hope is there?

On the other hand, we can see this as the best of times. In church, we have seen new leadership and new musicians emerge. We figured out livestreaming and Zoom. New people have joined us. We have two ordinations and a few baptisms coming up.

Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher in the 6th Century BC, observed, *"There is nothing permanent except change."* We have seen constant change over the past 3 years. We have also seen incredible change through our lives. With the rise of AI, political issues, economic challenges, change is not going to stop. Heraclitus was right.

But Heraclitus was wrong. Absolutely wrong in one important way. Because something – Some One – never changes – the Lord, our God. As we face the future, with all its changes – and there WILL be changes – that truth makes all the difference.

Jeremiah (like Ezekiel) lived in times at least as topsy-turvy as ours. During his lifetime lived through wars, genocide, and deportations of entire populations. He saw the once proud city of Jerusalem obliterated by enemy armies. His people were reduced to slavery in exile. Many people would have said, *"There is nothing permanent except change,"* and, *"This is the worst of times."*

Much of Jeremiah's writing is a long "lament" of his many woes. If you think your life is bad, if you really want to be depressed, read Lamentations 1:1-3:20. For instance in 3:16-18, he moans, *"The Lord has made me chew on gravel. He has rolled me in the dust. Peace has been stripped away, and I have forgotten what prosperity is. I cry*

out, 'My splendor is gone! Everything I had hoped for from the Lord is lost!' The thought of my suffering and homelessness is bitter beyond words. I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my losses." And that's a more uplifting bit.

And yet, in this pivotal moment, God gets into Jeremiah's soul. This is what Jeremiah says next: *"Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness. His mercies begin afresh each morning. I say to myself, 'The Lord is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!' The Lord is good to those who depend on him, to those who search for him. It is good to wait quietly for salvation from the Lord"* (3:21-26).

Thomas Crisholm paraphrased these words in the well-known hymn: *"Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father, there is no shadow of turning with Thee. Thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not, as Thou hast been, Thou forever wilt be."*

In the midst of change – tragic change in Jeremiah's case – Jeremiah knows that something – Someone – never changes – the Lord, our God. Despite the wars, the politics, the economic disasters, Jeremiah discovers that (in the words of slightly more modern song, *"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is Your faithfulness, O God."*

Our church was founded in 1901; we're 122+ years old. Over the years, with all the changes, through all the turmoil, the message of our church has also been that something – Someone – is permanent and never changes – the Lord, our God. Think about what the world was like in 1901! Since 1901 we have had two world wars and umpteen other conflicts, the Great Depression, votes for women, massive social upheavals in the 1960s and 70s ... and so much more.

This church could have split a dozen times. But it never has. Why? Because of a rock-solid commitment to the core of our faith – the God who never changes. Whose faithful love never ends, Whose mercies never cease. When we keep our focus on God, on Jesus, on the Spirit – when we keep our faith centered on Him – those other things don't matter much. God has faithfully led us through all the changes and challenges.

It's wonderful to look back and celebrate God's faithfulness to us over the past 122 years. It's good to do that. We need to do that. It's interesting how often God tells the Israelites to remember His faithfulness. Every year Jewish people still celebrate festivals like Passover, which reminds them God's miraculous deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Or Hannukah which celebrates the (re)dedication of the temple after the exile. When we reflect on and remember God's faithfulness in the past, we have calm confidence that can – and will – be faithful to us today, and in the future, as well.

God is the God who has been faithful in the past. ***But God is also the God who is faithful TODAY!*** *"The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease.*

Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning”(3:22-23).

We can limit God to the past. Is He alive and active today? *“Great is his faithfulness,”* writes Jeremiah, *“his mercies begin afresh **each morning**. I say to myself, ‘The Lord is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!’*

God has been faithful in the past. The Lord – God and His faithful love – is Jeremiah’s inheritance from the past. God has proven faithful. Now, every morning, Jeremiah reminds himself of his mercies. God’s presence is new every morning. It’s a great discipline to spend a few moments, every day, counting our blessings. Thanking God for His faithful love. It helps us put things into perspective.

What is God doing in your life, today? What is God doing in our church today?

God is the God of the future. *“The Lord is good to those who depend on him, to those who search for him. So it is good to wait quietly for salvation from the Lord”* (3:25-26).

Jeremiah encourages us to *“hope in God,”* to *“depend on him,”* to *“search for him,”* and *“to wait quietly for salvation from the Lord”* (3:24-26). What Jeremiah is encouraging us to practice is more than passive waiting. This an active hoping, depending, and searching as we pray to God, counting our blessings, being thankful, seeking His wisdom, and ***then moving forward*** in faith. God is at work in His world. God is doing things in our lives and all around us. He is bringing His salvation to the world.

Jeremiah and his contemporaries wanted “salvation” in very pragmatic, political terms. They were waiting for God to deliver them from exile and slavery in Babylon. That was certainly important for them. Ultimately God will lead the Israelites home. But the people will drift back into the same broken patterns of living. They forget about God. The rich get richer; the poor get poorer. Leaders look after their own interests. Foreigners and refugees are treated poorly. True justice doesn’t happen. This political “salvation” doesn’t result in a just, God-loving, God-obeying society.

When God comes among us, in Jesus, He shows us salvation is much more than having the “right” politics. Changing the government isn’t the answer. According to God, the real problem is not who’s the king (or the prime minister, or the premier). The real enemy is our own sin and rebellion against God.

It’s easy to forget about God. To assume I know best. Like Frank Sinatra, we’re happy to sing, *“And now the end is here / And so I face that final curtain / My friend I’ll make it clear / I’ll state my case, of which I’m certain / I’ve lived a life that’s full / I traveled each and every highway / And more, much more / I did it, I did it my way.”* We want to do it my way, too, thank you very much.

Even if we want to do it God's way, if we love God and try to follow Jesus, we struggle to live it out. No matter how hard we try, we all fall short of the perfection that God desires for us. We all struggle with a part of our mind and soul that cannot consistently live out God's call to holiness, justice, mercy, integrity, compassion, forgiveness, and love. Those virtues are difficult. They don't come naturally. It's easy to be angry, judgmental, and self-righteous. Those things come naturally.

So we turn to Jesus for forgiveness. For a new beginning. For life.

What about our future? As we pray about the future, we can limit our hopes and dreams to practical things. Jeremiah and the Israelites wanted political liberation; that was about it. We have practical needs too. It's good to bring those to God. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus does encourage us to pray, *"Give us this day our daily bread."*

But God also wants us to dream bigger. Much bigger. Jesus says, *"Pray like this, 'Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. May your Kingdom come. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven ...'"*

Pray BIG prayers. Pray that God's name would be known and kept holy. Pray that the Kingdom of God will come, here in Lethbridge. Pray that God's will will be done, here in Lethbridge. Pray that, as a church, we can be a key part of God's kingdom coming and His will being done in our city. Pray that each of us, individually, would see our part – as we encourage people, care for people, bless people, help people, and share God's love in word and in deed.

What might that look like? How can we be part of that? No prayer is too big ...

We're beginning a new chapter in the life of First Baptist Church, Lethbridge. The pages of this new story are still unwritten. What's going to be written there? I don't know. But God does. Our faithful God, who never changes, has exciting things for us.

One of our mentors from the past, William Carey, the first modern missionary, going to India from England in 1793, once said, *"Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God."* That's great advice for us as we begin a new season, here at church.

"The Lord is good to those who depend on him, to those who search for him. So it is good to wait quietly for salvation from the Lord" (3:25-26). Who knows what great things are ahead of us? God does. His invitation is to pray. To wait expectantly. To get about the business of seeing His will being done. And to be amazed at what He can do in us and through us in the next 122 years.