

Sermon – October 2, 2022
“Creation prays: Sustain me!”
Lamentations 3: 19-26

Prayer: In 1989, New Zealander Presbyterian composer, Shirley Erena Murray, wrote the lyrics of this popular hymn that we love to sing that talk about finding our quiet centre. Let us sing the first verse as our prayer:

“Come and find the quiet center in the crowded life we lead,
find the room for hope to enter, find the frame where we are freed:
clear the chaos and the clutter, clear our eyes,
that we can see all the things that really matter, be at peace, and simply be.”

The centre is the heart of every matter – of every relationship – of every phenomenon.

The earth has a center called the core that attracts gravitational force.

Earthquakes have hypocenters and epicenters. Every storm has a centre called the “eye”.

A labyrinth has a centre where the walker meets God’s spirit in prayer.

The sanctuary is the centre of this building. The heart is the centre of the human body.

The sacrament of communion is at the centre of our being as a faith community.

This is one of the sacraments that Jesus shared with his friends and followers.

Today, Christians, particularly those from the mainline Protestant denominations who are members of the World Council of Churches, are celebrating World Communion Sunday. It was first introduced in 1933 by a Presbyterian minister, the Rev. Hugh Thomson Kerr who served at that time in a large church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. World Communion Sunday takes place on the first Sunday of October, the purpose of which is to bring Christian churches together in a service of Christian unity and ecumenical cooperation. This is one Sunday every year for many Christians around the world to experience God’s invitation to feast together, affirming their journey with Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life.

The big word in my sermon today is lament. A lament is just as the word describes – a passionate expression of grief or sorrow that comes with it, emotional outbursts of wailing, weeping, moaning or mourning. It is a prayer that cries out to God from the midst of desperate pain, or any circumstance that seems out of control. It vocalizes the pain of God with the conviction that God can and will bring relief. A lament is not just the venting of frustration, but is a profound statement of faith in God from the midst of utter human hopelessness. For some of

us, the last thing we want to hear in church on a Sunday morning is a lament. Some of us have enough grief and sorrow in our lives, and we come here to find words of comfort, a time to quiet our spirits, to find the centre of hope and consolation in the words and hymns that offer us God's presence. We want a soothing balm and a clean dressing for our wounds that will help us to go back into our homes, into our workplaces, into our little niches with a little extra cushion between us and our stressful lives.

As a point of history, the book of Lamentations was written around 586 BCE, when King Nebuchadnezzar and his army invaded and ransacked the city of Jerusalem. The invaders destroyed the city's inhabitants, buildings, animals, and the hub of communal life, the Temple. The book offers imagery that testifies to the multiple traumas that the community faced under the realities of ancient colonization through war. For centuries, this book was attributed to the prophet Jeremiah. After all, Jeremiah was the prime lamenter among the major prophets in the Bible. He was relentless and would not keep his mouth shut at every injustice that he saw. But modern-day scholars believe that the author or authors of Lamentations were perhaps those who were left in Jerusalem during the exile and penned their traumatic stories of the invasion of their homeland. The book has 5 chapters and today, we are at the centre of the book of Lamentations. Chapter 3 is the only chapter that contains words of hope and assurance for the people of Jerusalem in the 6th century BCE. Author Kathleen O' Connor comments: "Like a lull during a violent storm, poems of desolation and doubt surround the chapter on both sides. The sudden appearance of hope at the centre of the book both startles and reassures, even as it creates one of Lamentations' interpretive challenges." Will the centre hold the other chapters? Will the centre move us to faith and action?

The voice in today's lament is known as "the strongman." He is the only speaker in this chapter and the only articulator of hope in the entire book. The poem refers to him in Hebrew as a "geber", meaning a hypermasculine figure charged with the defense of women, children and other non-combatant civilians. But he is also a captive warrior, which means that he was not able to fulfill his responsibility to protect and defend the people. He was powerless and he himself, as a protector, needed protection. American author Robert Williamson Jr. describes him as one who submits to God's authority, believing that God never gives people anything they can't handle. The strongman does not give up on God and believes that all will be well in

the end. He accepts that the suffering was the people's fault because they had angered God. Rather than protest, the strongman urges the people to repent, to change from their wicked ways. Rather than crying out in protest, he calls for submission.

The strongman declares, there is always hope! He calls everyone to centre on God as the source of hope. Listen again to these 2 verses: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." (Lam 3: 22-23) And this is the good news in chapter 3. There are three words that formulate the belief statement of the speaker about God: steadfast love, mercy and faithfulness. The Hebrew word for steadfast love, *chesed*, might be translated as the "unbreakable devotion or unending love of God." The steadfast love of God never ceases. It is always there.

The next word is mercy. One that never comes to an end and comes new and fresh every morning. Remarkably, the word "mercy" is based on the Hebrew word, *raham*, meaning "womb." This is the same Hebrew word for compassion. Mercy is defined as compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm. To best describe the mercy of God, imagine God's love like a mother's unconditional love for her child. In the midst of life's pains, we must centre on the womb of God's love. Only in that love will we find hope in our hopelessness, the promise of joy in our sorrows.

The third word is faithfulness from the Hebrew root word "emun" or "emunah" meaning "to believe", "to confirm" or "to support". The 1923 hymn, "Great is Thy Faithfulness," written by an American poet, Thomas Obadiah Chisholm, beautifully captures the wonder of these convictions about God in moving lyrics and tune. Chisholm suffered health challenges most of his adult life and therefore had a smaller than average income. Of this life experience, he said, "God has given me many wonderful displays of providing care, which have filled me with astonishing gratefulness." Chisholm sent the lyrics to his friend, American composer William Runyan, who, in turn, composed a beautiful musical setting.

Steadfast love, mercy, faithfulness – three words of hope – three words that ground us as a faith community. Three words that remind us of our responsibility as God's co-creators and stewards of Mother Earth. Three words that call us to centre our hope in God. Theologian John Holbert writes: "However dark the night, however deep the fear, however hopeless the

situation, we rely on the steadfast love of God and give ourselves over to the One who is always the centre of our hope.”

Friday, September 30th marks the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation – a day of lament for the indigenous community. Also known as Orange Shirt Day, it honours and remembers the children who never returned home and survivors of residential schools, as well as their families and communities. It raises awareness of the inter-generational impacts of residential schools, and to promote the concept of “Every Child Matters”. I was moved by the stories, the tears, the words of remembrance and the challenging words offered by some survivors and advocates of Truth & Reconciliation. I was touched when people offered shoes in many colours and shapes. I was moved as the crowd stood when a 50-metre-long memorial cloth bearing 4100 names of children who did not return from residential schools was presented on the stage. We have come a long way, but I know there is hope for truth and reconciliation to prevail.

On this World Communion Sunday, when we remember that God comes to us in the caring acts of the community gathered, let us return our gratitude for the hope that is ours in Jesus Christ. And let us find, at this table, God, the centre and the strength for our journey. Thanks be to God – the hope of the world. Amen.