<u>October 25 – A Season of Hope *(Lamentations 3:19-33)*</u>
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Welcome to our fall series and to this season of hope.

As autumn color continues to deepen outside and the days get noticeably shorter, my body has finally accepted our transition into a new season. Our bodies, minds, and spirits are sensitive to change, and transitions can have a powerful impact on our spiritual lives and souls. So this series is an attempt to offer language, support, and encouragement for the transitions that might be occurring in our lives. As we navigate these seasons together, we're relying on passages from Old Testament literature to guide us and speak to our needs for reassurance and clarity. And I hope that today's message might remind of us of what anchors us and holds us safe in every season and every change. Before we begin, I invite you to take a deep breath and join me in prayer.

Faithful God, you hold the future and work all things together for good. Open our eyes to see the unchanging hope that grounds all reality, no matter what happens. May that hope reorient us this morning, and may we live in its light in every season. In your name, Amen.

Living in a season of hope can be exhausting. To hope is to want something to happen or be true, *and* to hold on to an expectation that it's possible. The problem with hope is that the things we hope for are usually not guaranteed, and we know it. How many of you are hoping that the Seahawks will win their game against the Chiefs this afternoon? How many are hoping that we'll go on to the Superbowl a second time in a row? How many of you actually think that's going to happen? When my kids were little and one of them threw up, I would desperately hope that they were just tired and didn't have a virus that would sweep the house – and again and again, that hope got brutally dashed.

And the bigger and more important the thing we hope for, the bigger the possibility of heartbreak when it doesn't happen. We hope a particular side will win an election and change the way our country is going. We hope that a biopsy will come back negative, and if it doesn't, we hope that the treatment will be effective. We hope that our children will make good choices that don't cause suffering. We hope against hope that a relationship might be saved or transformed. But we have so little control over what we hope for, and most of us know what it's like to hope for something with all of our body and soul and strength and then have that hope shatter around us, exploding into little pieces that pierce our heart. Sometimes, it's hard to separate hope and dread.

When Luke and I first found out, last month, that he might be deployed, we lived through a season of hope. We thought about all the things that might prevent it from happening and willed them to take place, and I asked person after person to pray, believing even as the day got closer and closer, God might still intervene to prevent him from leaving. I held on to that hope so hard that I had trouble sleeping and trouble concentrating. And it didn't have any effect on what happened to Luke – in fact, he got sent on a longer and more uncertain deployment that we were originally told.

Last week, Pastor Meg preached from the book of Job, which tells the story of a righteous man who endured tremendous suffering – losing his home, his possessions, his children, and his own health – and was never given a reason for what happened. When Job's friends came to comfort him, he cursed the day of his birth and poured out his pain to them. This is the verse that stood out to me in the passage from last week: "What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me." (Job 3:25).

What does hope look like in a world where bad things can and do happen, where what we dread might actually come upon us or our loved ones? Friedrich Nietzsche, the 19th century philosopher, wrote that "hope, in reality, is the worst of evils, because it prolongs the torment of men." Instead, he advocated for *amor fati,* or the love of fate – accepting what life throws at us, and loving the bad as well as the good, the ugly as well as the beautiful, not wishing or hoping for anything to be any different. Perhaps life would be less painful if we just let go of hope for a particular future and practiced radical acceptance of what is.

Our Bible passage today was written after the unimaginable happened to the nation of Judah and city of Jerusalem. Despite numerous prophetic warnings, when the powerful empire of Babylon surrounded Jerusalem and began to lay siege, the people of Judah held out hope for their future because God had made an eternal covenant with them, promising an enduring dynasty and faithful, steadfast love that would never be withdrawn. Not only that, but God's temple was in the midst of Jerusalem, and God would surely defend this personal dwelling place. But what they dreaded came upon them. After bringing Jerusalem to a point of desperate starvation, Babylon broke through its walls, burned the city and the temple, looted the national treasures, captured the king, and killed his sons before his eyes. Those who survived the famine and the destruction were taken into captivity, away from their homes.

Displaced and traumatized, the people of Judah struggled to make sense of what had happened to them. What kind of God would let this disaster befall a chosen, beloved, covenant people? What kind of a God would allow an evil empire to triumph? What did it look like to go forward without a temple and a home? What had happened to God's promises and covenant love? Was there anything left to hope for?

The book of Lamentations is an interconnected collection of five poems that express Judah's complicated anguish in the wake of national destruction. It's attributed to the prophet Jeremiah, who witnessed Jerusalem's fall and was taken into exile afterwards – but the author is never named in the text. What we do know is that the author was a skilled poet, because Lamentations is both raw and structured, following a very intentional acrostic form.

In an acrostic poem, the first letter of each line spells a word or follows a pattern. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and four of the five chapters of Lamentations have 22 verses each, with each verse starting with a different Hebrew letter – and in all but the final chapter, the letters and verses are in alphabetical order. In chapter 3, though, the center chapter of Lamentations, the acrostic pattern is intensified. This chapter has 66 verses in alphabetical order, with a pattern of three verses in a row starting with the same letter – if it were an English poem, the first three verses would all start with A, the next three would all start with B, the next three with C, and so on all the way through the alphabet. This structure allowed the poet to express the full totality of his people's suffering, from A-Z, but with boundaries that prevented being completely swept away into chaos and despair.

Within these boundaries, the poet didn't hold back from images and questions that express the grief, anger, trauma, torment, and divine questioning that the people of Judah felt. Listen to some of the verses from chapter 2:

> [1]How the Lord has covered Daughter Zion
> with the cloud of his anger!
> He has hurled down the splendor of Israel
> from heaven to earth;
> he has not remembered his footstool
> in the day of his anger.
> [5] The Lord is like an enemy;
> he has swallowed up Israel.

20 “Look, LORD, and consider:
Whom have you ever treated like this?
Should women eat their offspring,
the children they have cared for?
Should priest and prophet be killed
in the sanctuary of the Lord?
21 “Young and old lie together
in the dust of the streets;
You have slain them in the day of your anger;
you have slaughtered them without pity.
22 Those I cared for and reared
my enemy has destroyed.” (2:20-22)

In chapter 3, the focus changes from Daughter Zion to the writer himself, who grapples with his own personal questions and pain. As you listen, think about whether you’ve ever felt this way:

1 I am the man who has seen affliction
by the rod of the LORD’s wrath.
2 He has driven me away and made me walk
in darkness rather than light;
3 indeed, he has turned his hand against me
again and again, all day long.
4 He has made my skin and my flesh grow old
and has broken my bones.
5 He has besieged me and surrounded me
with bitterness and hardship.
7 He has walled me in so I cannot escape;
he has weighed me down with chains.
8 Even when I call out or cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer.
17 I have been deprived of peace;
I have forgotten what happiness is.
18 So I say, “My splendor is gone
and all that I had hoped from the LORD.”
19 The thought of my affliction and my homelessness
is wormwood and gall!
20 My soul continually thinks of it
and is bowed down within me.

At this point in the poem, it seems as if the author is about as far away from hope as you can get – he's forgotten what happiness is, all that he hoped for is gone, and his soul can't think of anything else. Everything is swept away, and he can't even imagine what hope might look like. But it is exactly at this point of utter hopelessness, when the poet hits rock bottom, that he finds he's standing on the unchanging bedrock of God's steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness, which have never been absent and will never come to an end. I almost get the sense of the poet being surprised by this inbreaking of hope at the nadir of his misery, as he catches a glimpse into the heart of a God who refuses to leave him or the world alone and broken.

21 But this I call to mind, [he continues to write]
and therefore I have hope:
22 The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
23 they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
24 "The LORD is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."

When my third child, Eliora, was born, Luke was working for the Hopi Indian tribe, and we lived in an isolated location on the reservation in northeast Arizona. Eliora's birth became a medical emergency that required two helicopter rides, an extended hospital stay, and a worrisome blood pressure that stayed high for weeks postpartum. Because the Hopi Healthcare Center was understaffed, Luke worked long hours that included many nights and weekends. My mom was with me for a couple of weeks, but when she flew home, I was left alone with three children five and under, without any nearby friends or community, taking meds that made me feel terrible, worried about my health, and feeling the depression that often follows childbirth. Everything felt so hard, and heavy, and bleak, and my heart ached.

It was late May, a season in which strong winds would frequently fill the high desert skies with dust and sand, tinting everything in shades of brown. But a small miracle happened. It was almost impossible to grow anything in our hard clay soil, but that spring, the blue flax seeds we had planted sprang up on both sides of our front walkway and burst into bloom. Every evening, the day's petals would drop onto the ground, forming little carpets of blue. And when I woke up the next morning, the blue flax was renewed – covered in fresh blossoms that seemed to appear out of nowhere. I would look at them

and remember that God's mercies are new every morning, and that tangible sign of God's faithfulness gave me hope. I remember changing Eliora's little preemie diaper with tears running down my face, singing those verses with a broken voice and daring my soul to believe that my current reality would not last forever.

This is how I picture the author of Lamentations, and the community that first received it, reading or singing those words through tears, not yet able to picture a different future or hope for anything in particular, but daring to believe that their story wasn't over yet, because the One who controls the narrative and holds the future is filled with unfailing love and compassion towards all he had made, remains faithful to covenant promises, and does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone (Lam. 3:33).

True hope, the hope that anchors our lives and holds our futures, isn't seasonal or situational. It doesn't hinge on particular outcomes, it exists alongside suffering, grief, and disappointment, and it can't be shattered. The hope we find in the center of Lamentations is not something we can control or lose or let go of, because it holds us. True hope is built on the unchanging character of God, who always intends good and not evil for us, whose face towards us is unfailing love and compassion, who came to us and joined our story so that he might share in it and transform it. When we look at God as Jesus, when we look at Jesus' story, we get a foretaste of how our story ends – with resurrection, redemption, reconciliation, and all things made new.

So how do we participate in this hope, particularly when we are in a season of suffering or longing or uncertainty? I want to suggest four practices of hope that can help anchor and reorient us to the hope that centers our world.

First, Lamentations makes it clear that hope is not false optimism – it is found in the midst of honest lament. To lament is to give voice and expression to what's not right in the world and in our lives, to express our questions and grief and anger and doubts, to lift them all up to God because we believe that God cares even more about injustice and suffering than we do. If you are in a season of suffering right now, or broken by what's happening around us, voice your pain to God, from A to Z. Speak it aloud, or write it down, or read the book of Lamentations and let the poet's words be your own. To lament is an act of hope in and of itself, and it can help us catch a glimpse of a God who refuses to let injustice, suffering, and death have the last word.

After expressing his hope in God's steadfast love, the author of Lamentations writes, "It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD" (3:26). So for the second practice of hope, I encourage you to incorporate short periods of silence into your life – maybe just five minutes of sitting quietly with open hands: let go of any specific hopes or expectations or a need to make things happen, and simply rest in the presence of a God who is for you and who will weave all of the chaotic threads of life into a tapestry of beauty and goodness, no matter what happens.

Third, I encourage you to look, each day, for glimmers of beauty and goodness and delight and grace, like the blue flax that I found new every morning. "Nature is never spent," wrote the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. "There lives the dearest freshness deep down things." Let those things be reminders of the hope that anchors our existence and is continually breaking in, reorienting us to what's true. In the diary she kept while she hid from the Nazis in an attic in Holland, Anne Frank acknowledged the horror of what was happening and wrote that "And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty, too, shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more."

And finally, we practice active hope by reminding ourselves that a faithful God will have the last word; and then acting, in the present, in alignment with what God has promised will happen, even if our efforts seem small and futile. When we believe that not death but resurrection will have the last word, we don't need to hold back in loving somebody with our whole heart or living life fully. If the moral arc of the universe bends towards justice, we can act justly now with hope, knowing that every little action helps move things towards that end. When we know the story ends with all things becoming new and redeemed, we can try again after we've failed – because it's never too late, and we're never a hopeless case. God's mercies are new every morning.

And if you're so overwhelmed by grief and pain that you can't see beyond it, reach out for help – to a friend, to a pastor, to a therapist, by calling 988. Let somebody else hold hope for you until you can see it yourself. This is not the end.

I'd like to conclude by inviting us all to read these verses from the center of Lamentations together, as a reminder and a declaration of faith in divine hope that never changes. May we live in this hope in every season.

"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