

Sermon: New Beginnings Part 4
The Federated Church of Hyannis
January 31, 2021 – Reverend Derek L. White

Scripture: Lamentations 3:17-26

Remembering mine affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the gall. My soul hath them still in remembrance and is humbled in me. This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him. The Lord is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord.

Introduction:

Welcome to Part 4 of our series on New Beginnings. To recap;

Week 1: We discussed Revelations looking how it is not a book about the end times but a book about a new beginning.

Week 2: We looked at the words of Dr. King and the need for change.

Week 3: We looked at why the Lord might do a new thing.

Week 4: Today, we are looking at each day being a new beginning.

We all have heard the expression that it is important to take one day at a time. And here in the book of Lamentations we see that is just what the Lord calls on us to do. Every morning is a new day full of possibility and new beginnings. Because the Lord is merciful and compassionate, there is opportunity for new beginnings. Even during times of lamenting, there is hope.

Part 1: History of Book of Lamentation

The Book of Lamentation was written sometime around 586 BC. It was a lament of the people after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. And while the author is not identified in the text, many scholars believe it to be the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah is often referred to as the “weeping prophet” because he is known for his words of lamenting.

Yet here is chapter 3 of the book of Lamentation we see that there is also hope of new possibilities to come. The Lord is our portion that fills us up. See the people living in Jerusalem no longer had a place to gather together in worship. They had to find a new way to connect with God without use of the temple. And in the time of waiting, being still and listening for God was the advice that was given by the author of Lamentations.

Part 2: Being Still and Listening

Years ago, while I was working as a Youth Minister out in Chicago, I took a group of students into a part of the city that was economically depressed. We worked in the food banks, thrift shops, and shelters. Now this was during the month of August and working in the city temperatures often get over 100 degrees. It can feel like working inside a brick oven with all that concrete and bricks. Every evening we would come back to the church building we were using to sleep overnight in. As part of the mission trips, we often would use a local church in the area to stay at for the week. Each night for our evening devotionals we talk about the work we had done that day and what the students learned from the experience.

On this trip I decided I would use a spiritual practice called lectio divina. It is a spiritual practice of looking at the word of God in scripture and reflecting on it. The technique is to read a particular passage of scripture over and over again until certain words stick out in the text. Then to sit quietly for a period of time and reflect on those particular words and ask God why they stuck out to the person. This practice teaches centering prayer and being still listening for God.

The first night we attempted this practice of lectio divina the students spent 5 minutes in silent reflection. As the week went on we added 5 minutes each night. At the end of the week, we spent 30 minutes in silent prayer and reflection listening for God in our lives. Now there was a student in the group named Brian who was the quarterback for the High School football team. And on this last night Brian had tears running down his cheeks. His parents made him come to church, but he never had what he called an authentic relationship with God. God was just a thought, not someone he had a personal connection with. But on the last night of this mission trip while he was silently listening for God he felt the presence of the Lord speaking to him. It moved him in such a way that it brought him to tears. I remember the other adult chaperons coming around Brian and praying with

him. He experienced the presence of God in such a way that it transformed his life.

Part 3: Learning to Listen

Learning to listen to God is a practice that takes time to develop. There are many people I know who have patiently waited their entire life to hear God. The beauty of having a place like the temple or a sanctuary is that it is a place already prepared to be able to silently reflect and listen for the Lord speaking in our lives.

People want to come into a church to be able to pray. There is something about sitting in such a space that is comforting. It is unlike any other space. To quote a line from a movie I enjoy, “it is saturated with prayer”. A sanctuary is a holy place unlike other places. I remember as a young man walking into the sanctuary with a hat on one day and being slapped across the back of the head. Not the welcome I expected in church. But it is out of reverence we remove our hats in church. Although if we kept the Jewish tradition, we would cover the top of our head. Regardless, a sanctuary is a sacred space where it is a little easier to feel the presence of God.

The people of Israel did not realize what made the temple special until they lost it. And the author of Lamentations reminds them that even though they don't have the temple to pray in, they can still be still and wait upon a response from the Lord in other places. They had to learn how to seek God without use of the temple. It felt strange and foreign to them, but they learned to do it.

Part 4: How to Meditate

This concept of quietly waiting and listening for God is called meditating. It requires being still and listening. There are things we can do to practice meditating. I mentioned the use of a practice called Lectio Divina which uses scripture as a form of meditation. Sometimes a bell is used with this practice of Lectio Divina. A practice of prayer that I like to use is called Taizē. It was adopted in Taizē France during the Great War. It uses Gregorian chants and long periods of silence with reflective prayers. However, there are modern styles of it that substitute jazz in place of the chants. The focus of the service is to be reflective and listen for the presence of God. Many who are seeking healing find it comforting. It is my hope

to introduce this style of worship here sometime this year as an evening vesper service during a weekday.

There are other meditative forms of prayer. The use of a labyrinth is a great tool for meditative prayer. It focuses on the journey and walking with the Lord. As a person makes their way through the path they stop and reflect at different parts of the maze.

Learning to be still and quiet takes time to develop. Sadly, for many the world moves so fast that finding time for such endeavors is difficult. Although with everything that has happened this past year many people are experiencing a spiritual awakening. They are finally finding time to pray and read the Bible. They are enjoying long walks. They are learning to be appreciative of the little things. They are learning to recognize God in new places.

Meditation is like a musician that trains their ears. You and I might listen to a piece of music and it sounds beautiful. But a trained musician listening to that same song will hear things you and I probably would not notice. They might hear subtle tones in the piece, or a vibration of a chord progression that resonates. They would notice things the average person might never hear or be aware exists. It is the same way with God. Unless we learn how to listen for God we might never experience what Brian felt when he heard God for the first time in his life. It moved him to tears.

Conclusion:

I will leave you with this. Scripture says, “seek and ye shall find, ask and ye shall receive, knock and the door shall be open unto thee.” Each new day is an opportunity to discover something new. It is a chance to start over again.

This is a year of new beginnings. I look forward to being able to introduce and share some new things with you. Taizē is just one of the new things I hope can be a new beginning in this new year. Our Ash Wednesday Service coming up in a couple weeks will have elements of this style of worship in it. The Invocations every week in the service come from a Taizē website that gives a Psalm of the day. There are new and wondrous things that are ahead for all of us as we discover new beginnings. Amen.