



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading: Lamentations 3:19-27

Background of the reading

The book of laments is actually called “ekah” in the Hebrew text after the first word of the book. It means “where and how” setting and describing the atmosphere of the whole book. The Book is compiled by a set of five separate poems that could also be sung! The author, we can either assume it was Jeremiah or someone acting on his behalf, is lamenting on the dreadful situation of the Judean people. The setting is the historical crisis of a destroyed city, Jerusalem. It describes the dreadful days of the Babylonians who came and destroyed the temple and Jerusalem in 587 BC and took most of the survivors into exile.

The speaker is both a spectator and victim of the tragedy. The Judean survivors are humiliated and in desperate need of help. The songs are like funeral hymns conveying their intense grief and mourning. The vocabulary and metaphors describing the suffering are graphic and earthy. The once proud city is now like a widow, a queen became a slave. They never ever thought that the temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed. They thought of the temple as indestructible. They thought they could just do what they like. God would always be in his temple in Jerusalem.

The good life of joy, feasting, treasures, and prosperity is gone. Once elegant and bedecked with finery, the leaders are now blacker than soot, with their skin shriveled. Women have been ravished. Children cry for food. There is no one to comfort them. The harsh reality is described, not denied. The grief is not muted or misrepresented.

The poet faces God on their behalf with their pain and affliction. He tells them that they have sinned against God. They broke the covenant with God by not obeying his will. Everything happened to them because they neglected their

God and saviour. But he is also telling them that despite all the pain, suffering, affliction and mourning God still loves them.

The poet is telling them to hope in God. They hoped on meaningless things. They thought they had lost their way but actually God is still in control. Instead of having the ONLY beacon that survives all time and every situation, namely God, they hoped and held on to the meaningless and worthless beacons. The poet is telling them although they might think they are without any beacons to continue with their life journeys, God is still the only beacon of hope and love!

The basis for renewed hope is God's "great love." The Hebrew word *gesed*, sometimes translated as "covenant love" or "loyal love," is a word that has the basic meaning of *loyalty* or *faithfulness*, especially as related to the covenant initiated by God; the word involves obligations to family, friends, and the community. Another basis of hope is God's unfailing "compassions" *ragamim*; from a word related to the womb, it describes the tender, caring love of a mother, entertaining strong feelings of love and affection!

We know now when looking back this hope was not unfounded because in the year 539 BC the exiles to Babylonia were allowed to return to Judea and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple!

Reflection and meaning of the reading

The text for the sermon

²⁴ I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion/inheritance/lot; therefore I will wait for him."

The message is clear: The prophet said to the Judean people that they had lost their way because their beacons were wrong! They hoped on the things that did not matter at all and had deserted their true faith in their God.

The message made me think of the message of an old German fairy tale that we all know, namely the story of Hansel and Gretel. If you have forgotten the story, let me refresh your memory:

Once upon a time there lived a poor woodcutter with his second wife and two children Hansel and Gretel. When they had no more food to eat, his second wife convinced him to take them away in the woods and leave

them there to care for themselves because if the children stayed they were all going to starve to death. The poor father had no other option and took them away. However, Hansel being aware of the evil and wicked plan of his step mother, left a trail of pebbles which helped them to find their way back home again!

The stepmother was so angry and locked them up for the night with only a loaf of bread and water. The next night, the woodcutter did the same again. However, this time Hansel left a trail of bread-crumbs which were eaten by hungry birds. The outcome: they got totally lost in the woods!

After wandering around, Hansel and Gretel stumbled across a house made of gingerbread and other confectionery. They were very hungry and began to eat it. But it was owned by an evil old witch who lured them inside her house. She placed Hansel into a cage and forced Gretel to do the housework, continually sweeping the house. She fed Hansel lots of food with the intention of eating him later.

Eventually, when the witch turned on the oven, Gretel came from behind her and pushed her into it, shutting and locking the oven door. She freed her brother and both were very happy eating away at the sweets. They also found some valuable gold coins. Then they went home and were met by their ecstatic father.

I also think we too have choices in life as to where and who our beacons are?

Sometimes they can be bread crumbs being eaten by the birds, metaphorically the things that do not last like riches, material things and valuable possessions.

If we use these as our beacons in life, we will get lost too. We will lose our ways totally. We will also end up confused and mostly scarred. We often think of them as permanent and valuable assets to help us when difficult times come. But in the end they are just passing, earthly and finite things and of no help when:

- we get ill,
- we suffer under depression and feelings of guilt,
- when our husbands or wives leave us,
- or when our children or relatives die,
- when we lose our work,
- when our children or family members struggle with addictions or abuse;

- when our relationships start to break up...

These earthly things cannot give us eternal peace and stability - only joys that lasts minutes, and peace seconds. They cannot give us any lasting hope when everything in our lives starts to fall apart. They are just like bread crumbs – one minute here and the next away, taken by someone else!

But if we use pebbles, metaphorically, the things that last like our faith and trust in God, we will never get lost. We will also experience suffering and despair but if we have God as our one and only beacon we will have him to hold on to when things go wrong in our lives. He will be a light when we get lost and He will be available to talk to when everybody else is ignoring us.

He will even be there when we want to jump from the high cliffs of life's failings. He will be there when the wind blows so hard trying to tip our boats over. He will help us in every storm and struggle although at times we might feel He has left us! He will be there for us as long as we trust Him.

And how do we know this? God showed us in Jesus Christ the nature of his "gesed" – His love. He went on a road of suffering to release us from the struggles of hell. He saved us from our sins. He left his Holy Spirit to be like pebbles on our roads to help us to stay focussed on the narrow road to heaven! He gave us His Holy Spirit as the best SAT NAV there is. But unlike a SAT NAV that often take us in wrong directions, His Bible tells us exactly how we ought to behave as His followers on this earth. And after all this He invites us often and always to speak to Him in prayer, to tell Him of our struggles and tribulations!

May we never ever confuse the bread crumbs with the pebbles!

Amen