

093012 The Fruit of Faithfulness-The Spirit of Speech
Lamentations 3; Matthew 10

Last week, we spoke of our faithfulness to God and how the Holy Spirit brings together our personal experience and the universal reality of God in such a way that, when we speak of the faith, we are speaking a language of forgiveness and reconciliation and redemption. This week, we are looking at God's faithfulness to us. When we look at the fruit of faithfulness from this perspective we will see how our words of faith lead to actions of faith.

Lamentations 3 contains familiar words to most of you, since it is the foundation for that great hymn, *Great is thy Faithfulness*. Notice that the words of God's faithfulness in Lamentations and the assurance of the presence of the Holy Spirit from Jesus today are both in the context of loss and threat. In Lamentations, all has been lost for the Jewish community. Jerusalem has been destroyed. As a result, the hope of the writer has been destroyed. Then, in the midst of this, he remembers God's faithfulness: **Lamentations 3:21-23** *But this I call to mind, 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.* In Jesus' words to the disciples, he tells them to expect persecution, arrest and punishment for what they believe. Right in the moment when things are the worst, he tells them, is when you should trust that the Holy Spirit will speak on your behalf:

Matthew 10:19-20 *When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; 20 for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.*

This trust and confidence in the Holy Spirit and her capacity to speak on our behalf is available to us because we have been given the Holy Spirit. She dwells with and within us.

1 Corinthians 6:19 *Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?*

We are, as the Eastern Orthodox Church says, *theotokos*, God-carriers, Spirit-carriers. God's faithfulness to us and in us becomes our faith in God. Our faith becomes a beacon for the possibility of faith for those who do not have faith. Indeed, the motivation for speaking to others about the faith we have in God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit is precisely God's faith in them and us. Do we share God's faithfulness?

There is great power in this God-given faith, and in God's faithfulness to us. It is what builds community. We often think of ourselves as drawn here on Sunday mornings because of *our faith*. Church and the things we do as a church are an expression of *our faithfulness*. But imagine, if you will, that what has drawn you here, what has gathered us together, is really *God's faithfulness*. We become a community of faith who reflects the words of the Psalmist:

Psalm 145:8-13 *The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. 9 The LORD is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made. 10 All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD, and all your faithful shall bless you. 11 They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power, 12 to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. 13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. The LORD is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds.*

We gather together because God is faithful to us. He joins us together in a covenant with God and with one another. In that covenant, we become a community of faith. And we become a community who interprets and seeks a greater understanding of God's faithfulness to us, by way of the Holy Spirit. Jurgen Moltmann calls this kind of community a *community of mutual interpretation*. By that he means we are a community who gathers together to constantly and regularly interpret the way God is present with us in the world and our lives. When such a community is under duress and pressure, interpreting

the work of the Holy Spirit becomes immediate and of utmost importance. The interpretation of Christ's presence defines the actions of the community. To put it simply, what we say about ourselves influences directly the actions we will take with regard to that which we believe and in which we have faith.

There is a story from Carthage in 200AD. This is the story of two martyrs for the faith, Perpetua and Felicitas, and their small community. When the Holy Spirit comes to the disciples, as we spoke of last week, the whole world seems to light up for them from the inside out. This is what the Holy Spirit does. She gives us over to God and sends us out to speak a new world into being so that God might transform everything. She empowers us to remember God's faithfulness to us, for the sake of others.

In Carthage, the ruler Septimus Severus issued a decree that forbade the practice and conversion to Christianity. As a result, 5 people were rounded up- 3 men and 2 women- for professing their faith. The women were 22-yr-old Perpetua, who was married to a wealthy man, and a pregnant slave named Felicitas. Perpetua herself had just given birth to a boy prior to her arrest. Perpetua's father was a pagan and was horrified at the arrest, and was later truly distressed at the sentence of death by wild animals for all 5 of the Christians arrested. He tried several times to get Perpetua to simply pay homage to the gods of Carthage and avoid death, but Perpetua refused. When she was asked by the prosecutor to offer sacrifice to the emperor and the gods for the sake of her new baby and her father, she steadfastly refused. She said, *"I will not do so"*. The prosecutor asked, *"Are you a Christian?"* Perpetua answered, *"I am a Christian"*. The prison guards, like the guards in Paul's imprisonment in the Book of Acts, were impressed and moved by the faith of the Christians under their guard. Not only did the Christians look out for one another, but they looked out for everyone else, including the guards. Because of this, the guards allowed Perpetua's family to bring her newborn son into prison so that she could feed and care for him. So in the prison in the cellars of Carthage, Perpetua nursed her son until he was weaned. Perpetua started receiving visions. The visions showed her that she and the others were going to die by wild animals. Perpetua also knew her fight would not be against the animals or against the sword. In one vision, an animal trainer came to her and kissed her as she lay on the floor of the coliseum after being attacked. He said, *"Daughter, peace be with you"*. Perpetua said of the vision, *"Then I awoke and perceived that I was not to fight with the beasts but against the devil. Still I knew that the victory was awaiting me."*

In the meantime, Felicitas, in her eighth month of pregnancy, was praying fervently that her baby would be born before the day of the execution so that she could go into the coliseum with the others who were with her. She wanted to die with her sisters and brothers in Christ rather than wait, since pregnant women were not sent into the coliseum. Two days before the scheduled event, Felicitas gave birth to a baby girl, who was promptly adopted by the visiting Christians whom the guards had now let into the prison.

In God's faithfulness to us, by way of Jesus Christ, we have been given the Holy Spirit. Last week, we said we know the Holy Spirit is present when we are speaking unity into conditions of discord, love into situations of hate, reconciliation into relationships of brokenness, redemption into perceptions and realities of failure and suffering. This is the work of Christ in the world. This is what Jesus did with the disciples. The Holy Spirit, therefore, is the continuing presence of Christ with us. This is because of God's faithfulness to us, even in the midst of destruction, despair and oppression.

Our knowledge of God's faithfulness is only possible because the Holy Spirit has drawn us into a community of mutual interpretation, a community who cares about the faith they have been given, and the ability to withstand the darkness and emptiness of destruction and despair are only possible if we entrust ourselves to the Holy Spirit's words in the midst of such a community.

Romans 11:29-36 *for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable... O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" 35 "Or who has given a gift to him, to*

receive a gift in return?" 36 ¶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever.

The day came for the execution of Perpetua and Felicitas. In her visions, Perpetua had already let everyone know how they were to die. All of the five prayed constantly and asked for the presence of the Holy Spirit as they faced death.

Remember Lamentations 3?

Lamentations 3:18-20 so I say, "Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for 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 daybreak, they were led to the stadium. The day broke. The sun shone down that morning. On March 7, 203 AD, Perpetua and Felicitas were led into the stadium at Carthage. Perpetua had made peace with her father, who did not understand her faith. She had weaned her baby boy from the breast and so freed him to the care of other Christians. She had befriended her captors and guards. Felicitas had given birth to a baby girl and assured her care with another mother. Perpetua and Felicitas mothered the light of Christ within themselves and others with prayer, community and love.

And now, they approached their end. The witness who wrote the account of Perpetua says "they proceeded from the prison into the amphitheatre...joyous and of brilliant countenances. Perpetua followed with placid look and with step and gait as a matron of Christ." This is not what we normally do when confronted with our death, approach it with confidence and trust and most of all joy. Is this not attitude, though, of the author of Lamentations?

Lamentations 3:21-22 But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: 22 The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end;

Perpetua is joyous, free, confident in the face of great resistance. God's mercy, the Holy Spirit, walks with her into the amphitheater.

Wild boars and a great bear are chosen for the men. For Perpetua and Felicitas, a wild and fierce cow is prepared. Perpetua is led in and immediately thrown by the cow. She stands and sees Felicitas crushed underfoot by the cow. Felicitas stands up. Both she and Perpetua are almost naked and mortally wounded. They stand together in the middle of the stadium. Perpetua and Felicitas are led back to the gate of the stadium. In a daze, as if waking from a dream, Perpetua says to one of the Christian men awaiting execution, "I cannot tell when we are to be led out to that cow." He tells her it has already happened. Perpetua does not believe it until she looks down and sees the injuries she and Felicitas have endured. Perpetua turns to the young male Christian and says to him, "Stand fast in the faith, and love one another, all of you, and be not offended at my sufferings."

What we say matters. What we have said to one another makes a difference. The Spirit of speech communicates the faithfulness of God to those who believe. The fruit of faithfulness is a gift of the Holy Spirit because we share God's faithfulness in the words we speak to one another. The assurance of those words give us the strength to face many difficulties and trials.

1 Corinthians 1:8-9 He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Perpetua and Felicitas are led back into the stadium. Just before the Carthagian soldiers run them through with swords, the two mothers, with the crowd going wild around them, exchange the kiss of the peace of Christ, the common greeting and act of community that defined the early Christian community as one of love, forgiveness and grace. Tell the story of God's faithfulness, not for your sake but for the sake of those who need the fruit of faithfulness. Trust the Spirit of speech to find the words.

Lamentations 3:23-25 great is your faithfulness. 24 "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." 25 The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.

Amen.