Faith Enough to see God in Light and in Darkness
A Homily for October 6, 2019
18th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22)
Preached by the Rev’d Dr. Brian K. Wilbert

Revised Common Lectionary Readings
Lamentations 1:1-6, Lamentations 3:19-26, Timothy 1:1-14,
Luke 17:5-10

“Now, O Lord, take my lips and speak through them;
Take our minds and think through them; Take our hearts and set them on fire with love for You
and each other. Amen.”

One of the many many reasons I take joy in being a follower of Christ in the Episcopal
Church is the gift of our lectionary. The three year cycle of readings from scripture for our
Sunday morning worship, while only covering a small portion of the Bible, never the less is a
rich collection for both those who preach, and those who are preached at...Such is the certainly
the case for the readings appointed for this the seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost in Year C, the
third year of our three year cycle. Approximately six lectionary cycles ago, that’s 18 years ago
our lessons appointed for today fell on Sunday October 7, 2001. Eighteen years ago...some of us
were a lot younger back then. There were some who were with us back then who are now of
blessed memory. And there are some among us today who had not yet been born. October 7,
2001 occurred just three and a half weeks after a time which will be remembered as particularly
dark this country and indeed for this world. So hearing the readings from Lamentations and the
portion of lamentations appointed as an alternate to the psalm for the day was, well, it was just a
bit other worldly that a lectionary reading appointed for a particular Sunday in a given year
should speak so clearly to our global situation back then. Hearing it today may be a little jarring,
in fact probably not what we normally expect to hear on a Sunday morning! So here is your
liturgical factoid for the day: This is the only Sunday that any portion of the Biblical Book of
Lamentations occurs in our three-year lectionary cycle. And an alternative reading from the so
called “minor” prophet Habakkuk is offered up as a possibility for this morning. Well, maybe
three years from now. This morning the portions of Lamentations chapters 1 and 3 that we just
heard, said and sang appear as part of the readings appointed for the service of Tenebrae during
Holy Week. That is usually all of Lamentations that most Christians know. And, as an aside, if
you have never been to a Tenebrae Service during Holy Week, it is worth going to hear more
from Lamentations along with Psalms of Lament as we ponder the events from Palm/Passion
Sunday through the Festival of the Resurrection. It really does put things in perspective during
that most holy week of our Christian year.

So, what is behind our reading from Lamentations for today? Well in 586 BCE King
Nebuchadnezzar and his army finally took Jerusalem and burned down the Temple. But that was
only after a 2-year siege that led to famine within the city. The horrors of living through that
siege are difficult to comprehend. Our brief readings from Lamentations only hints at the deep
tragedy that befell those who lived in God’s holy city.

The book of Lamentations consists of five poems of lament that record the grief over the
destruction of Jerusalem. Thousands of truly innocent lives destroyed in the most awful ways.
Children of course, but men and women too who were not leaders, priests or royalty, and had
nothing to do with the cause of this suffering. The poets of Lamentations cry out to God asking
God to explain and account for the tragedies they endured. “Look, O LORD, and consider! To
whom have you done this?”
By way of contrast, in our reading from 2 Timothy for today, St. Paul speaks of the faith that keeps him going, even in his suffering, as he writes to Timothy. And in our Gospel Reading from Luke "Increase our faith!" is the cry of the disciples to Jesus. Faith is a word which we use quite frequently in our spiritual circles. As people of faith however we must be honest about the dark side of life, about the possibility of pain, of unknowing and tragedy. Christians do not deny that life has its dark side. Yet, in times of tragedy...personal, national or global, we believe that God hears our cry, that God cares, and that God grieves with us. Portions of Scripture, like some of the psalms of lament and the book of Lamentations, help us to express our grief and give our grief over to God, so our grief might be comforted and redeemed.

So, how much faith do you have? Despite the popular colloquialism no one can honestly say “I have all the faith in the world.” If we really have faith, do we need more? In our Gospel reading Jesus corrects the disciples’ desire for more faith. By using the mustard seed as an example Jesus says the quantity or degree of our faith does not matter. It is sufficient just to have faith and the parable of the mustard seed is a reminder to Christ’s disciples then and now that even the smallest amount of faith can do wonders. A little faith is a lot! The fact of faith is that either we do or we do not have it. More or less faith is not the problem, faith of any size does wonders.

Are you listening to God’s Word Saints? I have an Episcopal Colleague who greets her congregation at every worship service or parish gathering by saying “Hello Saints!” or “Good morning or Good evening Saints!” I’ll take that description because I believe that we are indeed all saints in progress. And I’ll end my homily today with the story of one of saints of this parish community who is a living example of faith...some might say great faith...she would say faith enough. Now, in a congregation the size of St. Paul’s there are many examples of people of faith, but this is the person, God, through the Holy Spirit, put in my path this week!

Every Wednesday morning Jeanne your Rector, Brian #1 the Curate of this parish, Marge LoPresti our Lay Pastoral Care Associate and I meet in the Rector’s study. And we pray together and then we prayerfully review a list of those from the St. Paul’s Community who have asked for and or are in need of pastoral care. So, I’m the new guy, and I’m still learning names (so keep wearing those name badges) One of the names on the pastoral care list is Joyce Wagner. Some of you may know Joyce and some of you may not know her but all of us need to know Joyce Wagner because she is a woman of faith...enough. Joyce was an active Stephen Minister in this parish and a joyful member of the altar guild among other ministries in this church and then three years ago while on a trip to Germany with her sister, Joyce had a massive stroke. The left side of her body is paralyzed, she can’t walk, she can’t sit up or lay down on her own, and she had to retrain her brain to learn how to speak, and think, and remember. As Marge and I visited with her last Wednesday it became clear to me that what brought her through this dark ordeal in her life was not that she had great faith, but that she had faith enough. Faith enough to hand over to God her pain and her grief at what has happened to her, an unexpected series of tragic events, all of it handed over to God. Does she wish it hadn’t happend? Absolutely! But for Joyce that pain and darkness has been redeemed. And she is busy with the work of praying for this parish and witnessing to her living faith. But don’t just take my word for it my new friends-in-Christ. If you are having a bad day or a bad week, if things aren’t going right in your part of the world, I would suggest that you might want to pay Joyce Wagner a visit at her room in the Judson Park Nursing Unit, and connect with her as a Sister-in-Christ. Her smile, her humor and wit, her attitude, her story and yes, her faith will preach the Gospel about faith in life’s darkness more than I’m trying to do in this homily.

At times I don't think the church does well in the dark. We present Christian faith as an exercise of reason, as a means of enlightenment for the illuminated. We are therefore more comfortable here at 7:45 a.m., 9 a.m. and 11:15 a.m. in the morning, when the windows shine,
even if the power goes off, and we can identify who is sitting next to us in the pews and when all
is smiling confidence in ourselves and in God too. God is not just the God of light, God is also
God of the darkness. Remember the words read each year when we celebrated the Feast of the
Incarnation otherwise known as Christmas "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did
not overcome it" (Jn 1:5). "The people who sat is darkness have seen a great light, and for those
who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned" (Mt 4:16).

In a few weeks we will be hearing a report about Connecting Communities, an initiative
in our Diocese which seeks to help church communities connect more deeply with God, each
other and our neighbors. We are connected to Joyce Wagner and she is connected to us through
belonging to and embracing the mission and ministry of this parish church. While we were
visiting her she received her mail for the day which included a card from another member of St.
Paul’s Cleveland Heights. She has a Stephen Minister assigned to her. She regularly receives
communion from a Lay Eucharistic Visitor. She attends the monthly Eucharist at Judson Park
organized by Deacon Colwell and supported by a host of Judson Park residents who volunteer to
help set up, and greet people and make sure resident parish members like Joyce get to the service.
Connections, Connections, Connections my sisters and brothers in the faith. It’s not rocket
science or the latest grow your church gimmick. It is faith enough. This is the faith that Jesus
calls us to, to walk with Jesus and allow Jesus to walk with us through this broken, messy and
hurting world. The faith we need, the faith Jesus calls us to is to serve God, to give our lives for
the spread of the Gospel in good times and in bad, in times of plenty and times of scarcity, when
all is going well in our lives and when our lives are challenged. That is faith in action and that is
faith enough. God be with you. (And also with you.)

Let us pray:

Almighty God our light in all darkness, help us to be honest when we pray. Preserve us
from false talk, from cheap words, and insincere conversation when we come to you in prayer.
Instructed by the saints who talked to you before us, help us honestly to say what's on our hearts
and minds when we talk to you. Keep us confident that your love is not severed when we cry out
to you in hurt and despair. Help us to lay our anger and fear(s) upon your altar, that you might
take our cries and turn it into your praise. In faith we ask these things in your most holy name.
Amen.