

Well, we're going to have a little fun with the lectionary this week. As I've mentioned before, I tend to draw my sermons each week from the texts of the Revised Common Lectionary, a three-year cycle of Bible readings used by many Christians around the world. Each week, I find that some scriptures speak to me more than others. Sometimes I use one of the four weekly scriptures, sometimes more. This week, I had more choices than usual. You see, Catholics, Episcopalians and Lutherans use variations of the common lectionary. Since I use the lectionary in part to avoid the temptation to stick to familiar ground – I think the Bible has a Top 40 among preachers just as surely as pop music has a Top 40 among DJs – I chose to focus this morning on two rather obscure passages for our Call To Worship and our Scripture reading, the Lutheran alternate reading and the Catholic alternate reading from the Old Testament. As I considered doing this, mostly I confess for the challenge and the fun of it, I discovered that these two passages actually had some very important themes in common and set up some lovely and important resonances with this morning's readings from the New Testament. They both point to "a promise for the future and a blessing for today," which some of you, I think will recognize as a quote from the Gospel according to John. John Denver, that is.

Since our two primary texts are indeed a little obscure, let me take a few minutes to introduce them in their context. First, the reading you just heard from the Wisdom of Solomon. If you are flipping through your pew Bibles to find Wisdom of Solomon, stop. It's not there. In fact, I suspect that for those of you who brought your own Bibles this morning, the only person who has this book is Connie. You see, the Wisdom of Solomon, or simply Wisdom as it is also known, is in the versions of the Bible used by Catholic and Orthodox Christians but not in those used by Protestants, unless it's in a section in the back labeled Apocrypha. Why the difference? Well, in the early days of the Church, the common language was Greek, so early Christians used the Greek version of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint. This version of our Old Testament, however, contained some books that copies of the Scriptures in Hebrew did not and had some variant readings in some books. This difference was considered acceptable by most early Christians, although some considered these extra books as not quite as important for faith as the Hebrew-only books. With the Protestant Reformation, though, and the interest in recapturing the faith of the apostles without the accretion of Church tradition, there was a move back to the Hebrew-language scriptures as a source and those books and portions of books that were found only in Greek were dropped.

So why am I, an avowed Baptist-on-purpose, turning my back on 500 years of Protestant practice. Well, I think sometimes those great reformers, in their haste to purify the Church, threw the baby out with the bathwater. Was the book of Wisdom written by Solomon? Almost assuredly not, but then it's also not certain that the other books often attributed to him in our Old Testament – Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes – were written by him either, so that's no reason to ignore this book. The fact is that, while Jesus, who used the version of the Scriptures written in Hebrew and common in Palestine, may not have known this book, Paul, the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the evangelist Matthew almost certainly did and quoted it as they did other Scripture. Its author was probably a Greek-speaking Jew living in that great center of ancient learning, Alexandria, at a time when its large Jewish population was under persecution by its Greco-Egyptian ruler, some 120 to 250 years before the birth of Jesus. The book is, in large part, a reflection on the response of God's faithful people to suffering, a topic to which the writers of Scripture return again and again. There is indeed wisdom to be found in this

book, the wisdom that comes from a heart which hungers and thirsts for God's righteousness at a time when both God's righteousness and God's presence seem remote in daily life. That's the kind of wisdom that we need in this day as well. So, at the risk of being accused of popery or crypto-Catholicism, I think we would do well to see what we can learn from the book of Wisdom.

The book of Lamentations is probably only marginally more familiar to us. Oh, it's in all our Bibles all right, tucked in right between the two long prophetic books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. But if I've ever heard a sermon that made much use of it, or studied it either in Sunday School or in seminary, I can't remember it. It's a small book, only five chapters and easy to overlook. It's also not an easy read. The book was written, probably by the prophet Jeremiah, in the aftermath of the dreadful siege and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC. It is, as the title suggests, a series of laments, songs of mourning for the death of that great city and so many of its inhabitants, the destruction of the Temple and of the sacrificial system established by Moses. The prophet cries out in his sorrow, anger and pain for these events, wondering if Israel can maintain its identity as God's chosen people without the Temple, without a way to follow the Law, without a home. In his writing on Lamentations for the Wycliffe Bible Commentary, Ross Price says, "Protestant Christians, one regrets to say, have too often neglected the reading of these solemn poems. Yet in these days of personal, national, and international crises (and disaster) the message of this book is a challenge to repent of sins personal, national, and international, and to commit ourselves afresh to God's steadfast love." Even in the midst of his grief, Jeremiah does recognize that God continues to love steadfastly. Chapter 3 of Lamentations, from which our Call to Worship (*see end of document – ed.*) was taken, is a beautiful affirmation of the faithfulness and compassion of God, a sure and true comfort to any of us who are in the midst of struggle or sorrow.

So what, other than the pleasure of discovery of some new segments of God's Word, do these two passages have to offer us this morning? I think there are two strong and important common threads between these passages and, incidentally, some of the better-known passages in this morning's lectionary. There is something to learn here about the nature of God and also about God's work among God's people and our own nature. First, the nature of God. Remember, both the author of Wisdom and Jeremiah in Lamentations are reacting to situations of death, pain and destruction. Both, however, are quick to point to God's loving nature as a promise for the future. Wisdom 1:13 asserts, "God did not make Death, takes no pleasure in destroying the living." No matter what may befall the faithful, they may be sure that God is ultimately on their side. For this Alexandrian rabbi, the separation between God and death is absolute. In a more modern context, we might say that he is willing to cede some of God's power in favor of God's love. Jeremiah, some three to four hundred years earlier, is not so sure that even the evil that befalls humankind is not a part of God's plan. Some versions of Lamentations 3:32 read, "Although God gives him grief, yet He will show compassion, too..." "Though he punishes, he takes pity..." For Jeremiah, God is sovereign over all things, even if that means we cannot always understand God's love. But, in either case, the writers affirm that God's love will save God's people from ultimate destruction. Even in Scripture, we cannot find a clear and consistent answer for the problem of evil. What we can and do find is assurance that God is on our side no matter how powerful the spirit of evil and chaos may seem in the world. Jeremiah goes on to say in Lamentations 3:33, "the LORD does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone." These pictures of

## A Promise for the Future, A Blessing for Today

the abiding love of God for humanity are echoed by the other Old Testament passage in today's lectionary, II Samuel 1, in which we find David, the king after God's own heart, grieving for the deaths of both Saul, who was his bitterest enemy, and Jonathan, who was his dearest friend, with exactly the same measure of grief and praise for both men. Surely, the faithful love of God for us, whether we are following God's plan or in rebellion against God, is both a promise for our future and a blessing for our every day.

Wisdom 2:23 says, "For God created human beings to be immortal, God made us as an image of God's own nature," or as some translations have it, "in the image of God's own eternity." In explanation of God's loving relationship to humankind, the writer goes back to God's very first action with humans, to our creation. In the view of the book of Wisdom, God loved us so much that God created us to be like God in a way that no other creature is, as an image of God's own self. God's first action towards humankind, our creation, was an act of love. Jeremiah also affirms God's love for humankind in action: "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning." One commentator has written that Jeremiah "expects mercy to come like the rising of the sun." "The LORD is good to those who wait for God's presence in their lives, to the soul that seeks the Creator... our God will have compassion according to the abundance of God's steadfast love." God's active love for us is seen most concretely, for those of us within the New Covenant, in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. In the stories in Mark 5 that comprise the lectionary Gospel reading this morning, Jesus heals the woman with the issue of blood and brings back to life the 12-year old daughter of Jairus. In some instances, where the powers of evil and chaos have interrupted and even ended physical life, God's active love heals and restores just as God's active love through the work of Christ always is able to heal and restore spiritual life.

In his second letter to the Christians in Corinth, the apostle Paul reminds them of Christ's work in this regard, a promise for their future and a blessing for their present. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." Through God's active love for us in Christ, we are not just spared, not just restored to immortality, but made spiritually rich. This blessing in our present carries not just a promise for the future, but also an imperative for the present. "Your abundance at the present time," Paul writes, "should supply the want of others, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality." Paul is in part reminding the Corinthians of their pledge to help other Christians in financial distress, in particular the church in Jerusalem but he is also reminding them, and us, of the great spiritual treasure we have to share.

Because we have encountered God's faithful love in our lives, because we know that God is on our side and, as the hymnist wrote, "through thorny ways leads to a peaceful end," we have a duty under God to go out and share that good news with the spiritually poor, with those who live their lives in fear and grief amid the chaos. John Denver wrote those words, "a promise for the future and a blessing for today" about children and flowers but we are the children of God's Kingdom, siblings and joint heirs with Christ Jesus and we are more precious to God than the lilies of the field. As the love of God is a promise for our future and a blessing for our day, so are we to be promise and blessing for our neighbors throughout the world. Our abundance must supply their want; we must be willing to pour out our richness on them just as Christ did for us.

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For we are the body of Christ in this place, for this time. We remember the sacrifice of Jesus today in our communion celebration, breaking bread and drinking the fruit of the vine just as he did on that night so long ago. But we are called to extend that celebration to all, to make it alive today, carrying the reality of God's faithful, active love to those who long to know it. We may indeed expect God's mercy when we fall on our knees with our face to the rising sun but we will only truly experience that mercy when we become the conduits of God's mercy and love for others.

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The Call to Worship mentioned in the sermon follows:

LEADER: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end;

**PEOPLE: They are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness.**

LEADER: "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in Yahweh."

**PEOPLE: The LORD is good to those who wait for God's presence in their lives, to the soul that seeks the Creator.**

LEADER: Although grief comes in our lives, our God will have compassion according to the abundance of God's steadfast love;

**ALL: For the LORD does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.**