

## LIFT UP YOUR HEARTS

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, March 24, 2019  
based on Lamentations 3:40–41; 55–58***

Several years ago, PPG Industries came out with a kind of self-cleaning glass—window glass with a photocatalytic surface that was said to cause dirt to just fall off. I’m waiting for a self-cleaning floor so that all those bits of things that I drop in the kitchen will just get carried off. Of course, you could say that God already invented that—it’s called ants. But we consider God’s little garbage cleaners to be just adding to the mess. It’s all part of the ongoing challenge of keepings one’s house in order.

The writer of the book of Lamentations was concerned with helping people to get their spiritual house in order. At the time of the writing of the book, everything in the land of Israel was a mess. It was the people’s own fault that it was a mess. The people had forgotten God and strayed from God’s ways, and as a result calamity had struck in the form of the Babylonian invasion. The Babylonians had laid waste to the cities and had carried many people off into exile. The early chapters of Lamentations describe how all the buildings were now in ruins. But of greater concern to the writer of Lamentations was that fact that people were spiritually in ruins. They had lost spiritual direction; they were in despair and disconnected from God. Before they could ever rebuild their country, they needed to rebuild their soul.

Today when we look at our own world, we see much that is in a mess—whether we are looking at the serious divisions and hatred among people, or the perpetual problems of poverty and hunger, or the worrisome state of the environment. One of the central insights of the Bible is that human beings will never be able to set the world aright until they get their hearts and minds put right, and that can happen only through a life-giving connection with God. As the Psalmist put it, “Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain.” (Psalm 127:1) Jeremiah in Lamentations speaks of how we can experience that kind of spiritual renewal.

The passage we heard from Lamentations 3 begins, “Let us test and examine our ways and return to the Lord.” [Lam. 3:40] If I want to clean up the mess that I made of the kitchen floor, the first thing I need to do is to notice the problem—all the crumbs on the floor—and then I need reach for the answer, grabbing a broom. In spiritual terms, this process is called penance. I need to recognize and acknowledge the problem areas in my life (or in social terms, we need to recognize the problems in society)– “Let us test and examine our ways,” says Jeremiah—and then we need to reach for the answer—”return to the Lord.”

But precisely such a practice of penance is what is often lacking in our world today. The first part of penance—confessing one’s sin—is sometimes glaringly lacking. Look at political leaders—from the very top on down—and you often see a refusal to acknowledge or admit error and weakness. The same problem can be found even in religious institutions. The Catholic Church today is wrestling with terrible scandal precisely because some of the leadership refused to acknowledge and address serious wrongdoing. We may have trouble admitting

wrong in our own lives. But Jeremiah calls for genuine honesty in every aspect of life, as he says, “Let us test and examine our ways.” (Lamentations 3:40)

Seeing the problem is the first step; but then of course one must also see the right solution. When it comes to putting the house in order, I find that this is the especially tough part. I can see that the sink does not drain and that the refrigerator door handle just broke; how to solve that is the bigger challenge.

The Bible clearly lays out the human problem, which it calls sin—our alienation from the good will of God—but the major focus of the Bible is on the tough part: how there can possibly be an answer for our human brokenness. God ultimately provides the answer through Jesus Christ, as Christ offers his life for us on the cross, so that we can be forgiven and reconciled to God, and as Christ rises from the dead, so that we might have life forever with God. If we wish therefore to take hold of the solution for the human problem, we need to do precisely what Jeremiah says—return to the Lord—so that we might receive the saving grace that God is offering to us.

But if it is difficult for people to engage in the first part of penance—confessing one’s sin—it is all the more difficult for people to engage in the second part—genuinely turning to God. In our secular age, people are so often inclined to look for every other possible answer to their need except God. But even when people acknowledge their need for God, engaging in an authentic returning to God can be difficult. It is easier to just give lip service to God or to go through the motions of religion.

Jeremiah addresses this issue directly as he continues by saying, “Let us lift up our hearts as well as our hands to God in heaven.” (Lamentations 3:41) In ancient times, when people in Israel prayed, they generally did not put their hands together but rather lifted their hands upward toward heaven as a symbol of praise and openness to God. Of course, since this is what people routinely did in prayer, it was easy to simply go through the motions. Jeremiah appeals for something much deeper and more authentic—to lift up one’s heart.

And it is quite clear what we need to lift our hearts to—to “God in heaven”—for God alone has the power to save us from all that would pull us down. A little later in chapter 3, Jeremiah goes on to speak of his personal experience of this saving power of God. Across several verses he describes an experience of great trial in his life, but then he concludes, “You have taken up my cause, O Lord, You have redeemed my life.” (Lamentations 3:58)

The whole process of penance—acknowledging one’s spiritual need, turning to God in faith, opening oneself to God, and experiencing God’s saving grace—is a central theme in the season of Lent—and it is really at the heart of every service of worship. [10:30—You can see it in the movements of the Mass in G that we will be hearing this morning] [8:30/9:30—You can see the theme in the songs and prayers of our service this morning]. Today, like Jeremiah, as we look out into our lives and into our world, we may see much that needs to be put right. Jeremiah calls us to the real answer, as he says, “Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord. Let us lift up our hearts as well as our hands to God in heaven.” (Lamentations 3:40–41)