

Lamentations 1:1-6
Luke 17:5-10

“Holographic Faith”
1st Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
J. Shannon Webster
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“How lonely sits the city that once was full of people... she has no one to comfort her...the roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to the festivals; all her gates are desolate.” Is the prophet talking about Jerusalem, or Birmingham? Of course, this lament is over the destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem, in 587 BC. A great part of the population, including the religious and social leaders of the Jewish people, were taken into captivity in Babylon. The very center of the universe had been destroyed, in the Hebrew theological view of the world, and reality ceased to make sense. In this lament, Zion is personified; Jerusalem weeps.

How lonely sits the city that once was full of people. Maybe that describes the Birmingham of a few years ago better than the one today. And could it be the lament of those who once lived in the city, and fled? When there were no longer jobs for lower middle class folks, and Ensley ceased to be vital. When the grand homes decayed on Norwood Boulevard, schools closed, buildings were boarded, weeds grew, and those who remained feared for their safety, in too many Birmingham neighborhoods. Hastened by the greed of those with scary whispers: “Sell, before it’s too late.” This congregation, at least, heard the lament of the exiled and homeless and responded with First Light, Ruth and Naomi, and other outreach.

Now Birmingham seems to be coming back, we hope. Some of you have moved downtown, and new businesses are opening with regularity in the core. The city has embraced a plan to end chronic homelessness, and maybe part of it will work. I go to the Downtown Business Association meetings – we, as a church, belong to that organization – and the hopefulness and positive outlook is palpable. So you who vote in the city – go vote. Stay involved.

I used the image of exile with churches in the oil fields of the Permian Basin, some years ago, when the bottom fell out of that market, and many felt in exile when they never moved. What had been assumed to be secure reality was gone. And the image has been used to describe mainline Christian denominations. There was a time we spoke and the leaders of this nation listened. Not any more. We live on the margins, today.

It is a time that tests faith. We can't take so much for granted. So we might want some more faith, to be stronger in our faith. And the help for which the disciples ask, in our Gospel passage, after Jesus had given them something particularly hard to chew, might make sense. "Increase our faith." That sounds good. So Jesus' reaction seems a bit surprising at first. It sounds harsh, as if he were saying, "Life is hard. Get a helmet." But he is actually teaching them something *about* faith.

He gives two snapshots from life in everyday Israel. In Matthew's version of this it is a mountain, but Luke uses the mulberry tree – actually a sycamine, a tree with very deep roots. It can't be transplanted. And Jesus says: "If you had just a *little* faith, mustard-seed sized, you could uproot it and plant it in the sea.

And he gave the example of the master and the slave – which has no real corollary in our culture - to say when the slave comes in from the farm he/she still tends to the dinner in the house as a duty. So when we have done our duty for God, why do we expect a reward for doing the minimum? There is no point at which you collect overtime, you don't rack up points with God, there's no scorecard for spirituality. Jesus came among us as a servant Lord, and calls us to service.

Understand these two things – mustard-seed faith and the servant who expects no special reward, are both in response to the request of the fearful, "Increase our faith. We are going to have to have

more faith, stronger faith, to deal with this world.” Jesus isn’t reprimanding them for an absence of faith- “If you had faith as a mustard seed...” – but pointing them to the faith they have and inviting them to live out the potential of it. He is saying something like: “It is not the amount of faith you have so much as that you have any at all. Thinking you don’t have enough is sort of like thinking you are a little bit pregnant. You are or you aren’t; you do or you don’t. It’s not about our faith anyway, and how much we have. It is about the faith of Jesus Christ and what it does for us. There’s no point system, to get us an extra hour off of doing good works, no point system to get us to salvation. Faith just *is*, and if you need a formula, it is this: there is more mercy in God’s love than there is sin in us.

I’ve been thinking of faith as a hologram, this week, as I read these texts. In part because we are in this together. The lament in our Old Testament text is not an individual one, but a community one. All people suffer for the sins of the nation, the city. Conversely, we belong to a community of faith, that even stretches backwards and forwards in time, beyond our life spans, and at any point represents the Body of Christ.

So... holograms – which are three-dimensional images stored and reproduced using light from lasers. I don’t entirely understand how they do it. As best I can describe, a lightbeam is bounced off an object, and another beam, a reference beam, intersects it and a photograph is made of the image where the light contains the objects entire impression. Another reference beam can reconstruct that. Here’s what’s cool – every small portion of that photograph contains enough of the image of the whole object to reconstruct the original. The very word is Greek - holos, from which we get “whole”, and graphos, “message” – the whole message. So viewing a holograph is like looking through a window to see the whole object, a window with a memory. And you can later see the entire scene by moving your viewpoint the same way you can look outside in any direction through a window in your house. Holonomic brain theory comes from this – when

researchers realized that memory was not stored in any one point alone, but in multiple places in the brain, sort of like a holograph.

I think that's why Jesus told those disciples, "If you had faith as big as a mustard seed (and you do), you would be amazed at what that can mean, what can happen." That faith is a point on the hologram; containing enough information to reconstruct the whole.

You are a point on the hologram. Made in the image of God. Beyond what you can imagine, with enough information to reconstruct the whole. And we come to the table, which is our reference beam, and the Body of Christ is reconstructed. Especially on World Communion Sunday this image is powerful for me, because the hologram is reconstructing grace at tables all over this planet. I think the gospel-writer John was saying this same thing:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

Here's our reference beam – bread and wine, and when that reference illuminates us, we become the Body of Christ, 3-dimensional, living-color. We should come away from this table with a Jesus-shaped impression in our lives.

That should be enough to end the exile, to comfort the city that mourns. Or, as John the Revelator pictured it, "I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, a new Birmingham, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned." Praise be to God.