

Maumee Watershed District Lent 2018 'Faithful to the End' #1
"Great is Thy Faithfulness"

Lamentations 3:21-24 *But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." (Lamentations 3:21-24)*

Tom Chisolm would have been called 'frail' or 'at risk' at birth. In school he was not able to do what most kids could do and his medical condition did not improve much in adulthood. Chronic allergies, anemia, susceptible to sickness often left him bed-ridden and unable to work. When he would get some strength back he would work overtime to try and make ends meet; but of course that would leave him more susceptible and put him down worse than before. He was often hopeless about his future. Then Tom found Jesus Christ and took great comfort in the Scriptures. He somehow began to believe God would be faithful to him in time of illness and weakness. He began to believe he would no longer be the only one providing for himself, but God would help him. A passage from the book of Lamentations became one of his favorite scriptures: "*It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is Thy faithfulness.*"

One of the gifts God gave Tom was the ability to write poetry. He got well enough to go on a mission trip and on this trip he wrote to a good friend, who was a musician, sending him several of his poems. One of these poems moved the musician so much he wrote the musical score to accompany the poem's lyrics. The hymn was published in 1923 but got little recognition for several years. Then it was discovered by a professor at Moody Bible Institute. He loved it so much he requested it sung at almost every chapel service; it became the theme song of the college. In 1945 George Beverly Shea began to sing the song at Billy Graham's crusades, and the hymn *Great is Thy Faithfulness* was heard around the world.

As we journey through this season of Lent, I want us to consider God's faithfulness and how God is, 'Faithful to the End.' We will seek to see how God is faithful to us. We will look at the life and death of Jesus and how He touched people 2000 years ago and brought them hope. How Jesus brought hope to people like Tom 50 years ago, and to people like you and me today. How Jesus shows us God is still faithful to His children and will be until the end of time.

How does this happen for us? How can we be convinced God is faithful? We live in a cynical world – terrorism at home and abroad. Disastrous storms, earthquakes, school and nite club shootings, school, a skyrocketing divorce rate, cancer ravaging our loved ones. Is there any hope? Is God really faithful?

The Old Testament Book of Lamentations was written by the prophet Jeremiah during the time Jerusalem was being invaded and destroyed by the Babylonians. He writes in poetic style like Tom Chisolm. His purpose was to remind the people of Israel then, and us today, we cannot rely on ourselves, on our nation, on our pride or performance. Our suffering is often due to our independence and lack of dependence on God. We need to look to and pray to God who can heal and rescue us. And even in the hardest of times, we should always hope in God. So, how do we see God's faithfulness? We see -

1. God's Faithfulness in Scripture. God was faithful to David when he battled the giant Goliath. God was faithful to Abraham and Sarah and gave them a child in their old age. God was faithful to Gideon as he became a mighty warrior and battled the enemy Midianites. God was faithful when Jesus called the disciples, taught them, and empowered them to change the world.

Some will say Scripture they don't understand the Scripture so don't read it. I don't understand how medicine works but that doesn't keep me from taking it because I believe it will make me feel better. God keeps His promises. God does what God says He will do.

The Hebrews have many names for God that describe God's character. One is *Jehovah Shammah*, which means God is always there. They believed God was faithful, in the good times and the bad. Even when Jerusalem was being destroyed by the Babylonians Jeremiah saw God present with them. "*It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is Thy faithfulness.*" We can see -

2. God's Faithfulness in Current Reality. Our family was in Washington D.C. last December and went to Ford's Theater where Abraham Lincoln was shot. We saw where they carried him across the street to a neighbor's house and held vigil until he died. Some would say what kind of faithfulness is that? Lincoln believed God called him to keep our Union together and end slavery. Even though a Civil War ensued and Lincoln died, God was faithful to him. God's plan was enacted by Lincoln and later came to fruition. I believe God was faithful to Martin Luther King's dream even though his outcome was the same as Lincoln's.

God said, *For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart* (Jeremiah 29:11-13).

Some say, what about the storms of life? Are those planned? Where was God in all the recent hurricanes and forest fires? All that destruction! I believe God was there; Jesus was in the eye of the storm. Do you remember the disciples in the boat – the Sea of Galilee raging? Jesus had told them to get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side while he went up on a mountainside to pray. Where was Jesus in the storm? He was praying. Did He know about the storm, could He feel the winds, see the thunder and lightning? No doubt. When He sensed the danger, He chose to pray. Today Jesus continues to intercede for us.

Jesus then walked on the water to meet them in the storm. Jesus meets us in our storms of life at just the right moment. Today He is doing it in Texas and Florida through the steady hands of first responders, the compassion of neighbors, the generosity of people and government. We see only a small portion of His activity, but we can know Jesus still steps into the super-storms of life. I believe God is in the midst of this church's planning a District VIM mission trip to bring God's presence to one of these areas.

Another Scripture says, *We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose* (Romans 8:28). This verse does not say everything is good, or everything works out the way I want it to. It doesn't say all things have a happy ending. Not everybody gets healed, surgery does not work for all, seat belts are not a 100% guarantee, my perfect job may not last forever. What it does say is that God is at work, God is with us, and God loves us and is working hard for us.

We live in a flawed world. There is sin, hurt, war, acts that are not anywhere close to love. I believe God sees all of this and it hurts God as much as it hurts us. God is weaving a tapestry of our lives. The front of the finished tapestry is beautiful, and we marvel at it. But if you look at the back you see a bunch of threads or yarn that make no sense and pretty ugly. Life is like this, ugly at times in the making, but God is making life beautiful again. We can hope in that.

God is coming back one day. But in the meantime, Jesus and His Holy Spirit are here, at work, helping, caring, loving us faithfully as only God can. *"It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is Thy faithfulness.* We can see -

3. God's Faithfulness in Others. I have a friend who has been through some hurricane like storms. Three difficult events recently that knocked him off course and caused deep devastation. Before, he was somewhat skeptical of the church and maybe even of God and his purpose in the world. But these storms actually knocked him onto God's course.

Now I see him growing every day. He has become a ferocious reader of the Scripture and spiritual authors. He is asking lots of good questions, he is leading his family to a good place. He is mentoring others and leading a new men's group. I believe he would tell you God is faithful to the end. I will tell you I am so proud of him. There are many others -

If you ever saw Eddie Fox, you would think he just got off an airplane. His suit is usually wrinkled, shirt stained, hair mussed, circles under his eyes. He looks like he just got off a plane because he probably did. Eddie Fox until just recently was the Director of World Evangelism for the United Methodist Church. He traveled across our world spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He has preached in something like 75 countries. Eddie doesn't preach at all like he looks. He is phenomenal.

He tells of the time he visited the tiny kingdom of Tonga in the South Pacific. It has a population of 100,000 people living in 30 small island communities, that are only a dot on the vast Pacific Ocean, just West of the International Dateline. Tonga is ruled by a king who is a committed Christian and who is a lay preacher in the Free Wesleyan (Methodist) Church. Tonga is known throughout the world as the Friendly Islands. They are a strong and gentle people who value family life and who are bound together in responsible community structures. There is almost no violence there, and at the very heart of the Kingdom of Tonga is the Christian Church.

Those who visit there often ask, "How on earth did such a place develop?" On this island is a village of 300 called Utui. On July 3, 1834 a miracle happened in there which was to have an impact on the entire South Pacific. A group of faithful Methodist Christians gathered in a field near the village to fast and pray. During this prayer meeting, the people experienced a visitation of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit came upon the people with such power that the entire community was transformed. People were set afire in a kind of Tongan Pentecost and began to spread the Gospel through their entire nation. The Church grew with amazing rapidity. New congregations were established throughout the nation. In 1835, just one year later, Tongans climbed into their sea-going canoes, and the Holy Spirit pushed them 500 miles to the west to share the Gospel with their neighbors on the tiny island of Fiji. A year later they traveled 300 miles north to Samoa to witness the Gospel to their former bitter enemies.

Eddie Fox says that today, if you travel to Utui, you will find one of the most unusual historical monuments in the world. As far as he knows, it is the only monument ever erected to commemorate the visitation of the Holy Spirit! Eddie Fox traveled to that monument in Utui. He said he wanted to go and kneel on the holy ground in order to pray for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit and a world Pentecost. He went to that rock in Utui. And after preaching to the people there, he knelt before that marker and asked the leaders of the Church there to lay hands on him and pray that God would empower him to fulfill his ministry. While the leaders were praying, spontaneously, men and women of Utui came forward and began to fall prostrate on the ground. They began to pray fervently for Eddie and his crew and for a world Pentecost. And after a long time, the people came forward and asked Eddie and his crew to lay their hands on them for the receiving again of the Holy Spirit. And miraculously the spirit of revival began anew in Utui. And it spread again across that island and people responded by the hundreds, coming forward to receive the Holy Spirit and to commit themselves again to witnessing their faith.¹ To build a foundation that would propel their nation into God's future.

If you ever see this wrinkle suited, tired looking man you can ask him why he does what he does – traveling 100s of thousands of miles a year, not sleeping, being gone from home. I believe He will tell you it is because God had called him to preach the Gospel around the world and everyday God gives him the strength to do it and that *God will be faithful to him until the end.*

May God's faithful work in Scripture inspire us. May we see the beautiful poetry and tapestry in God is making of our storms of life. May we see Jehovah Shummah – that He is always there. May God's Spirit forge us into a movement that speaks and acts of His faithfulness until the end of time. May we hold onto hope – *His mercies are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness.*"

i.Fox & Morris, Let the Redeemed of the Lord Say So?, pages 177-8.