

The Most Important Piece

Sermon for the 16th Sunday after Trinity

Sermon Text: Lamentations 3:22-26, 31-32



²² The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; ²³ they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. ²⁴ "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in Him." ²⁵ The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. ²⁶ It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. ... ³¹ For the Lord will not cast off forever, ³² but, though He cause grief, He will have compassion according to the abundance of His steadfast love.

A few years ago, two men rode a boat near a dangerous waterfall. The two didn't know about the waterfall and enjoyed the fact that the boat was floating down the river without much work. The closer they came to the waterfall, the faster the boat went until they were floating easily without rowing at all. It was already too late when some bystanders on the riverbank called out to them that they were floating in the direction of the waterfall and towards their doom. They could no longer save the boat and themselves. What previously had been amusing, suddenly turned into a life-threatening situation. But just before the waterfall, there was still hope - a man stood with a life preserver and threw it to the two lost men. The one courageously jumped into the water and could just reach the life preserver. But the other was petrified. He clung to the boat that was destined for ruin, even when it was clear that the boat was going to be destroyed. So the one was saved and the other was lost. What happened with these two men is similar to what happened with the people of Israel. The people of Israel had a boat. The boat was their land. But they lost their way and no longer relied upon God but on their own strength. Therefore the land of Israel fell to its doom. Jeremiah's Lamentations speak about this. The entire population was deported and Jerusalem and the Temple were in ruins. There was no longer any hope for the future and for rescue. In the book of Lamentations, Jeremiah complains about this situation. His words are directed at God. Because behind these events, he recognized God and His punishment. And he then says words like: "You strike me night and day!" The words of Jeremiah are like an echo that has been repeated again and again throughout all parts of the world and resound to this day. We are near to the end and our life-light is almost extinguished. And yet Jeremiah isn't a complainer who always has something to whine about. No, though Jeremiah recognizes God's punishment in the terrible fate of his people, he knows of God's great mercy and love. He knows that God will judge everything for the best in the end. And that's why he doesn't cling desperately to the fate of his people. Jeremiah is not like the man who desperately holds fast to the lost boat to the end. He sees the life preserver that God throws to him at the end and then speaks these wonderful words: "The Lord is my portion!" When Jeremiah talks about a portion, we must dig even deeper. What does it actually mean that Jeremiah has a portion of God? A portion sounds like a piece – like a piece of cake. It is just a part of the whole, only a part and not the whole thing. The saying "The Lord is my portion" comes from that time period in Israel. At that time, there were 12 tribes of Israel. Every clan or family tribe was assigned a territory. The land was distributed like a cake and each received a piece. That was

an inheritance for the whole family! Only one tribe didn't receive an inheritance – they were the Levites or the priests. And it was said of these priests: They have no territory, but the Lord is their portion. Now we can't understand this situation as though the country of Israel was divided like a cake and the Levites came too late so that nothing was left for them. No, the opposite should be clear, that the Levites received the best. They received God and therefore shouldn't belong to any other. The Levites shouldn't be tied to a territory because they belong only to God. They belong to the Lord and no other. Therefore God was their "portion." What a deal! Instead of a piece of land, God Himself would be their portion. God, who created the whole world with everything in it just with His word, He was their portion. That which the Levites didn't have in land and money, they had in the person of God Himself. But they had to work for this. They had to constantly offer sacrifices and intercede or pray for the sins of the people. Priests were like a bridge between God and people. A bridge is for crossing over something. With a bridge, you could go from one side to the other. The priests were exactly like a bridge. A bridge is there so that people can walk on it. And the people did that too. Over and over again they trampled on what God did. They did that so much that everything was destroyed. And that's why everything now lay in ruins. The destruction of Israel showed impressively that God was no longer there. God wasn't even their portion anymore. And that's why Jeremiah cried so bitterly! But Jeremiah's complaining suddenly changed. He's like a lost child who cries loudly for his mom and then suddenly sees his mom and she hugs him. Despite being in the middle of Jerusalem amid the ruins, Jeremiah says: "The Lord is my portion!" Jeremiahs can see that God was still his portion. Though no longer through the priests and also no longer through all the sacrifices they made. But very differently.

God Himself must come and be Jeremiah's inheritance. God did exactly that in Jesus Christ. He simply took the place of the priests and became sacrifice and priest at the same time. HE alone should now intercede for us. In the pile of ruins in Jerusalem, only the remnants of the 12 tribes remained. There is also no longer a country there. And it's exactly at this point that Jeremiah sees very clearly: "The Lord is my portion!" Jeremiah is like the man who tightly wrapped his hands around the life preserver. He can already sense how, with the strong rope, the rescuer pulls him safely to the river bank. And what Jeremiah sees before him is God Himself. The land of Israel is like the boat that fell down the waterfall and was destroyed. But Jeremiah is allowed to see that he receives God Himself instead of the land. So it is with us too. It's true that we constantly lose many things in this life. Everything that we have, such as: land, bank account, family, love... all of that must pass away. It must be like the boat at the waterfall that disappears into nothingness. But not Jesus, we have Him as God's portion.

Many of the people who were able to flee Afghanistan either on an airplane or by foot these last weeks have nothing! Some didn't even have shoes as they boarded the planes. They have lost everything. And for the time being, they will be nationless. And yet it doesn't have to be the end. There's the portion that God also showed Jeremiah. It is God Himself who comes to us in baptism and becomes a part of us. This is much more than any other passport you can have in the world. It is also much more than all the money in the world. What a deal! We can hardly truly comprehend it. Perhaps we can first truly start to comprehend it when we lie in our ashes like Jeremiah and can see things much more clearly. We have all complained - one because his entire family died; another because he received bad news from the federal office; and again another because he or she lost their job. We all have something to complain about. One about this thing, another about something else. One person that we heard about in the Gospel today had lost everything. It was the stinking Lazarus who lay dead in his grave. And then the Lord Jesus came and gave him His divine inheritance. Then Lazarus came out of his grave and everything

was new. It happened at the word of the Lord Jesus. Jesus intentionally performed this miracle so that we should know what He is going to give us. We are to know that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. We should also recognize this when nothing can be seen. On the one hand, we are like the man who sits in his boat and is pulled into the abyss. We see only dangerous water and we realize that the boat on which we sit is doomed. At some point we all have to recognize it that way. But Jesus sends us a life preserver. It is His Word. We can't see everything yet. Perhaps we sense the depth of the water and the dangerous waterfall that pulls us. But we also definitely sense the life preserver which we hold onto. We also sense how God pulls us and drags us to safety. On the one hand, what we are holding onto is small. Just a Word! Just baptism. Just the Lord's Supper. With these things, we can taste, feel, and see a little. It is just a part. A part of the whole. But we trust that this portion that we have in this world today is firmly connected with the eternal God and brings us to safety. That's why we don't need anything more than just this portion. Beloved, that's what we want and nothing more! Amen.