

Streetsville United Church  
Sunday, January 10, 2010  
Rev. John Tapscott

**"THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD"**

Lamentations 3: 22,23

About ten years ago this time we were all breathing a great sigh of relief - do you remember it? The computers didn't crash and lights stayed on as the calendar clicked over into the new millenium. It was a crisis averted, though in retrospect we wonder whether it was a real crisis or a small issue hyped up into a crisis.

How many crisis has the world faced in the past decade - 9/11 and global terrorism, the banking crisis which led to economic hardship for many (though not for those responsible for generating it). There is what is now called the crisis of climate change. And there was the H1N1 scare last fall. We humans lurch from crisis to crisis, quickly forgetting the last one as we encounter the next. And we have crises in our personal lives, sometimes even in the church.

The Book of Lamentations was written in a time of national crisis for Israel. The Babylonian army had invaded Israel, destroyed crops, devastated the land, ransacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. They had taken the strongest Hebrews to Babylon, leaving the poor and the lame and the blind in the land. If ever there was a crisis in Israel, this was it. It was a crisis of faith, too. Had God abandoned his people and his promises? To many it seemed so. So Jeremiah laments and weeps over the state of his land and his people.

But even as he laments he finds hope in God. "My soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope. Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness." (Lamentations 3:22,23)

This is what I want us to celebrate today - the faithfulness of God - the amazing faithfulness of God. "Great is your faithfulness."

Now we could celebrate the faithfulness of God's people. For God can show his faithfulness through caring human actions, even when we don't recognize them as being from God.

One of our members sent me this story. A Post Office worker had the job of

processing mail with incomplete addresses. One day, a letter came in shaky handwriting to God with no address but a return address. So the worker opened it. The letter read: "Dear God, I am an 83 year old widow, living on a very small pension. Yesterday someone stole my purse. It had \$100 in it, which was all I had until my next pension cheque. Next Sunday is Christmas, and I had invited two of my friends for dinner. Without that money, I have nothing to buy food with. I have no family to turn to, and you are my only hope. Can you please help me? Sincerely, Edna."

The postal worker was touched. He showed the letter to the other workers. Each dug in and came up with a few dollars. They collected \$96, which they put into an envelope and sent to the woman.

All the workers felt a warm glow thinking of the dinner Edna would have with her friends. A few days after Christmas another letter came from Edna to God. Workers gathered around as the letter was opened. It read: "Dear God, How can I ever thank you enough for what you did? Because of your gift of love, I was able to fix dinner for me and my friends. We had a nice day and I told them about your wonderful gift. By the way, there was \$4 missing. I think it might have been those rascals at the post office. Sincerely, Edna."

Today for a few moments today I do want to recognize and celebrate the faithfulness of God's people. "Faithfulness" means a sense of reliability, of steadfastness, of fidelity to God, to God's truth to the church. I have known many faithful Christians over the years, some in my own family, and in every church I've served. They persevere in the Christian life and in serving the Lord and his church. The minister who encouraged me to consider the ministry was a faithful and loving pastor to the flock. This quality of faithfulness is one I really admire and desire as the years go by. Here in our church, I see many faithful people of God. You are faithful in worship, in prayer, in service. Your faithful stewardship brought us through a year which looked to be very difficult a few months ago. I am grateful that I preach in a congregation which appreciates and upholds the Christian faith. Those skeptics who undermine the faith seem to get all the press and publicity, whereas the quietly faithful people of God go unnoticed. I suppose it was always this way and always will be. But your faithfulness is noticed and appreciated, by me. It is surely noticed by God, too. Many among us will hear the Lord say as he welcomes us home, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master."

"Great is your faithfulness," says Isaiah, and he's talking about God's faithfulness. For whatever faithfulness is in us comes from the faithfulness of God. God's goal is to make us more like himself and faithfulness is a fruit of the

Holy Spirit that God gives to us and works out in us. Now we must receive the gift allow and it to grow within us. But human faithfulness originates in God's own faithfulness. "Great is thy faithfulness."

Now it must be said that sadly this fruit is not always seen in God's people. We celebrate faithfulness but it's not as common in God's people as we might like. Jeremiah's lament over Jerusalem was a lament over the people's disobedience, their sin, their lack of faithfulness to the covenant. Jeremiah linked the disaster which had befallen the nation to their unfaithfulness. Unfaithfulness has grave consequences, personally and collectively. I think the weakness of the Christian church is pretty directly related to the indifference of God's people. And if we are honest with ourselves, we know that we are really not as quite faithful as we ought to be. I never, ever boast of my own faithfulness. In fact, I am often ashamed of my lack of faithfulness - in prayer, in studying Scripture, in failing to keep focussed on God's agenda rather my own. I can tell you that God's faithfulness to me has been far greater than my faithfulness to Him. I have not always trusted God as I should have, but God has been amazingly faithful to me. He has seen me through difficulties, illnesses, crises, anxieties. Any faithfulness **in** me comes from God's far greater faithfulness **to** me and **to** the church.

Jeremiah knew that if the nation was going to survive this crisis and be rebuilt, it would be through the faithfulness of God. "Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope; Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness." And in God's own time, what Jeremiah hoped to see came to pass, at least partially.

God's great faithfulness was most clearly seen when he sent the promised Saviour, who by his life, death and resurrection saved us from our sin and opened the way for us to enter eternal life. Jesus Christ is God's greatest sign of faithfulness to a wayward and sin-darkened world. Jesus Christ is God's compassion and mercy. "Great is your faithfulness" we say as we look upon the face of Jesus Christ. "Great is your faithfulness, O God, in sending us the Saviour."

In God and in his care we find blessing and salvation and health. That was the lesson the Hebrew people had to be taught over and over again. And if it seemed that God had removed his hand of blessing for a time, it was only so that the people might seek him again and live under his care once more. The faithfulness we celebrate today is the great faithfulness of God.

I don't know where the church would be if it were not for the faithfulness of God. Sometimes the church has been attacked by enemies from without, sometimes from within. But time and again the church has come through the valley of the shadow of death, not only surviving, but rising up with a new sense of conviction and mission. Great is God's faithfulness to the church.

And what about this beautiful and wondrous creation that God has fashioned? The human race has turned its back on God and gone our own way, lurching from crisis to crisis, but somehow the world has survived. We have not burned ourselves up or blown ourselves up. Is that due to the ingenuity of humankind or to something even deeper, perhaps the faithfulness and the compassion and the mercy of God?

Thornton Wilder wrote a play called "The Skin of Our Teeth", which spans the whole history of humankind. Each act brings the human race to the brink of ultimate disaster. Each time we appear doomed, but then some unexpected factor miraculously intervenes and the human race, despite ourselves, is saved by the skin of our teeth. Thornton Wilder is saying that the unexpected factor which saves is the faithfulness and the mercy of God.

God's faithfulness is seen in our everyday lives. Frank Boreham, an Australian preacher, tells of a time in his boyhood when he and his brothers noticed that their father felt anxious and their mother's eyes were often red and swollen. Suddenly the atmosphere changed and it all had to do with a Bible verse that had been cut from a devotional book and tacked to the wall. The verse read, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us." The boys asked their mother about it. She said, "Father and I have had a crushing trouble. Last Tuesday I was very worried. I had to drop my work, pick up the baby and walk around the kitchen feeling I could endure it no longer. My burden seemed to be killing me. In pacing around I noticed the devotional book. I opened it and on a page was this text - "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us." I felt as if it had been written especially for me. I was so overcome that I sat down and had a good cry. Then I began again with fresh hope and trust. When father came home I told him about it and he cut out the text and pinned it to the wall. Hitherto hath the Lord helped us."

Over and over God proves his faithfulness to us. And by his grace, some of that faithfulness gets into us and is reflected in us, not always, and not perfectly, but sometimes and to some degree. God fulfilled his greatest promise to send a Saviour, so we trust that he bring all his promises to pass in his own time and his own way. And faithfully he will bring us home at the end. "Great is your faithfulness, O God."

2010 will bring joys and challenges, accomplishments and crises. But whatever comes, we can trust God to be faithful to his word, a word he spoke to Israel through another prophet, a prophet named Isaiah. And this word is for us, too, for the church. "Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you; when you walk through the fire you will not be burned, for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel. You are precious and honoured in my sight, and I love you. Do not be afraid, for I am with you."