

Pentecost 17
5 October 2025
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Lamentations 1:1–16; Psalm 137; 2 Timothy 1:1–14; Luke 17:5–10

Sermon Preached by Fr. Matthew Bowman
Parish Church of St. Luke, Winnipeg

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is a joy, and a holy privilege, for us to be together today on my first Sunday as the Rector of St. Luke's. Beginnings always bring with them possibility and promise, and yet they also carry weight: the weight of memory, of past expectations unfulfilled; of hopes, and dreams, and questions.

Today's readings meet us in that very place. They speak of the grief and lament that comes with hard times; they remind us of the rich gifts of faith handed down from generation to generation; they call us to remember that the call to Christian discipleship is one to a life of humble service; they encourage us to be diligent in rekindling the flame of God's Spirit within each of us.

Faithfulness in Hard Times

The Book of Lamentations begins with a searing cry: *"How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations!"* It's an honest crying out, an unsanitized naming of grief before God. We see themes of grief and lament continued in this morning's appointed psalmody: *"By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remember Zion."*

It's the cry of a people in exile, remembering their homeland, grieving the loss of everything they'd come to know and love, unsure of what tomorrow will bring.

And then — right at the end — words that shock us: *"Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!"* How can such words be in the Bible, let alone sung within the beauty of Eucharistic worship? It's important to be clear: these words are not God's command. They are the cry of a wounded, exiled people who had witnessed their own children being slaughtered. They are a snapshot of raw human rage and grief, wrapped in the voice of prayer. The psalms do not sanitize human emotion — in their beautiful complexity, they offer words for joy and gratitude, along

with words for fear, rage, and despair. That such a verse is included in Scripture means this: even our most pain filled cries can be spoken to God.

God is able to bear them, and God does not turn away from us when our hearts overflow with pain. Yet as Christians, we read these words through the Cross. Jesus Christ Himself *"bare our sins in his own body on the tree,"* enduring the world's violence and hatred, and yet answered it not with vengeance but with forgiveness: *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."* In the person of Jesus Christ, the fullness of the human experience, grief included, is not denied — but is taken up, redeemed, and transformed into mercy. So even here, amidst the hardest psalm in the entire book, we glimpse God's faithfulness, and are reminded that nothing in us — no grief, no unmet longing, no fury — is beyond God's hearing, God's holding, or God's healing. And that is good news for the Church today. We need not pretend that the past was always easy, nor must we deny the sorrows and experiences that shape us.

Instead, we can bring them before God, trusting that the One who bore the world's violence can transfigure even our darkest moments of lamentation into hope.

Rooted in Memory, Moving Forward in Faith

From lament, our readings turn to encouragement. Paul tells Timothy: *"I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and now, I am sure, lives in you."* Faith in God is something that's rarely, if ever, born in isolation. It's something that's handed down; that's shared in community. Just as Timothy received faith through those who loved him, so this parish has received its faith through generations of Anglicans who have prayed in these very pews, whose praises have echoed in song through good times and not so good times, through years of abundant financial resources and years of leanness; week by week rooted in the rhythms of the Church year.

But Paul doesn't tell Timothy simply to look back, and stop there. He tells him to *"rekindle the gift of God that is within [him]."* Reminding us that memory is not meant to fossilize us in the past, but is instead meant to fuel the future. This is true for us here. As a parish we cherish the gifts handed down — our proud tradition of Anglican chant, our commitment to worshipping the Lord *"in the beauty of holiness,"* our Prayer Book heritage — yet they are not museum pieces. They are living gifts, holy treasures entrusted to us so that we might keep them alive in our own day, and might pass them on rekindled, renewed, and radiant to generations yet to come.

As humans it's very easy to get mired in memories both happy and unhappy. As a parish, it's very easy to look at our current challenges and to succumb to the belief that

our best days have come and gone, which can lead to a cycle of fear marked by digging into particular ways of doing things, lest we be the one to do the thing that breaks the proverbial camel's back.

In our reading from Luke's gospel, the disciples fall prey to this temptation, crying out, *"increase our faith!"* And yet Jesus reminds them that even faith the size of a mustard seed is enough, when it is a faith rooted in the creator of all that is, seen and unseen. He then speaks of servants who, having done their duty, do not expect reward or recognition. Discipleship, Jesus teaches us, is about humble service. In our collective life together, this matters. It can be easy measure our worth by numbers, or by recognition from outside folks. Yet Jesus reminds us that the true measure of discipleship is steady service: saying our prayers, faithfully keeping the Eucharist, caring for one another, and serving our neighbours in Christ's name. The Prayer Book calls this *"our bounded duty and service"* — to worship the Lord, to give thanks to God for the many blessings we receive as God's hand, and to live out our faith not for applause but for the love of God. Priest, deacon, crucifer, subdeacon, greeter, hospitality folks (you get the picture) — we all serve together as fellow servants of the gospel in this time and in this place.

Paul's charge to Timothy is as fresh now as it was then: *"Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us."* The treasure is not ours to own, but ours to tend. It's like a flame: left alone, it can flicker and die; tended faithfully, it can burn brightly, giving light and warmth.

Here at St. Luke's, this flame has been tended for over a hundred years through the rhythms of Morning and Evening Prayer, through the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, through our mutual encouragement of each other in good times and bad, and through keeping the Church's calendar of saints and seasons. These are not merely old customs; they are the very means by which the Spirit renews and sustains us.

My calling as your priest is not to bring a flame of my own, but to tend with you the flame already burning here, to work with you to polish its silver stick and to gently draw our attention to times when its wick is in need of trimming— that it might shine more brightly. And your calling, as God's people in this place, is to let that light shine — not only within these walls, but into our neighbourhood and our city.

As we embark on this next stage of the journey, I look forward to hearing your stories of life in this place; of the things that bring you joy and the things you absolutely can't stand, and of all the places in between; that we might collectively discern where God is calling us as we, like many other parishes, do the hard work of wrestling with post-COVID realities.

Looking to the Future

As we begin this chapter together, I hope you will join me in committing ourselves to four things:

1. To a life of honesty in prayer, collectively and in private;
2. To being generous in expressing gratitude for the immense blessings we have received in what we have inherited, whether we've been here fifty years, or like me having come along in recent days;
3. To embracing a collective life together that is marked by humility, care, and seeking to understand.
4. To being courageous in rekindling the flame of God's spirit that is within us.

And as we do so, let us remember Paul's promise: *"God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline."* That Spirit has sustained this parish for generations. That Spirit sustains us now. And that Spirit will carry us into the future that God is preparing for us.

May God give us grace to find it so.

Amen.