**Sunday, December 20th, 2020**

**Lamentations 3:1-3, 19-26**

Have you ever felt like you were the unluckiest person in the world?

You might want to get to know Larry Hanratty.

In 2007 the Los Angeles Times named him the most unlucky man in California.

Larry was nearly killed in a construction site accident.

For weeks he was in a coma while his lawyers fought for his liability claim.

But one of his lawyers was disbarred, two of them died suddenly,

          and his last lawyer ran off with his wife.

After his recovery in June, he was in a terrible car accident.

Before the police arrived on the scene, he was robbed of $55.

His insurance company tried to stop his worker's comp claim,

          and he came within 2 days of being evicted from his home.

By the end of July of 2007, he was suffering from lupus,

          and the start of a lung condition which required

          that he carry a canister of oxygen with him.

He was taking 42 pills a day for his heart condition and his liver aliments.

Finally, the City Council came to his aid,

          and then his friends rallied around him.

After all that had happened to Larry that year,

          he was able to thank the Mayor of Whittier,

          and said: "There's always hope".

Throughout that year he experienced horrendous circumstances.

But that didn't stop him from doing what he did best.

Larry was a Deacon in his church,

          and was constantly helping others in their time of need.

Everywhere he went in his town he was known as "HOPE", in capital letters,

          because he reminded everyone: "There's always hope".

The year 587 B.C., brought disaster on Judah.

Prophets warned the people: "If you do not change your ways,

          God is going to let your enemies come and destroy you."

But the people wouldn't listen, and they continued in their sinful habits.

The Babylonian army burned and destroyed all the principal buildings,

          including the temple, and took most of the surviving inhabitants

          into slavery and exile.

The book of Lamentations consists of five poems, or laments,

          expressing the great sorrow over the fall of Jerusalem.

These poems give a vivid description of the destruction of the city,

          and describe the great suffering and horrible anguish of the people.

Though astonished and grief stricken, the author never doubts God's justice

          in bringing this judgment against the people.

The writer confesses his nation's sin and urges the people to repent.

Lamentations expresses faith that God will eventually forgive and restore

          His relationship with His people Israel.

God will in time have compassion for his people

          according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

When the sin of the people is eliminated, God will act quickly to forgive and heal.

The author mourns passionately and fully.

But in the mourning he looks to recovery,

          remembering that the Lord is a loving God,

          he trusts God to heal the people's wounds.

This time of mourning and grief will be followed by another time,

          a time to dance and sing, a time to rejoice and experience God's love.

The people turned back to God and they were restored.

I imagine if each of us sat down and wrote a description

          of what the year 2020 has been like,

          it would resemble the laments of the Israelites so long ago.

Our church has not been destroyed,

          but it is so often empty because of the dangers of the virus.

We have not been taken into captivity and slavery,

          but the isolation often feels like it.

Like the Israelites of so long ago, we do not know when this time will end.

But we do know God is with us each day.

In just a few days we will celebrate the birth of Jesus.

The celebration will be different this year for many of us.

Yet, like Larry Hanratty, we have hope.

The baby in the manger is God's gift to us.

We can't buy this gift.

We cannot earn this gift.

And if it were not for God's great love for each one of us,

          we would not be able to receive this gift,

          or to treasure and enjoy this gift.

How often do we pause and ponder God's great love for us?

How can the creator of the universe care

          about the twists and turns of our life's journey?

If God is able to place the stars in their sockets and suspend the sky like a curtain,

          do think it is possible that God is able to guide our lives?

If our God is mighty enough to ignite the sun,

          could it be that he is mighty enough to light our paths?

If he cares enough about the planet Saturn to give it rings,

          or Venus to make it sparkle, is there a chance

          that He cares enough about each of us to meet our needs?

Why did he do it?

Did he have to give the birds a song and the mountains a peak?

Was he required to put stripes on the zebra, and the hump on the camel?

Would we have known the difference

          had he made the sunsets gray instead of orange?

Why do stars have twinkles, and the waves snowy crests?

Why dash the cardinal in red and drape the beluga whale in white?

Why wrap creation in such splendor?

Why go to such trouble to give such gifts?

Because God delights in loving us.

The next time a sunrise steals your breath,

          or a meadow of flowers leaves you speechless, remain that way.

Say nothing and listen as heaven whispers,

“Do you like it? I did it just for you.”

If you were the only person on earth, the earth would look exactly the same.

The Himalayas would still have their drama,

          and the Caribbean would still have its charm.

The sun would still nestle behind the Rockies in the evenings

          and spray light on the desert in the mornings.

If you were the only person on earth,

          God would have sent His Son to you,

          to show His great love for you.

God did it all for us, for each one of us.

Come close to the baby in the manger and give him your thanks.

Christmas celebrations may be a bit different this year,

          but Christmas hasn't changed.

The baby in the manger gives us hope,

          because God is with us.

AMEN