

"When the Mask Is Removed"

Lamentations 3:22-33

May each one of you learn to ever more fully recognize and appreciate what our text identifies as your God's "steadfast love," and find deep and abiding comfort each day in knowing without question that Jesus Christ is your "portion" and your one and only Savior from eternal death in hell. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

It is most often a blessing in disguise when "disguises" or masks are removed – masks which had served to cover or hide that which we could not afford to ignore. It is a blessing *in disguise* because the removal of such masks is almost always unpleasant – sometimes very much so.

I suspect that nearly everyone here today has not only had such masks, but has experienced the short-term pain of having them removed. If, for example, you've ever experienced sickness or disease that was later identified by a doctor as a serious problem that needed surgical correction, you know the kind of thing we're talking about here. If you've ever pretended that the problems in your marriage weren't important or serious, you know about masks. If you've ever been an addict, you know about masks.

We have the same sorts of problems spiritually – deep, serious problems that remain hidden until the mask is forcibly removed. It can be as simple (although nonetheless serious) as the guilt from a hidden sin that can only find true healing when the mask is removed through confession. It can also be something profoundly grave, like a gradual, comfortable slide into apathy or unbelief. Satan is very clever at disguising such problems. The last thing he wants is for such masks to be removed and for human souls to actually acknowledge and confront the problems that exist.

Our text for this morning deals, in a way, with this general topic. It offers us extremely practical advice on not only learning to appreciate the discipline of our God, but how to conduct ourselves (the proper reaction) when our God demonstrates his "steadfast love" to us by removing the various masks in our lives.

The text from which we will learn this and other equally valuable lessons this morning is found in the Old Testament Book of Lamentations, the Third Chapter:

^{ESV} **Lamentations 3:22-33** *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. ²⁷ It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. ²⁸ Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him; ²⁹ let him put his mouth in the dust-- there may yet be hope; ³⁰ let him give his cheek to the one who strikes, and let him be filled with insults. 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; ³³ for he does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men.*

So far our text. In thanks to our Lord for this gift of his Word, and in humble acknowledgement of its divine wisdom and love, so we pray, **"Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth!"** Amen.

First an introduction to the Book of Lamentations, which is arguably one of the more neglected Books in our Bibles. Most Bible scholars agree that the Book was written by the Prophet Jeremiah, and that he wrote it in 586 BC. That date should be significant to us, although unfortunately I would suspect that most probably would have to admit that it isn't. 586 BC is the year after Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians (587 BC) and the remnant of God's people were carried off into exile.

A "lament" is a passionate expression of grief or mourning, usually in poetic form – as here in the Book of Lamentations. The cause or basis of the mourning is usually regret, and such regret or remorse usually comes only after a long period of denial and defiance. A lamentation usually mourns the loss of something very, very good. It also, as here, often represents sorrow over a loss that is *self-induced* or *self-inflicted*.

Obviously what is being mourned or lamented in our text is Israel's crushing defeat at the hands of the Babylonians and the exile to which they had been subjected. Yet note well the tone of this text as well as the acceptance of the fact that the calamity was not only from the hand of God, it was richly deserved. A very old mask had been ripped off of God's people by God himself.

What mask? For the most part, Israel at this point in its history had abandoned their God. They had turned away from the God of their fathers and had polluted themselves with the very idols about which their God had warned. As Israel gathered at the borders of the Promised Land, God had told them to destroy or drive out its prior

inhabitants and to destroy their pagan idols. The people decided instead to intermarry with those peoples and to adopt their false gods as their own.

What then was the mask? It was the outward circumstances that lulled the people into believing that God was actually okay with what they'd done; that he didn't really mind that they were doing *exactly the opposite* of what he had told them to do. It was the illusion that they could worship *other* gods and still enjoy the favor and blessing of the One True God.

Time after time God had warned the people that this was not the case. He sent prophet after prophet. He subjected them to hardships and oppressions of every sort, only removing those hardships when the people repented and turned again to him in faith. He even annihilated Ten of the Twelve Tribes of Israel by the sword of the Assyrians – wiped them out forever. Those Tribes simply ceased to exist. Israel still didn't get it. Through it all, with few exceptions, the mask remained firmly in place – until God finally ripped it off through the armies of Nebuchadnezzar.

The Book of Lamentations is God's divinely inspired guide on how he wanted his people to react to, and deal with, that which they had brought upon themselves. Did you recognize God's guidance in our text? Listen again: ***"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. ²⁷ It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. ²⁸ Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him; ²⁹ let him put his mouth in the dust-- there may yet be hope; ³⁰ let him give his cheek to the one who strikes, and let him be filled with insults. ³¹ For the Lord will not cast off forever."***

The message: *"Admit that you did this to yourselves. Take it. Accept it. Learn from it."* What, exactly, were they supposed to learn? At least two things: One, the reality of the evil they had adopted, and, two, the pure love that God was demonstrating by removing the illusion that all was well.

Israel had come to imagine that they were special because of who they were. They needed to be reminded that they were special only because of what God would do for or send to mankind through them. They were special only because God promised to send the world's Savior from the Jewish race - as one of Abraham's descendants. As soon as that Savior had been sent (and rejected) God removed his protecting hand from the Jews and they became just another godless nation. Like all the rest of history, it was not about the Jews. It was all about Jesus Christ. Still is. Always will be.

Removing masks is always a blessing. Nothing is a problem until it is; that is, nothing is recognized as a problem until that problem manifests itself through consequences. Think of it this way. If you have cancer eating your body from the inside, that is obviously a problem whether you recognize it or not. The mask – the outward appearance of good health – in no way changes the reality of the problem. You don't suddenly have a problem when the doctor finally tells you that you have cancer. That's just when the mask is removed and you finally recognize the problem that was there all along.

Carry this truth forward about 2500 years from the time it was first written and it will cease to be dry history and become instead a most timely and critically necessary reminder. Our own country has long been covered by masks, one of which was finally removed this past week. For a very long time we have been a thoroughly corrupt and decadent society, absolutely awash in sexual immorality. In the past that immorality was masked by our wealth and prosperity. Our society reasoned that since America has been so richly blessed by God, God therefore must be pleased with us. The idea is not new, yet it is as false today as it ever has been. The problems were further disguised, further masked, by the fact that we had not openly embraced the rot that everyone knew existed. We could then fool ourselves into believing that we are still a "Godly nation." This past week the highest Court of the land ripped away this layer of deception – boldly embracing gay marriage as a God-given right and making it forever illegal for any group of citizens to enact any law forbidding it.

And in so doing they have, in a way, done Christians a great service. How, you ask, could that possibly be true? While all Christians were obviously discouraged to see such irrefutable evidence of just how fast and how far our nation has fallen, what we are actually now confronted with is simply the reality of the way things actually are. No longer can we live in the self-delusion that ours is a God-fearing, Christian nation. 21st Century America now stands exposed as the moral sewer that it is.

While we could wish things were different, they aren't – and this we absolutely need to acknowledge. Does anyone here imagine that our country wasn't twisted and perverse prior to the announcement of this ruling? Of course it was. This ruling just made what ought to have been obvious to each of us undeniably clearer. Again, not the sin itself but the new clarity can be seen as a blessing from our God. Our calling in life is to reach sinners with the law and gospel. It's really only when the thin veneer of superficial morality is removed that we as Christians begin to recognize just how much work we have to do, together with just how necessary that work is. Laws and government can't do our

work for us. In fact more often than not such things just serve as masks that prevent us from seeing reality. Nor are we as Christians supposed to be all about correcting what is wrong in this or any other society. Our calling is to reach individual souls – one at a time. The happy by-product of that work is that when we actually do what we are supposed to be doing and hearts are changed, society also then reflects the real change that has taken place on the inside. Then there are no masks, as citizens in our society do the right thing for the right reason. Outlawing gay marriage, for example, doesn't do anything to change hearts, let alone actions.

When the "all is well" mask was ripped from Israel and they were carried into the Babylonian Exile, God through Jeremiah in our text reminded them – and therefore also each one of us – of this timeless truth: **"The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; ²³ they are new every morning; great is (God's) faithfulness."** He said, in effect: *"Lament the evil, but accept this reprimand in silence and without complaining from the hand of the Lord. Thank him for it, and learn from it."* He then concludes our text with these precious words of comfort: **"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; ³³ for he does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men."**

Understand these words from our God, for they represent purest gospel truth. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. It is never his intent that any soul be lost. To this end he mercifully and lovingly allows hardship whenever and wherever he knows that that is what is needed. That is, in fact, why he tells us to accept hardship in silence and humility – because we can be sure that he always acts with our best interest in mind. Is there any doubt that God has seen the poverty of our outreach efforts – individually and collectively as a congregation and synod – and that he also recognized the need to strip away every mask that prevents us from seeing the tremendous need that is all around us?

Law and gospel (sin and grace) is the only answer. Unbelieving sinners need to be told that Jesus Christ is their Savior too, and that faith alone in him is the one and only path to heaven. Again from our text: **"The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him."** Our job, our calling, is to direct those in our circle of life to the one true God, and in particular to his Son Jesus Christ. While man obviously cannot be saved by sinning, neither can man be saved by "doing good." Salvation comes only to those who trust that Jesus has already done all the good necessary to pay for mankind's countless sins. True healing comes only when each one of us recognizes in faith that he or she has already been washed clean by the innocent death of God's Son.

Do not then be discouraged by the increased clarity of sin. Thank God ever more passionately that he has solved that problem by sending his Son – that he, in the words of our text, **"is your portion"** – your God-given allotment in life – and then share that news with those who so desperately need to hear. Amen.

Scripture Readings

ESV **2 Corinthians 8:1-9, 13-15** We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ² for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³ For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints-- ⁵ and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. ⁶ Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. ⁷ But as you excel in everything--in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you--see that you excel in this act of grace also. ⁸ ¶ I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. ¹³ For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness ¹⁴ your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. ¹⁵ As it is written, "Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack."

ESV **Mark 5:21-24, 35-43** And when Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered about him, and he was beside the sea. ²² Then came one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name, and seeing him, he fell at his feet ²³ and implored him earnestly, saying, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live." ²⁴ ¶ And he went with him. And a great crowd followed him and thronged about him. ³⁵ ¶ While he was still speaking, there came from the ruler's house some who said, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?" ³⁶ But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the ruler of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." ³⁷ And he allowed no one to follow him except Peter and James and John the brother of James. ³⁸ They came to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and Jesus saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. ³⁹ And when he had entered, he said to them, "Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but sleeping." ⁴⁰ And they laughed at him. But he put them all outside and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the child was. ⁴¹ Taking her by the hand he said to her, "Talitha cumi," which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise." ⁴² And immediately the girl got up and began walking (for she was twelve years of age), and they were immediately overcome with amazement. ⁴³ And he strictly charged them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – June 28, 2015

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 540 (Red Hymnal)

"With the Lord Begin Thy Task"

The Order of Service – Hymnal page 15ff. (Red Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Epistle Lesson: (2 Corinthians 8:1-9, 13-15) Though we hear much about the problems Paul worked to correct in the Corinthian congregation, there was also obviously much that was good. In our first reading we hear of their true zeal in connection with charity and church contributions – so much so that they *begged* to be able to share their financial gifts with those in need. The standard is always Christ Jesus, who for our sakes "became poor" by his innocent life and sacrificial death.

The Gospel Lesson: (Mark 5:21-24, 35-43) Certainly the same Lord Jesus who healed the little girl in our Gospel lesson is still at work in our lives today. What a great comfort! God the Holy Spirit fill each of us with complete confidence and trust in our God to supply all our needs, both physical and spiritual. The proof is that he has already given us his Son.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – page 22. (Red Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn (See Bulletin Insert)

"Lord of All Hopefulness"

The Sermon – Text: Lamentations 3:22-33 (Printed on the back of this bulletin)

"When the Mask Is Removed"

The Offertory – (Hymnal page 22)

The Offering followed by the Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 318 (Red Hymnal)

"Before Thee, God, Who Knowest All"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Red Hymnal page 24ff)

The Distribution -Hymn 316 (Red Hymnal)

The Nunc Dimittis (Red Hymnal page 30)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 54 (Verses 1 & 3) (Red Hymnal)

"Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here! **To our Visitors seeking an altar at which to commune** – Since we desire to follow the words of our Savior, we practice "Close Communion" – a practice that is not new to confessional Lutherans. This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting them to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please first meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word.

Attendance - Sunday (37) Average (52)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time
Next Sunday	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time

ILC News – Collette Krause has returned the call to Trinity of Watertown, SD. Michael Schierenbeck is considering the call to Faith of Markesan, WI.

Council Notes – Five Council members plus the Pastor were present for the meeting on June 23. Offerings year-to-date have met budgeted needs. As directed by the Voters, \$10,000 was paid down on our church mortgage last month, bringing the total owed to \$86,000 with a scheduled payoff date in 2022. Chairman McEnroe will address the congregation briefly on the idea that the congregation might initiate a drive to pay off our mortgage – freeing up monthly mortgage payment for other critical needs. The Council will investigate the purchase of individual sound amplification devices which would be used by those who are hard of hearing. Next Council meeting is July 22.

Earthquake in Nepal – Please remember the ongoing needs of our Christian brothers and sisters in Nepal. For more information go to <http://lutheranmissions.org/earthquake>.

Mission Helper Trips – Three CLC Mission Helper teams are scheduled to leave Monday for trips to Kenya, Tanzania, and Zambia. Follow the progress of the trips at: <http://2015clcmhateafrica.blogspot.com/>