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Pilgrim Congregational Church
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SCENARIOS OF LAMENT AND HOPE

Jeremiah 22:1-5, 8-9
Luke 13:31-35
Revelations 21:1-4

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A paradox: despite our preoccupation with the present - the *now* generation and all that - we also are fascinated with the future. Perhaps there's in us a deep desire to make things better - or we fear what might happen if we don't - either way, we're into visioning the future, whether it's Duluth 2001, Newt's Contract or global peace. We create scenarios of what might be and chart paths to get there.

But that's nothing new. It's something we humans have long done. The Bible is filled with scenarios of both hope andf lament from Genesis to Revelations. In the creation story itself, "God created humanity in God's own image.... And God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and...have dominion over...every living thing that moves upon the earth.'...And God looked upon all creation, and behold, it was very good!" *That's* a scenario of hope!

In the Old Testament, God's people always were held accountible for their response to the covenant God had made with them. The writer of Deuteronomy called them to obey God's commandments "that you may live and multiply and possess the land which the Lord swore to give to your ancestors....Take heed, lest you forget the Lord your God...and go after other gods and worship them. I solemnly warn you that this day you shall surely perish. Like the other nations who have gone before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord your God." (Deuteronomy 11:8-20)

Hope and lament. Throughout the Bible they confront God's people, most forcefully through prophets like Jeremiah. When corruption and injustice threatened the very fabric of his nation, Jeremiah on the one hand assured Judah, "Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor those who have been robbed....If you will indeed obey this word, then..." this nation and its people will not only survive, but prosper. On the other hand, looking upon Jerusalem, he warned, "If you will not heed these words,...this house shall become a desolation....And many nations will pass by this city, and everyone will say to his neighbor, 'Why has the Lord dealt thus with this great city?' And they will answer, 'Because they forsook the covenant of the Lord their God and worshipped other gods and served them.'" Scenarios of hope and lament for every generation!

Now turn to Jesus on his fateful journey toward the same Jerusalem. Our passage from Luke began with an unexpected twist of hope and lament. Jesus had just warned that "Some are last who shall be first [in God's Realm], and some are first who shall be last." Everyone *knew* who he was talking about! Who were certain *they* were Number One in God's favor? The Pharisees, of course. If the New Testament had *any* villains, it would be those despicible, self-righteous Pharisees. Yet suddenly, caught with our preconceptions down, we meet some Pharisees who unbelievably were *good guys*, who actually came to Jesus concerned for his safety. "Get away from here - Herod's out to kill you!" Change course, Jesus. We don't want to see you die!

Was it just coincidence that this unexpected incident immediately followed his warning to those who think they're first? Or *could* he be warning his own followers that some *we're* sure will be last (symbolized by those nasty Pharisees) might actually have some human decency to which *we're* blind? Could *our* stereotypes and preconceptions possibly be turned on us? Might we sometimes be caught up by the same phariseeism we condemn in others? Isn't that the danger of rigidly judging the "bad guys," who too easily end up being any who differ from us, and in our blindness, we miss the possibility of worth or good in them. How dull that becomes - if we allow no surprises in life: good brings good; evil inevitably brings evil! Jesus would never buy *that*. He always kept open the possibility of new life in *any* person, no matter how degraded that person might be. Remember the heroines and heroes of his parables: the woman at the well, the good Samaritan, the prodigal son, the woman accused of adultery, the disfigured leper, the pesky beggar, the whole unlikely cast!

Even though he listened to those good-willed Pharisees, he chose not to accept their well-meant advice, knowing his destiny to be in Jerusalem despite the obvious danger. He knew he was caught between the hostility of the authorities, symbolized by Herod, and the frustration of the Messiah-seekers, who'd been looking to him with increasing expectations! Still, he had to go where he'd make his greatest impact, in that city beloved to the Jews. Though he knew his time was short and his appeal would likely fail, he would not turn back. He totally trusted God. We may not understand God's ways, but those who can trust in that presence walk undismayed, even on *our* Jerusalem roads.

It was then Jesus spoke his poignant lament: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!"

Jerusalem, great city of God! To reject my message, to meet my gospel of love with hatred, violence, and death - what tragedy! The last thing I want is judgment on my beloved Jerusalem, if only it would turn from its bullheaded rebellion against God's way of *shalom*. Hope and lament. On the one hand God's love reaches out, even as a hen would gather her brood; on the other, those who stubbornly shut their ears and hearts. Because God had given us the gift of choice, Jesus could not *impose* his gospel on an unwilling people. Sadly, he drew a scenario of terrible lament for Jerusalem that would come to pass scarcely a generation later when the Romans totally destroyed it. Above all, he lamented a *people* called by God to live faithfully who would not.

Even as the church has envisioned itself the New Jerusalem, the new people of God, so does Christ yearn for and speak to us. Surely there is meaning, there is consequence for all that *we* say, for all that *we* do, for all that *we* are as a Christian people. We bear the burden of responsibility, whether we are loving or callous, courageous or timid, caring of others or self-serving.

Thursday evening I had a memorable experience. It was not one I had looked forward to; in fact as Jody knows, it was one I'd have gladly weasled out of! I just had never before spent time with adolescent felons, and I was plain nervous how it would go. But I had agreed to lead a service at the Arrowhead Juvenile Center, part of the fine corrections ministry program of our Arrowhead Interfaith Council, and so I went with no little fear of what I might do to that ministry's reputation!

Of course it ended up a powerful experience sitting with that small group of 14-16 year olds talking with, but mostly listening to them. I thought how much they were like my own children a decade ago, or our own confirmands and high school young people here, only with fewer dreams, less confidence in themselves, more fear toward life and what it holds in store - scenarios far more of lament than hope! They were products of poverty, drugs, violence, and abuse; not of good schools, supportive families, and values of stability and care. So they held lots of anger toward parents they felt had turned on them, churches they felt were indifferent to them, and society they felt had dismissed them as beyond hope. As a reslt, they didn't show much acceptance of responsibility for their own actions that had put them where they were. But it was all a powerful reminder of the pain out there to which I too easily close my eyes!

To our own young people here today, I'd say: be thankful *you're* on a winning team - that you have parents who care, opportunities for a good future, that you *can* choose to make those opportunities happen! Believe in yourselves, in those about you, in a God who blesses you with what *really* counts!

Although lament weighed heavily as he headed toward Jerusalem, Jesus' final word spoke hope: "Blessed are they who come in the name of the Lord." Those who *do* follow will see him, know him, and find life! That word of hope was transformed into a full-fledged scenario of hope by his first century followers, convinced Jesus did not die in vain, that his death in fact offered humanity the possibility of a new beginning:

Behold, the dwelling of God is with humanity....They shall be God's people...God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away. (Revelations 21:4)

That scenario of hope offers new life, not in the unknown future, but here and now. As we travel *our* Jerusalem road, can we, too, say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord"? then *this* season of Lent, *this* day, *every* day offers new hope *and* new life, for indeed, "the former things *have* passed away."

Here's a word of hope from a hopegiver who ministers on our behalf. Near the end of my Thursday visit at AJC, a boy who had remained quiet through most of the evening awkwardly pulled a worn little card from his back pocket, saying Chaplain Noreen had given it to him earlier, and would I please read it. I answered that since it was important to him, *he* should read it to us. I realized quickly that he had a rather obvious reading disability. But he took the card and haltingly read its story that clearly meant a lot to him. It's one many of us have heard, that some of us may have dismissed as a bit corny. In the spirit of that Thursday circle and of our circle today, hear it now:

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand: one belonging to him and the other to the Lord. When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life.

This really bothered him and he questioned the Lord about it: "Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why when I needed you most you would leave me."

The Lord replied: "My precious child, I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

On the reverse side are these printed words from Chaplain Noreen:

You were important to me while you were at AJC, and I deeply appreciate those of you who shared your life story, were willing to look honestly at yourself and accepted the challenge to set new goals to bring about change in your life. Remember, we don't walk alone, if we are willing to ask for help.

...My prayers, thoughts, and concerns go with you. I am very interested in where your path leads. Let's keep in touch. Chaplain Noreen.

In the midst of lament, a scenario of faith, hope, and - most of all - of love! Amen.