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Interim Pastor  
Ordinary Time  
Sacrament of Lord's Supper

February  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday,

“The Visible Hand”  
“The Story”: Chapter 17

Texts: Lamentations 1:1-5  
Ezekiel 36: 16-17a, 18-36

Lamentations 1:1-5

How deserted lies the city,  
once so full of people!  
How like a widow is she,  
who once was great among the nations!  
She who was queen among the provinces  
has now become a slave.

<sup>2</sup> Bitterly she weeps at night,  
tears are on her cheeks.  
Among all her lovers  
there is no one to comfort her.  
All her friends have betrayed her;  
they have become her enemies.

<sup>3</sup> After affliction and harsh labor,  
Judah has gone into exile.  
She dwells among the nations;  
she finds no resting place.  
All who pursue her have overtaken her  
in the midst of her distress.

<sup>4</sup> The roads to Zion mourn,  
for no one comes to her appointed festivals.  
All her gateways are desolate,  
her priests groan,  
her young women grieve,  
and she is in bitter anguish.

<sup>5</sup> Her foes have become her masters;  
her enemies are at ease.  
The LORD has brought her grief  
because of her many sins.  
Her children have gone into exile,  
captive before the foe.

#### Ezekiel 36: 16-17a, 18-36

Again the word of the LORD came to me: <sup>17</sup> “Son of man, when the people of Israel were living in their own land, they defiled it by their conduct and their actions. <sup>18</sup> So I poured out my wrath on them because they had shed blood in the land and because they had defiled it with their idols. <sup>19</sup> I dispersed them among the nations, and they were scattered through the countries; I judged them according to their conduct and their actions. <sup>20</sup> And wherever they went among the nations they profaned my holy name, for it was said of them, ‘These are the LORD’s people, and yet they had to leave his land.’<sup>21</sup> I had concern for my holy name, which the people of Israel profaned among the nations where they had gone.

<sup>22</sup> “Therefore say to the Israelites, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: It is not for your sake, people of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. <sup>23</sup> I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I am proved holy through you before their eyes.

<sup>24</sup> “‘For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. <sup>25</sup> I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. <sup>26</sup> I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. <sup>28</sup> Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God. <sup>29</sup> I will save you from all your uncleanness. I will call for the grain and make it plentiful and will not bring famine upon you. <sup>30</sup> I will increase the fruit of the trees and the crops of the field, so that you will no longer suffer disgrace among the nations because of famine. <sup>31</sup> Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds, and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable practices. <sup>32</sup> I want you to know that I am not doing this for your sake, declares the Sovereign LORD. Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct, people of Israel!

<sup>33</sup> “‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: On the day I cleanse you from all your sins, I will resettle your towns, and the ruins will be rebuilt. <sup>34</sup> The desolate land will be

cultivated instead of lying desolate in the sight of all who pass through it. <sup>35</sup> They will say, “This land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden; the cities that were lying in ruins, desolate and destroyed, are now fortified and inhabited.” <sup>36</sup> Then the nations around you that remain will know that I the LORD have rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate. I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it.’

How does God act in history—in our time and place?

Here is a question as old as time to borrow a phrase, but—in all seriousness—here is a question asked time and time again, and—surely—there is often urgency behind it. Like most human beings, I think each one of us, here today, has struggled to make sense of what has happened—or what is happening—in our lives, and perhaps never more so—let me suggest—than when calamity strikes...

*“How deserted lies the city, once so full of people!  
How like a widow is she, who was once great among the nations  
She who was queen among the provinces has now become...a slave”*

A great calamity has come...

Jerusalem—the holy city and the capitol of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, has fallen. The armies of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, have breached the city walls—fallen upon the cities inhabitants with fire and sword—have taken the surviving people of God away. Now, they reside in a foreign land. This passage from Lamentations—written during this time of exile—connects us to hearts deeply broken—to individuals searching for answers:

*“Why did this happen?”*

*“What happens next?”*

*“Where—is God?”*

Let us pray: O Lord God, may the words of my mouth today—and thoughts we have in our hearts today, be acceptable in your sight, for your remain our Rock, our Redeemer. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

*“Why did this happen?”*

*“What happens next?”*

*“Where—is God?”*

As I weighed these questions—this past week--I was reminded of Dick Trethaway, a Professor of Economics at Kenyon College, my alma mater. Professor Trethaway and I often squared off in racquetball games and, as you may imagine, I often debated whether I should lose by a lot to my teacher—or try to beat him by a small margin! He was an engaging personality, and he was someone—more to the point-- who believed in the “Invisible Hand” theory of Adam Smith.

This theory—in simplest form—states that you and I advance something more than just our self-interest by freely pursuing our dreams: We also advance the common good of others. This was quite a revolutionary thought in the days of Adam Smith—back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century—but what struck me—in returning to days gone by--was the belief Adam Smith had about God. To Smith, there was no doubt that a higher power—even a majestic and magisterial entity—had set the world in motion, but this same power—he believed—was now absent from the world. To put it another way, if Adam Smith had been asked “Where—is God?”, I believe he would have pointed to the moment of Creation as the one—and only time—when God appeared on the world stage...

That’s not the viewpoint of Scripture, though. Far from it, actually: For the writers of Hebrew Bible--of our Old Testament—God had not just set things in motion but had also remained present on the world stage. But there was more: God had a great and good plan for the life of the world--a plan that involved the nation of Israel.

Why do we have an Old Testament in our Bible? Well, for many reasons, but surely one of them is to bear witness to God’s desire to have Israel be a holy nation—to be an example to the world of God’s justice and mercy—to be a lighthouse, as it were, guiding people to the safe harbor that comes with obeying God’s word and God’s law. Yes, here is God’s plan, spelled out in the pages of Scripture! But, sadly—and as we have seen—God’s nation—and God’s people—did not embrace God’s word—much less God’s law, and—what is more--they did this—as we’ve also seen--despite the repeated warnings—voiced through prophets—through God’s messengers to them—that such

behavior could not continue, indeed, that a great calamity—and there’s the word!—was just around the corner, if they continued to do so. Why do we have an Old Testament in our Bible? It is here, friends, to remind us that God is not absent—much less un-concerned—about world affairs. It’s here to remind us that God cares—and cares deeply—about how God’s people live out our lives....

Now, that’s a bit of a mouthful! And a mindful! A quick recap of where we are now, in reading “*The Story*”, really. Are you with me?

Let me expand on this idea a bit more now....

When calamity strikes—as I’ve suggested—questions follow. Questions arise over human motives and human actions, for instance—and for some people doubts arise about God’s power—much less God’s love. How many of us, for instance, have heard it said that God must be dead—or the Bible must be untrue—if such and such has happened? Just about all of us--and I like how the author E.L. Allen—no relation!—put it: “*A modern world would say that the disasters which had befallen Israel showed that its religion was without foundation...*”

But do these critics have it wrong? Could it be that God—far from being dead and unconcerned—is the God who must let us taste the consequences of disobeying His word? Let me put it this way: When those take up the sword perish by it—or when people reap what they sow—isn’t this what Bible says will happen? *Who is right? The critics? Or the One who has caused Scripture to be written?* As one author puts it—and quite rightly, I feel, *the issue, friends, is not about whether God is powerful—the question is whether God is just. And so, when Israel did not choose Gods ways there were consequences—and one of them was this great calamity—this overthrow by Babylon. And this line of thinking is voiced by Ezekiel, today....*

Who is Ezekiel? He is one of God’s prophets who has also been exiled to Babylon, and let’s hear his voice again:

*“When the house of Israel dwelt in their own land, they defiled it by their ways and their doings...and so I poured out my wrath upon them,” says the Lord, “for the blood they shed in the land, for the idols with which they defiled it—and I scattered them among the nations.”*

This calamity, friends, has come because God’s name—and God’s character—has become associated with unholy living—unholy worship. How many parents, as I

suggested last week, will allow a mis-behaving children to go on mis-behaving indefinitely? None of them, I'd hope! And why? Because, one, it's not good for the child, and two—and just as importantly—it makes the parent look bad! And this gets to the point Ezekiel is making here: The Lord will not allow His name—and His character—to be misunderstood, much less disrespected, in the eyes of the world! And so, to take us back to that image from Adam Smith—a hand, as it were, becomes visible in human events—and it is a hand that acts to punish Israel for being a source of darkness—rather than a source of light....

But—now--this state of things cannot stand, either: *“I will take you from the nations—I will gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land...”*

If a parent is always—and forcibly--disciplining their child, friends, what do we think of them? Don't we wonder about who they are? And I say this in all seriousness. Here, again, is not a perfect analogy--*but it points us to the fact that the God we see here, in these pages of scripture, also is aware of what the world will think of His purposes if God's people remain scattered*—and so—and as we read again in Chapter 36: *“It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name...”*

*“Why did this happen?” A question I asked at the outset, and the answer to this question—as we look to the narrative of Ezekiel—is clear: Human actions have consequences—and consequences that bring calamity upon them—and others....*

*“Why Happens Next?”*

Here's the second question I ask—and now, dear friends, let us consider what we hear from Ezekiel now, as we move further into this same chapter:

*“I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries—and I will sprinkle clean water on you—I will take out of your flesh a heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh—I will put my spirit within you—and you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good—and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities...”*

I love the way Dora handled last weeks Children's Time—do you remember? She spoke of God giving the Israelites a “time out”. And what is the purpose of a “time out”—

well, to remember why you are given one, of course. *This is the result God wants for the Israelites, too—He wants them to remember—and to loathe—the behavior that got them there, like any caring parent does, as well—but here’s where a difference begins: There is a hand at work to make this happen---but do we see whose it is?*

Go to Baptismal font:

*“I will sprinkle clean water upon you—and you shall be clean from all your uncleanliness”*

Who does the cleansing at our baptism—who is who washes us clean, at this font?

*Is it me?*

*Or is it the One who is without sin?*

*“I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh...”*

*Is this something what you and I, friends, are able to do?*

*Are we, if you like, the surgeons in the operating room who are able—through our efforts--to bring about a change of heart in another person?*

*Or is it the One who is the Great Physician, who does the changing?*

Here are two powerful—and truly humbling—images of hands.

Hands that are visible

Hands that are at work.

Hands—to build upon this image—that are strong and purposeful—hands that are well-trained—adept—precise—in the work they do....

***But they are not our hands, friends—they are not....***

(Move to Communion Table)

Words of Invitation:

The truth is, they are the hands that have been pierced—for you—for me.....for the world.

And, now, at this table--which is open to all who profess a saving faith in Christ Jesus --we remember the hands of him who first broke this bread and said:

Words of Institution:

*“Take and Eat. This is My Body, which is broken for you...”*

Here, now, at this table, we also remember the words of Jesus as he took the cup after supper and said:

*“This cup is the new covenant, which is poured out in my blood for the forgiveness of sin. Drink all of you, from this cup--and do so in remembrance of me.”*

With these words, Jesus spoke to the new covenant that Ezekiel said was soon to come--and this covenant, friends, would be one that would bind God and humanity more closely than the one made earlier, on Mount Sinai, for--and hear me now, friends: *You and I--like our ancestors in faith--can never fully learn to be faithful to be God--this is something we just cannot do--and the consequences of this failure should be eternal punishment--even our everlasting banishment from the presence of God--but this--THIS--is not what God chooses to do--no God choose, instead to be the one gives us a fresh start--the new birth, by the water--the new heart, by the Spirit....and here is what I pray we all not just know--but also feel: We know that we do not deserve this, deep in our re-made and our humbled hearts.*

Blessing of Elements

Let us pray:

O Lord Jesus Christ, present with us now--as we do here now what you did, long ago, in an upstairs room--breathe your Holy Spirit upon us, so that these elements of bread and the fruit of the vine may become your body and blood to nourish us--to sustain us --indeed, to remove the stoniness of our hearts.

Hear our prayer--at this moment--that is made both with thanksgiving and with great humility--hear our praise to you for the new covenant--for the gift of grace and mercy --that now binds us to you, through the death of Christ Jesus. We remember his sacrifice for us. We remember sides and hands pierced for our sake. And we

remember that—through these same wounds—we have been healed, restored and forgiven. Hear our prayer. *And hear, dear Lord, in these same prayers our admission that we cannot achieve our salvation—that we may only receive it, as we freely do, and with great humility—our souls bow before your throne...*

But now, dear Lord, hear our response—and our re-commitment—to leading a holy life, a life guided by your Law—and your Justice and Mercy. We have heard—and have taken to heart—the words of Ezekiel—and so, hear our prayer that through our lives lived in humble gratitude and in care and in service to all that we, Lord God, will not just harvest the grain you make to grow, but that we also will see that the grain is distributed in such a way that there is no famine anywhere—that we, dear Lord, will rebuild places devastated by war and neglect—that we will, dear Lord, remember that the work of your Spirit has brought about our industry—and our technology—yes, hear you prayer that e know that you call us, Dear Lord, to employ the same in ways that advance the good of all, and not just the good of a few. Yes, Lord, hear our prayer for the fruits of our labor to be truly in line with Your will for our world, as we also give you the praise that we live in a country where we are free to pursue our hopes and dreams. Yes, hear us, Lord God, that wherever there is desolation in our lives—and in or world—that we—as your people—may tend to it in such a way that others will say—in the words of your messenger Ezekiel: *“This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden—and the waste and desolate and ruined cities are now inhabited and fortified.”*

Yes, breathe your Spirit upon the elements so that, today, Lord God, when we join in communion with you—and with one another—we do so with the purpose of showing the world your glory. Indeed, we pray today that it shall come to pass as the prophet also says: *“Then the nations that are left around about us will know that you, O Lord, who has rebuilt the ruined places—that is You who has replanted what was desolate—that it is you, Lord, God, who has worked through us, that what is good and pleasing and perfect is Your doing, O Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes...”* as the psalmist writes....

Yes, hear this, our prayer, as we now pray to you the daily prayer, saying,

“Our Father....”

Servers Come Forward.....

Prayer after Communion

Lord, we thank you for this meal we have shared with you, with the powerful presence of your Spirit.

In this meal, Lord, we have seen your hand—still bearing the scars of your sacrifice for us—and you have laid this same hand upon us, giving us wholeness and strength. We continue to feel its touch. We thank you that in all things—and at all times—we are not alone—that you, O Lord, are not invisible or uncaring—but that, instead, your hand moves in our history in ways that are visible and real.

Send us forth, now, from this sacrament, to be your hands—and your heart—visible—and beating—in this world—and let us have hearts that are filled with such empathy—and let us have hands that are so gentle—that all will take notice and say, *“Surely the Lord, alone, is God! Let us worship His holy name!”*

Amen.