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Isaiah 50:4-11

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### Deep Hope

Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning! And good morning to all of you who join us from your homes. We worship in limited forms this morning, but we earnestly await a soon-coming day when normalcy returns. The days are surely coming... the here, but not yet, of this moment. Let us pray! God of hope, you have been leading us through the wilderness of Lent. We look to your pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. Give us your Spirit-empowered hope so that we may not be distracted by our present suffering or frustration. Help us see your promises and feel your steadfast love. Transform our lives and our hearts as we come near to the end of our Lenten journey, as we prepare your way with palm branches and shouts of Hosanna. Lord, save us. We pray in Jesus's name. Amen.

Deep relationship, accompanied by deep commitment and deep wisdom, leads to deep healing and deep growth. Deep healing and growth then become the experience and testimony that sustain deep hope even in the most difficult circumstances. If you remember back to our last encounter with the book of Isaiah in February, we remember that the people in Babylonian exile see little to no reason to hope in the God that had allowed them to be conquered and humiliated by the king of Babylon. For all intents and purposes, it seemed as if the gods of Babylon had won, not the God of Israel. But a disciple in the tradition of the 8<sup>th</sup> century prophet Isaiah thinks and believes differently as Israel's exile is coming to a close. This prophet of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE takes on the prophetic mantle of Isaiah, calling out his Jewish brothers and sisters to notice the

winds of change swirling around them. Babylon is falling to its enemies to the east, the Persian empire with Cyrus as their conqueror. All that was needed to cut off the Babylonian king and, by extension his empire, was more soldiers and more blood shed on the battlefield, for all kingdoms, no matter how big or small, are built and sustained on the blood of their enemies. The Persian empire defeats the Babylonians, and this new empire's policy allows for indigenous people groups in exile to return to the lands, from which they had been forcefully removed. But the Israelites have moved on and made lives for themselves in exile. What good is a god that cannot even save them from their enemies? If they have made a home in Babylon, why would they need to return to the land of Israel or to the supposed city of God, Jerusalem?

As we talked about in February, though, this prophetic voice during the transition between the Persian and Babylonian Empires will not allow the exiled people to sit idly by as their chance of return to the land that God had promised moves on. They must seize this moment and this opportunity, but their level of hope and confidence is dismally low. Some might notice a direct connection in this moment. We find ourselves worn out, broken down, stressed, anxious, and conflicted in the midst of the here, but not yet, of the pandemic. In some ways, the last year has felt like exile, like we have all been blind-sided by something so much bigger than our lived experience, and yet so microscopic that we find it difficult to believe who is telling the truth about what is really going on. Do you wonder if this was how the people felt when the prophet began telling them that God had a plan for them? Can they really believe these words? Is there any energy or effort left for hope in exile? The prophet says yes. Why? Because YHWH has never given up on his commitments or his relationships. Though the people of Israel may have lost their way and become intimately familiar with the consequences of their disastrous idol-worship and kingdom-building schemes, God does not leave them in Babylon as servants and

slaves. No! God calls them again to deep hope, to the deep commitments or covenants that God had made so many years earlier and that we have explored in our previous 5 weeks of Lent.

In the midst of this struggle to hope, we enter our text this morning in Isaiah 50 and like the people laying palm branches in the roadway before King Jesus, we dare to hope in the savior and king who enters on a donkey. Roman emperors would have ridden on a white horse with legions upon legions of soldiers at their disposal, a reminder to this subjugated people that Rome was the most powerful, the true bringer of peace and justice, and the rightful ruler of the world. But this was not the first time that the Jewish people had been under the thumb of empire, nor was it the first time that they had the audacity to hope in the God of their ancestors, even a peasant carpenter from Galilee. The people of Jerusalem were embracing a long tradition of hope that stretched all the way back to the words of Isaiah in this text.

Our 8 verses make up the third of four servant songs in the book of Isaiah, particular pieces of poetry and prophecy in the Old Testament that attest to the suffering that Israel endured as God's servant at the hands of empire. While scholars over the years have attempted to identify the specific person, of which these 4 songs attest, most Old Testament scholars today have come to think that these Servant songs describe the experience of the nation of Israel as a whole, rather than a particular person. New Testament authors definitely saw the experience of Jesus in these songs as Jesus was unjustly tortured and murdered by the Roman Empire, but whether or not the book of Isaiah is specifically referencing a particular person to come later is difficult to tell. Within the context that we have already discussed, the purpose of this servant song in Isaiah 50 is its encouragement to the exiled people: encouragement that their time of consequence is over and that God is still on their side as they attempt to gain the needed momentum to return home. Are you feeling any momentum in this moment that we need to take advantage of or begin

working toward so that we do not find ourselves content or stuck in our current state? How can we move out of this strange time that has been pandemic with inspiration and vision?

These words in Isaiah 50, then, are words of deep hope. Verse 4 says “that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.” Are you feeling weary this morning? Weary of COVID? Weary of the politics surrounding our current experience? Weary of conflict and controversy? Weary of anxiety and difficult conversations? That I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. The Lord has given the prophet the tongue to speak and the ear to listen for what is needed to invigorate and revive the people toward a new vision, a deep hope in the relationship that has defined their experience for hundreds of years, their relationship with the almighty God of the universe. We ask God to give us the voice and ears of the prophet as well that we could sustain each other with the deep hope that we have in the God who called us to deep healing and deep growth. Just like the nation of Israel, we remind ourselves that even though this season has tested us and caused us great distress and despair, we can hope in the God who has never given up on us, our God of healing and growth. We have deep hope because we know that the Lord God helps us as the prophet says in verse 7 and 9. We hold our hope dearly even when our critics and accusers stand before us because we know that the God who vindicated Jesus in his hour of deepest need also vindicates us as in verse 8. The powers and institutions that mock us as we cling to our hope in God’s deep commitment make me wonder if Israel’s Babylonian neighbors did the same when the prophet called the people to begin the journey back.

Verses 10 and 11 warn the Israelites that those who claim to have the light that is going to lead them are actually walking on the road to torment, to their demise because they have trusted their own lights, objects of their own making, brands that they have kindled. I wonder here if the prophet is talking about those in the Israelite community who claim that there is no reason to

leave the home that they have made in Babylon, in which they can live by the light and power of the gods that showed themselves triumphant when the people were led into exile initially. It seems in verses 10 and 11 that the ones who fear, trust, and rely upon God walk in darkness, but God is leading them in the right direction if they will only follow his voice. How many of us today feel as though we are walking in darkness? Some offer us the lights of their own making to help us light the way, but is the way that they are illuminating for us the way that the voice of God is calling us? Even in the darkness, we hope in the leading and help of our God, who is drawing us into the way of his son, the way of service and sacrifice that we will experience this week. What may seem as the way of darkness now may have felt the same to Jesus as he entered this last week of his ministry, knowing that the authorities had it out for him, especially with the political turmoil that would surround the celebration of Passover.

As we enter Holy week, do you hear the voice of the prophet in Isaiah and the voice of the people at the triumphal entry calling you to deep hope, a hope that goes back thousands of years, that finds its roots in the ancient promises and commitments of a God who helps and vindicates his people. When we feel like we are walking in darkness, maybe the darkness of the wilderness of Lent, we wait and listen for God's leading. We cling to deep hope, made real by deep healing and deep growth. Let us pray. God of hope, we look to you this morning for your leading as we begin this journey out of the exile of pandemic, out of the exile of social distancing and mask-wearing, out of the exile of only our homes and our safe spaces. We ask you for new vision and renewed listening as we discern where you are leading us and how you have changed us. Help us hold onto you as you have held onto us. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.