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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Jeremiah 31:1-17; John 1:1-18

2 January 2022

Dare to Imagine: Restoration

*Opening Greeting & Prayer:* Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning. Good morning to all of you who join us online. Welcome to each and every one of our guests this morning. We are glad that you are here with us this morning.

Let us pray: God of restoration and new life, we pray for your Spirit's presence in us and around us as we seek your will and way in your universe. You have created us in your image; we have distorted and disfigured that image. Through the faithfulness and grace of Jesus, we seek restoration for our hearts, minds, bodies, and souls. May our eyes and ears be open to how you are leading us in each new day. In Jesus name. Amen.

*Message:* One year has gone by. So much has happened this past year. Then I thought, "Well, we cannot make the road by walking together, yet looking backward." Reflecting on what has happened and what we have done is important work. But with learning from the past, we must be sure to find a way to center our focus ahead on the goal, too. Getting a better idea of where we're headed shapes how we respond today to any number of current issues or perplexing problems. When we are tempted to embrace the dichotomies, the either/or answers, that are often offered to us by our present cultural and political debates, we struggle to imagine anything more. God has never been limited by human beings' abilities to solve the problems that they have created or have been integral in perpetuating, so we hold onto where God is leading us.

We have come to the last week of our Advent series of messages. Today, we dare to imagine restoration. In the last 5 weeks, we have explored the possibilities of peace, joy, love, and revelation, seen completely in the coming of Jesus Christ, the God-child. When we live into the possibilities of the Jesus way, we begin to embody or show our neighbors glimpses of restoration, a final restoration that is on its way. The restoration that develops in each of our lives after we have given our whole selves over to the will and way of Christ will be realized fully at the second advent of Jesus, the coming that we continue to long for.

Our scripture passages this morning are familiar. If we were reading Matthew's account of the nativity, we would hear some of the last verses of our passage from Jeremiah. Rachel is weeping because of the loss of life to the Babylonian army, who has ransacked Jerusalem and led captives into exile in Babylon. In the book of Matthew, Rachel is weeping over the deaths of the young boys of Bethlehem, 2 and under, who are massacred on Herod's orders because of his fear of a rival, a baby boy who may take his throne in the future. Both stories of exile and violence are very dark moments in the ancient Israelite stories, moments filled with pain and grief, suffering and despair, hopelessness and disappointment. Yet the prophet does not leave us there alone to mourn in the brokenness and destruction of the world. Jeremiah writes of the Lord's promises to reunite the people of Israel by not only gathering those who have been scattered by Assyrian and Babylonian captivity, but by actually bringing together, again, the family of Israel, the northern and southern kingdoms, Ephraim and Judah. When God brings the people back, God will restore relationship between the estranged siblings.

Jeremiah gives us a glimpse, then, of what restoration could look like: members of a family coming together again in life-giving and authentic relationship. You might know this kind of imagining, this kind of longing because families can be dysfunctional and ridiculous,

especially with competing visions and birth order and parental expectations and life experiences and so on. I don't want to speak for you, but I can imagine that each of us can think of a time when we felt the strain of broken relationship with parents, siblings, cousins, grandparents, and more, yet God does not give up on those kinds of relationships but instead moves for them to be revived and sustained in the in-breaking kingdom. Do you have the energy to imagine such a thing, especially in those family relationships that have haunted you most?

In our second passage, the words of John chapter 1 call us back to God's original intention. In the beginning... Genesis 1:1. In the beginning was the *logos*, what is translated most often in English as the *word*. When God created, all was as it was intended to be. God's image-bearers, human beings, were living in authentic and faithful relationship with each other, with God, and with creation. According to Greek philosophy, all of creation came into being through the *logos*, an eternal principle through which all of reality was made. The author of John's gospel claims that the God of ancient Israel and this eternal principle are one and the same, but even more than that, the *logos* or word has taken on flesh or become human (a strange idea) and tabernacled among the people just as the presence of God had tabernacled with ancient Israel in the wilderness on the way to the promised land.

Like the sun's light and oxygen's life-giving potential in our lungs, God's light and life sustain all of creation though the forces of darkness, those that are opposed to God, continually attempt to extinguish the light and life. Suddenly in John 1:6, we move from the big picture of almighty God and the *logos* to a particular time and place. John, the witness, otherwise known as John the Baptist in the other gospels, has given testimony of how the true light is coming into the world. The creating and sustaining force of the universe, the true light and life, has come as a person to the very people who have been in covenant or relationship with almighty God for many

years, yet the world and this special people do not and have not recognized him. Yet for those who do recognize, receive this good news, and believe in the logos or the light, God will welcome them into God's family, not because they were born into it, as if it were a traceable bloodline or a birthright or even a belief system or experience that guarantees our place, but because God, the logos, has done it. This free gift, this grace and the truth of God's presence among us as the Messiah have come in Jesus Christ. Jesus has fully revealed how the almighty God will bring all people back to God's self in the end.

In John 1 then, we see glimpses of God's restoration as the welcoming of all people into God's family. What had become exclusive for the ancient Israelites in their purity of blood and practice and ritual has now been broken down. The people of ancient Israel were to be a source of blessing to all of the nations, giving their neighbors an example of what authentic and faithful relationship with the eternal God looked like, but their attempts had been disrupted and distorted by their brokenness and sin. They mistook their relationship with God as an exclusive relational exchange or trade, in which they did what was required of them by God and God, in turn, blessed them and kept them from suffering and defeat.

This kind of thinking about God is only helpful if God actually works this way, but God doesn't. Grace messes up the whole exchange system or as I like to call it, the soda-machine god. God cannot be gracious and be a soda machine, in which we only get what we have paid for or earned from God. Grace has no requirement. If it did, it would no longer be grace. What the author of John chapter 1 is getting at is that when people seek their own soda-machine god, they miss the god that actually shows up at their front door. In John 1:11, the author writes that the logos came to his own people, but the people did not accept him because there was no room for him in their imaginations or faith.

At this point, we come back to restoration and imagination. Can you dare to imagine that restoration is a gift of grace, that God will fully restore this universe to what it was intended in the beginning, but it won't be because we earned it from God and deserve our rightful payment of what God has promised? It will be because God has freely given the life and light that is needed to bring all things into authentic and faithful relationship. Can you imagine the possibility of a future that has been promised and will be fulfilled by a God who does not put all of the weight of accomplishing it on our shoulders alone? Will you dare to imagine the grace of restoration?

*Closing Prayer:*

God of restoration and renewal, give us the strength and humility to live into the grace that you have offered us. Empower us through your spirit to believe and speak that we are your beloved children, graciously accepted into a new family of life and light. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear how your grace is re-shaping the world around us. In Jesus name. Amen.