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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Texts: Isaiah 43: 1-3, 18-19; Jeremiah 19: 10-12; John 14: 1-6

September 12, 2021

### More Faithful in This Present Crucial Hour

I have a special message for each of the populations gathered in the Meetinghouse this morning. To the choir, I say, it's so good to see all of you back in your appointed places, and to hear your voices after more than a year without you. To all the parents who have returned with the start of Sunday School, I say that I'm so pleased you remember this place. It does my heart good to see each of you. To those who have bravely and faithfully been with us throughout the summer, I wish to welcome you to this Sunday of new beginnings. To those who may be visiting, you're taking a chance this morning, and I hope we can deliver. And to my colleagues, my comrades, my friends gathered behind me, I'll say that I'm delighted to begin another year in your company. To all of you, each and every one, I welcome you to a new and promising year – one fraught with uncertainties, but one brimming with possibility as well.

The word I have for you today is taken from the books of Jeremiah and Isaiah. From Jeremiah, we find a lovely word of assurance spoken in a time of crisis, when everything about the future felt up in the air. "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." Those are words meant for you every bit as much as those who first received them. This morning, we gather to put our trust in that hopeful assurance. From Isaiah, too, we find this word of encouragement: "When you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the waters, they will not consume you." That too is meant for you, but so are the words that follow: "I will make a way through the wilderness," the prophet has God declare.

When I was considering what to say to you today, it was that image that leaped out at me. At first, I recalled memories of being on the Appalachian Trail, and then suddenly coming upon a road crossing. When you're in the wilderness for a long time, a road signifies civilization, rehabilitation, renewal. Follow the road – the way – and you will find a warm meal, a comfortable bed, a hot shower, and maybe also the company of friends. To come upon a way through the wilderness is to find those things that the book of Jeremiah promises: well-being and not harm, a future filled with hope.

But then I recalled something more. Jesus chose that image for himself one time when he was speaking to his disciples. "I am the way," he told his friends, which is as much as to say, "I am the road through the wilderness. I am the path that will lead you to the relief you so desire. I am the crossing where others can find you, and I am the direction that will take you to the places you most need to get to. What does it mean, I wonder, for a man whose own life road would lead toward the disaster of crucifixion, to call himself the way? Or again, what does it mean that a man who owned no property, a man associated with no particular nationality, a man who issued baffling pronouncements that unnerved the self-appointed guardians of the good and the pure – what does it mean that this man, consigned to the trash heap of the ancient world, should call himself "the way"? More to the point, how does that "way" lead to the things we most need –

love, community, shared understanding, a sense of purpose in the world, material flourishing? What sort of way through the wilderness is this?

To get at those questions, I returned this week to a book that had a profound effect upon me when I first read it, one I've shared with you before. It's Rebecca Solnit's *A Paradise Built in Hell*, about the extraordinary communities that arise in the aftermath of disasters. Though her case studies are drawn from modernity, my wager is that Solnit's book has everything to do with the life of faith, including the events that transpired for Jesus and his followers. Her argument is that catastrophes have the paradoxical capacity to unlock altruism, selflessness, love, and even joy among those who are caught up in the aftermath of such an event. A rupture takes place in the everyday, and frequently something emerges that we scarcely have a language to describe. The wonderful is somehow enfolded within the terrible, joy is somehow discovered in the very center of one's sorrow, and courage is found even in the midst of fear. Here's Solnit:

Horrible in itself, disaster is sometimes a door back into paradise, the paradise at least in which we are who we hope to be, do the work we desire, and are each our sister's and brother's keeper.<sup>1</sup>

Disasters often have a way of returning us to a public and collective life, where participation, agency, purposefulness and freedom all become readily available. By contrast, for many people, those are precisely the things that are missing in their everyday lives, leading Solnit to suggest that the real disaster might be the everyday that we all navigate. Trivia dominates our everyday conversations, and our airwaves. We consume stories that we can scarcely remember when we are finished. We pursue tasks whose purpose we cannot discern. Weirdly, maybe even perversely, the disaster exposes the shallowness and vapidness of so much within our lives by suspending those trivialities, and giving us a common purpose. It temporarily enables us to share our burdens, to leave that shallowness behind, which, secretly, we've been yearning to do. A disaster, then, is like a lightning flash that gives us a glimpse of the kinds of lives we've been hoping to lead all along – noble, active, selfless – and the kind of society we most wish to dwell in – where our sorrows and cares are mutually shared. To switch the metaphor to the one I began with, in a strange and unexpected way, sometimes disasters expose a road, a path, a way, that leads precisely to the source of what is deepest and best in our souls.

In one of the most absorbing sections of the book, Solnit observes what happened in New York City just after 9/11. Amidst the pain, amidst the wreckage, paradoxical moments of shared purpose emerged, together with emotions that we scarcely have words to describe. It is not happiness. But neither is it pure negativity. Instead, it registers on an altogether different continuum, one where shallow is expressed on one side, and depth on the other. She says this: "The very depth of emotion, the connecting to the core of one's being, the calling into play of one's strongest feelings and abilities, can be rich, even on deathbeds, even in emergencies, while what is often assumed to be the circumstance of happiness sometimes is only insulation from the depths...or so the plagues of ennui and angst among the comfortable suggest."<sup>2</sup>

Here are a few of the stories where Solnit witnessed those dynamics emerging:

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<sup>1</sup> Solnit, Rebecca, *A Paradise Built in Hell* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010), pg. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Solnit, pg. 16.

Tobin Mueller started volunteering at a table handing out doughnuts to relief workers, and quickly wound up transforming the entirety of the Pier 59 warehouse into a makeshift mini-mall for rescue workers on break, stocked with masks, food, goggles, medicine, clothing, and anything else people might have needed. Mueller said that his one rule was that he never turned anyone away who wished to help or volunteer. They were all sleep deprived, crazed, hollowed out by grief, and yet this is what Mueller said: “I realized this is a little heaven.”

Temma Kaplan, a historian, met a young couple who had lost a friend in the collapse. They were selling cookies to raise money for their friend’s widow, and Kaplan reported that people kept coming by, and kept giving money, because in that moment, everybody was open to hearing their story. It was the emotional equivalent of mutual aid. When asked to describe the import of what she had witnessed, Kaplan said that it was a version of the beloved community that MLK and the civil rights leaders had fought for.

Kate Joyce was another person who observed the moment. She was a 19-year-old from New Mexico who got stuck in the city after her plane landed in New York just as the towers were collapsing. She found her way to Union Square, and later talked about the “overarching and unspoken desire (almost hunger) to provide ears, eyes, voices, and bodies that would first of all nurture one another.” She called that scene “an ecstatic present.”

A Catholic priest named James Martin was one of those who converged on Ground Zero just after the collapse – he gave blessings, a few times he celebrated the Mass, but mostly he just listened, and comforted, and talked to people. Writing about it a few weeks later, he said, “working down there has been the most profound experience of the Holy Spirit that I’ve ever had...you just got the sense – for me as a Christian – of the Kingdom of God. This is the Kingdom, this is the notion of everyone working and living together and eating together and pulling for a cause – totally other directed, totally selfless, and frankly, very self-deprecating.”<sup>3</sup>

To those stories in Manhattan, let me add another, this time in Connecticut. In the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the Board of Deacons of this church met and wrestled with how they – you – might best respond to those events. They – you - decided that the first order of business was to reach out to our Muslim neighbors, for abuse was being piled high upon Muslims throughout the United States. That decision resulted in a relationship with Reza Mansoor, and with many other Muslim leaders in the state of Connecticut (and really around the world if you think about our Tree of Life ministry). Many communities erected literal and figurative barriers around themselves, but you sensed the opening. Thankfully, the Muslim community did as well. I’m so thankful for those relationships, and Reza, particularly for your friendship! Your presence today bears witness to the miracle of friendship that emerged from all that wreckage.

A little bit of heaven. The beloved community. An ecstatic present. The Kingdom of God. The miracle of friendship. Each of those instances is wrapped in an experience of profound sorrow, of deep suffering, and of terrible dislocation. What are we to make of such experiences? What are we to do with such profound paradoxes? How can it be that from out of the scene of so much devastation, the very best within the human species was suddenly given leave to show itself?

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<sup>3</sup> All stories and quotes taken from Solnit, pgs. 200-208.

I believe that Solnit is exposing a pattern that people of faith have long understood. It was laid out in the narrative of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, together with the ecstatic experiences that take place just after those events. Theologians have long argued about whether those events – crucifixion and resurrection, followed by the ecstasy of the early disciples, constitute a special or a general event. The question is whether the story of Jesus constitutes a unique intervention of God into the world, or whether it discloses a pattern, a dynamic, by which God enters a damaged world over and over again. Faithful Christians have been found on both sides of that debate, but for my own part, I must tell you that I fall squarely in the latter camp, among those who would argue that this is a general event. That means the story of Jesus doesn't belong to churches alone. It prevents that story, along with the "way," "the path," and "the road" that it discloses, from devolving into a kind of tribal possession, meant only for those who publicly identify themselves as Christians. If it is a general event, it can be shared across religious traditions. On that telling, the narrative of Jesus describes an opening that occurs every time a disaster occurs, every time bad news arrives, every time a terrible suspension of the everyday takes place. A path through the wilderness materializes, one that Isaiah calls "the highway for our Lord." With or without the name of Jesus or God, with or without the external trappings of religion, the Way suddenly becomes available. And just as suddenly, it's populated with fellow travelers, fellow workers, each of them united by empathy, compassion, and mutual concern. What language shall we use to describe it? A little bit of heaven breaks through, or the beloved community emerges. The Kingdom of God lurches into view, or miracles of friendship materialize. Those designations are borrowed from the Christian lexicon, but Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and those with no religious affiliation will supply their own designations.

Of course, it goes without saying that not everyone discerns that opening, that way, or chooses to walk through it. A countervailing impulse also takes hold for many. Often, it comes from the elite, from those in charge of large institutional responses. As often as not, those responses are governed by fear and by a desire for retribution. Thus, it was that the massive outpouring of goodwill after September 11<sup>th</sup> was quickly channeled into other directions, as the insistent drumbeat of war began to pound, and then bombs began to fall. Meanwhile, Muslims and others from the Middle East were singled out for persecution. We're still living in a world that was reshaped by those countervailing, fearful, and retributive impulses. It must be stated that not everyone discerns the opening. The entrance to the Way can be narrow indeed. Even so, many do find it.

We've been talking about a catastrophe that occurred twenty years ago, but really, it's the disaster of our current moment that's been on my mind. I confess that I've worried a great deal over the last several months about the state of our community. Will people ever come back? How do we reconstitute ourselves after so much time apart? How do we build a sense of togetherness, and purpose, after so much time in the wilderness? How do we find direction – a path, a way – after so much wandering? Those questions have made me restless at night, and sometimes during the day too. But a way seems to be emerging.

300 refugee families will shortly arrive in Connecticut from Afghanistan, with many more arriving in other parts of the United States. Those are families fleeing their own disaster, looking for their own wilderness way. Currently, they're scattered around Air Force bases around the country, but one of those families will likely arrive in Old Lyme very soon. Our refugee house is

ready and waiting. That's because we know the pattern. We know the way. In the face of a catastrophe, we've learned to extend ourselves, to make new friends, to discover the fullest and the deepest expression of our common humanity. When we do so, God meets us. A little bit of heaven shows up, and the beloved community emerges once again. But we'll need your help. Our refugee committee can use some fresh members. We need a treasurer. We need folks to offer rides. We'll need financial resources, and we'll need people to offer their friendship to those trying to make a way through their own wilderness. Let me know if you'd like to be a part of that effort – we need you. It's true – there are always some who refuse to find the way. When we were preparing to welcome Syrian refugees, some troubled soul dropped a note in the offering plate informing us that we would likely be welcoming terrorists. That poor man. If only he knew the friendship and joy, the celebration and purpose we all found together when the Hamous arrived. It's time to do it again. We've been passing through our own wilderness, even as those who will be arriving are passing through theirs. Perhaps we can find the way together, a way leading to their welfare and ours, a future filled with hope for each and every one of us.

In the end is my beginning said T.S. Eliot, and so it shall be here. “I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. That's a promise delivered to you, to this community, and to those whom we soon shall welcome. In the words of our closing hymn, may we become more faithful still in this present, crucial hour.