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’êkah, (AY-cha). How. That is both the first word and the name of the book in Hebrew that we call “Lamentations.”

When Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek (called the *Septuagint*) in the third century BCE, they named the book *Threnoi*, [THRIH-nee] meaning “dirges” or “laments”. This provided a descriptive title instead of simply using the first word.

The fourth-century Latin translation of the Bible, known as the Vulgate, continued this tradition. It adopted the title *Lamentationes* [lah-men-tah-tsee-OH-nays], from which the English “Lamentations” is derived. Lamentations or laments are, of course, a passionate expression of grief or sorrow.

But the Hebrew title is more provocative. *’êkah*—how. This can be questioning cry of bewilderment—how could this happen? But it can also be a forlorn exclamation, as verse 1 says, “How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations!”

So opens the book of Lamentations with the cry of the city Zion, personified in verse 2 as a weeping widow with no one to comfort her.

We only hear from Lamentations potentially one other time in our three-year lectionary. I’m sure many of you will agree with my wife, Helen, that is once too many. If we want lamentations, we just have to watch the news. That is true—and also why we need to hear from this book.

The Book of Lamentations is a collection of poetic laments for the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE.

The first four chapters are acrostics—poems that begin each line with letters from the Hebrew alphabet in succession. The poems are, for the most part, in a rhythm scheme common in funeral dirges.

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The fifth chapter's poem is not an acrostic and seemingly points to a grief so unbearable and chaotic that it cannot be controlled either by form or liturgy.

From a literary perspective there are two people speaking in the book. One is the narrator and one is Jerusalem personified, typically called Daughter Zion. In today's passage we hear from the narrator who emphasizes the difference between Daughter Zion's current desolation and her former glory.

The narrator tends to affirm traditional theological explanations for the disaster, frequently attributing it to the sins of the people, and seems to give voice to God's perspective as a way of instructing us, the audience, about what happened—and why.

By contrast, Daughter Zion's cries do not emphasize a past that has been lost, but dwell on her present destitute condition.

She gives voice to the raw pain and anguish of the trauma; she often questions, and sometimes challenges, the traditional theological framework.

According to the narrator, Daughter Zion's overwhelming sense is loneliness, that because of her trauma she is detached and isolated from others who do not understand.

Daughter Zion, though, explains that she feels like a widow, not only vulnerable but also having lost the social fabric of those she once relied upon and whose relationships gave sense and order to the world. Yahweh was Zion's husband. But Yahweh is gone and she is abandoned, unsure whether restoration will ever be possible.

How? How did this happen? As we've heard from Jeremiah the past four weeks, the people brought it upon themselves. It was the rulers and

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religious leaders who put their faith in armies and political alliances while at the same time ignoring their people in need.

And while the leaders made the decisions that committed the nation, they did have the support of sufficient number of people to carry out those decisions. And now the entire nation suffers.

The Greeks called it hubris—excessive pride. Judah forgot what had happened to the Northern Kingdom 150 years earlier and the prophet Micah’s message then of “what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?

Hebrew is written with all consonants and there is another word that is spelled that same as *eicha* but pronounced *avekah* [eye-YEK-ah] that means “where” as in “where are you?”, which some Jewish commentaries note is the very first question God asks Adam in the Garden of Eden after they had eaten the forbidden fruit. Their disobedience leads to their subsequent losing of Paradise, not dissimilar to the people losing Jerusalem and Judah.

But it can also give a different slant on the book. Instead of, or in addition to, the book being about *eicha*, “how could it?”, it could be *avekah*, “where are you?” Not in the literal sense, but to pierce our emotional armor and ask “Where are you in your life? What are you feeling?”

As we see our country racing toward oligarchical fascism in combination with militant Christian Nationalism, many of us feel despondent and helpless in being to do anything about it. We are now facing perhaps for the first time a true test of our faith.

After Jesus tells the disciples they better not cause anyone to sin and to forgive 70 times 70 we come to today’s passage with the disciples saying,

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“Increase our faith!” In today’s times many of you may feel the same and asking, “How do we do that?”

Faith is less about assent to doctrine and more in terms of our steadfast devotion to Christ—that is, as the Christian life itself.

Increasing faith is more like increasing resilience through an ongoing spiral-like process of reflection, action, and grace that only “increases” as the process itself unfolds and expands in breadth and depth.

The key is not the size of faith but its tenacity and durability by resolving to embody our faith in persistent, courageous action.

This can only come through practice, in those challenging moments when faith is put to the test.

As Audrey West, associate professor of New Testament at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, writes, “Faith is persistence in reaching out to Jesus and trusting in Jesus’ power and authority. Faith is responding with love to forgiveness received, not letting fear get the upper hand, and being willing to take risks that challenge the status quo. Faith is giving praise to God, having confidence in God’s desire for justice, and being willing to ask Jesus for what we need.” End quote.

Faith is also not practiced alone. We do it as a community, supporting each other, encouraging each other, comforting each other. And we do so not as “us against the world” but as “us with the world”. Even when it seems futile, Jesus calls us to engage, to witness, to love.

To make the world more like the kingdom of God, that’s how we do it.

In the name of the God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer. Amen.

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“Do You Trust Me?”, 10/2/22

Belief, faith, trust.

In the 19th century there was a world-famous tightrope walker called the Great Blondin (blahn-din). He was able to do tightrope walking blindfolded, carrying people, doing flips, and more.

On June 30, 1859 he became the first to cross Niagara Falls and did so a few more times over the next couple of weeks.

On July 15, with President Millard Fillmore in attendance, Blondin told the crowds, “I am going to push a wheelbarrow across on the tightrope. Do you believe I can do it?” After seeing all that he had done previously the crowd roared, “Yes!”

Blondin then walked *backward* to Canada and returned to the U.S. pushing a wheelbarrow.

After the cheers the Great Blondin asked, “Now, anyone willing to sit in the wheelbarrow as I push it back along the tightrope?” The crowd said—nothing; nobody made a noise.

The crowds *believed* he could push *someone* across in a wheelbarrow, but they didn’t *trust* that it could be *them*. You could say they lacked *faith*.

Today’s scripture passages deal with faith—and by extension belief and trust.

As we have discussed before (meaning I have talked and you could only sit there and nod your head), in the New Testament Greek the word *pistis* can be translated as either faith, belief, or trust and comes from a word meaning “be persuaded.” How we translate it depends on context, but it’s important to know that the differences are more nuances rather than completely different words.

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In English, a belief is something a person has confidence is true some basis, but not necessarily absolute proof. In modern parlance there is also a component of intellectual assent. “I believe in God.”

Faith goes a step further in having a committed belief in something without proof, particularly during difficult times. “I have faith in God.” So not only do you believe, but are committed to it.

Trust is a little more personal and tends to involve relationships and when you place confidence in someone or something. “I trust in God.”

Faith is believing that God is who God says God is and that what God can do, only God can do. But trust takes things a step further. It is making the willful choice to trust that God will do what He promises.

Simplistically, you could say we believe with our head, have faith with our heart, and trust with both.

In the verses prior to today’s gospel lesson in Luke Jesus admonishes his disciples not to cause others to sin or risk worse to yourself. He also commands them to admonish those who do sin, but then forgive them when they repent—even if the cycle is repeated over and over.

Coupled with earlier teachings about sacrifice it is no wonder the disciples say, literally, “Add faith to us!” It seems more than they can bear.

Jesus, though, responds a bit irritated and hyperbolic. “If you had faith the size of this teeny weeny barely visible mustard seed, you could do things that seem impossible.”

The disciples are asking for the wrong thing. For Jesus, the right kind of faith is quality, not quantity. It’s not how much you have, but what kind you have. It’s not manipulating supernatural forces like literally uprooting a mulberry tree and planting it in the sea, but what you do with what you have.

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Faith has less to do with doctrine and more in terms of our steadfast devotion to Christ. That is, it is more than believing in Christ; it is responding to Christ.

To have faith means having our whole way of perceiving and responding to life transformed by the abundance of God’s creative justice and power.

What seems “impossible” for us is “possible” for God.

Faith is not the miracles of moving mountains, but in the everyday tasks of discipleship, the everyday life of loving and forgiving.

In today’s lesson Jesus conveys that with a slave metaphor.

Because of our own country’s problematic history of slavery and its continuing legacy, the metaphor can sound like a tacit endorsement of slavery.

But in the ancient world, slavery was just a fact of life. Many sold themselves into slavery out of sheer poverty. Or they were peoples conquered by another. Slavery was based on economic and cultural distinctions, not racial as arose during the Enlightenment Era. This is not to suggest that slavery was not still a bad thing or that people enjoyed being enslaved.

But Jesus had followers who undoubtedly owned enslaved people and so he uses metaphor they can relate to—but turns it on its head. Jesus essentially says, those who are used to being the masters should see themselves as slaves relative to God. Not so much as being “owned” by God, but by being “servants” to God—and for God. They are not lofty masters of their fate, but humble servants of the Lord.

Jesus is suggesting that those who would be leaders of the Jesus movement would do best to view themselves as ones who serve—and who do so without thought of reward because it is simply what they are supposed to do.

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To be honest this is my fundamental belief about the Christian life. We do what we do because that is what we are supposed to do. It's like breathing and sleeping, drinking and eating.

That does not mean it has to be drudgery, though! Any more than drinking and eating need to be drudgery. Serving God by serving others should be joyful simply knowing that it is the right thing to do!

That does not mean it is always easy, particularly when we don't see a favorable outcome to doing a good deed. But that is where faith and trust comes in. Faith does not increase like magic. It is felt and known through lived experience. This can only come through practice, in those challenging moments when faith is put to the test, when you move forward with a concrete step in the justice-seeking and peacemaking way of Jesus, with a discerning heart, regardless of uncertainty, worry, or fear.

Faith is persistence in reaching out to Jesus and trusting in Jesus' power and authority.

Faith is responding with love to forgiveness received, not letting fear get the upper hand, and being willing to take risks that challenge the status quo.

Faith is giving praise to God, having confidence in God's desire for justice, and being willing to ask Jesus for what we need

Like Jeremiah lamenting over the fate of Israel, we may also lament and fear what is happening not only with our own country but around the world, both politically and religiously.

Paul encouraged Timothy in today's epistle lesson to maintain his sincere faith and act with a spirit of power and of love to hold to the standard of teaching in faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. So should we.

Like the Great Blondin and his wheelbarrow, we can believe in God working in our lives, but we must also have faith to commit to God to let God do so.

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And to trust in God that serving in order to lead, forgiving in order to love, and to lose our lives in order to save them is the discipleship God calls us to.

Belief, faith, trust. All are one and all for the One. Trust me.

In the name of the God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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“Fan the Flame” 10/16/19

When I was in Boy Scouts growing up, I learned a lot of skills, but there was one that I lacked confidence in for many years.

I was reminded of that yesterday when my 7-year-old grandson, Robby, asked if I would stay overnight last night at a Cub Scout family campout at Camp Kingsley in Ava, NY.

I said yes, but then we found out that his Pack had cancelled going, so I got to sleep in my own bed after all for which my body is grateful.

One of the key elements of a good campout, particularly in colder weather, is having a campfire. It cooks your food, keeps you warm, and gives you light at night.

When I was about 11 I learned how to build a fire, but not confidently, so that when I was on my own or even when I was older and was expected to be the leader for the younger scouts, I was anxious, particularly if I had to use all natural materials or conditions were poor.

The key to building a fire is to start with tinder—not the dating app, but finely divided, open material which will begin to glow under a shower of sparks or a match. Dry grass, wood shavings, or bark from birch tree are good. For manmade tinder, paper works really well. Or lint from your dryer.

Before you light the tinder, you make sure you have constructed some other enclosure around it with kindling—small twigs and such—with some larger fuel around that—larger sticks and branches. You have it built such that it helps trap much of the heat, but is open enough for air to feed the flame.

Then you light the tinder and gently blow on it to give oxygen to the flame. As the flame takes hold on the kindling, you have a small fire that you blow

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or fan the flames to give additional oxygen increasing the heat intensity to catch the larger sticks on fire until fire is strong enough to burn on its own and handle even logs.

Today’s epistle lesson also deals with kindling and flames.

2 Timothy is basically a farewell speech of the Apostle Paul at the end of his life, though most likely written by a disciple of his 30 years or so after Paul’s death.

In today’s passage Paul is encouraging one of his best-known disciples, Timothy, who apparently is having a crisis of faith, wondering if it is all worth it and what to do in the midst of so much persecution around him and little sign of Jesus’ return.

After the traditional opening greeting Paul says, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.”

Note it was the matriarchs in Timothy’s family that grounded him in his faith as now a third generation Christian.

Then Paul follows with “For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands.”

This is the NRSV translation and is accurate as the Greek word, anazópureó (an-ad-zo-poor-eh'-o), means “to kindle afresh”.

That is, we can see the fire of Timothy’s faith has diminished, but is not out.

There may be no flame, but there are still some coals from which the fire can be re-started, rekindled.

But the language is a bit prosaic and if you’re not a fire builder you might ask, “How do you rekindle?”

Fortunately, it is also valid to translate anazópureó (an-ad-zo-poor-eh'-o) as the NIV does as “fan the flame,” which gives a much more graphical picture

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of how to get the fire going again. By fanning the flame or blowing on it you give literally a breath of fresh air, which alone can cause it to flame up again. And with some nurturing and new fuel you can have a roaring fire once again.

Paul is reminding Timothy of his roots—to boldly cultivate and embrace his own current calling and ministry because of, and on account of,

Timothy’s initial exposure to the faith within the context of his family.

Paul tells him in verses 8 and 9, “Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace.”

Today’s passage concludes with Paul saying, “Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.”

And that is what we are charged to do as well. Yet, like Timothy we may be discouraged, wondering if we even have any talents and are they making any difference whether as individuals or as the small congregation of Stone Presbyterian Church. Does anyone know or care?

The gospel lesson today says, don’t worry—just do.

Jesus’ response suggests that the apostles’ request to “Increase our faith” is misguided. It’s not a question of quantity, but of sufficiency. Faith “the size of a mustard seed” is sufficient for even the most demanding tasks of discipleship.

As most of you probably know, the mustard seed was known both for its miniscule size (1-2 millimeters in diameter) and for the contrastingly large, unruly bush that it produced. Thus, it was—and still is—the perfect metaphor for small beginnings leading to big results.

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But the point of Jesus’ metaphor is not to quantify faith as much as to affirm its power. God works through a modicum of faith to empower us to do what God needs us to do.

And while the example of the slave having to do all the work with no charity from the master seems a little unsympathetic, we can say that obedience to God is to enter into a deeper relationship with God and that in itself fosters joy.

By approaching each ordinary task as an opportunity to live your faith, you discover the extraordinary depth of God’s love for you and for the seemingly ordinary (but quite extraordinary!) people around you.

As Paul reminded Timothy of his roots, I remind you of yours to boldly cultivate and embrace you own current calling and ministry with our community of faith providing the kindling and support.

Let the Spirit rekindle and fan into flame the gift of God that is in you—and us—so we may continue the joy of serving God.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.

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“Super Size Me”, 10/2/16

How much is enough? We often have the attitude “more is better.” If 500 mg of Vitamin C is good for you, make it a thousand. If you can take an inch, take a mile. In Ah-mur-ica we say, “go big or go home.”

This picture [*point at slide*] is from a 2004 documentary called “Super Size Me” about a man named Morgan Spurlock who for a month ate only food from McDonald's. At that McDonald's had a promotion where you could “super size” your meal or drink and one of his self-imposed rules was that if they asked him if he wanted an item super sized he had to say yes. By the end of the month he had gain 24 pounds and has severe health issues. While it made good press, critics noted that Spurlock had consumed twice the normal daily calories and they showed that if you just limited your number of calories you could actually lose weight even eating just at McDonald's. Nonetheless, six weeks after the documentary aired, McDonald's dropped its super sized portions.

In today's gospel lesson, “the apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”” Though I hadn't remembered the documentary at the time when I read the passage, my first thought was the disciples saying, “Lord, super size our faith”. Now at first it's easy to blame the disciples for wanting “more”, as if they were greedy.

Perhaps they are, but recall some of the things that have happened up to this point. Jesus has turned away would-be followers who simply wanted to bury their father or say good-bye to family. Jesus told a parable about a dishonest steward and commended him to the disciples saying, “make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” And just before today's passage he tells the disciples, “It would be better for you if a

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millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble” and “If the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.”

No wonder the disciples are asking for more faith; despite giving up their own livelihoods and being with him constantly it seems it’s not enough and they’re afraid. Didn’t Jesus already chastise them when they were crossing the sea and he calmed the storm saying, “Where is your faith?” and later said to them, “If God so clothes the grass of the field...how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith.”

Now here 2000 years later you might say, “Lord, give me a sign” or “Show me I’m on the right path.” But the disciples were traveling with Jesus incarnate, in the flesh, day in and day out and yet they still have doubts. So if you have your own doubts or concerns, don’t worry—you’re in very good company.

So how does Jesus respond to their request? Does he say, “It’s all good” or “Don’t worry; be happy”? No, appears to a bit irritated and belittles them saying essentially, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, one of the tiniest of seeds, you could do miraculous things.”

The Greek word used here for faith is *pistis*, may also be translated as trust, confidence, commitment. We often distinguish the faith that “moves mountains” from the basic trust in God or Christ. We tend to make a distinction between these two types of faith because of the false assumption that the former has to do with manipulating some kind of supernatural power and the latter has to do with submitting to an external authority or set of beliefs or standards of conduct.

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Yet Jesus’ very statement “your faith has saved you” to those he does help implies that something else is going with faith. To have faith means having our whole way of perceiving and responding to life transformed by God’s abundance creative justice and power. What seems “impossible” for us is “possible” for God.

What Jesus says about “faith” sets the stage for what he says about being God’s “slaves.” You might find the next set of verses about slaves makes you uncomfortable, since you might think Jesus is in favor of or at least not against slavery, but that’s not the point of his message. His message is “If you’re the Lord of the manor, you don’t reward your slave with extras just for doing his job and vice versa if you’re a slave you shouldn’t expect special treatment just for doing your job.”

If having “faith” -- even faith the size of a mustard seed -- means having one’s thoughts, feelings, and actions wholly transformed by God’s reign in our midst, then it entails being a “slave” of God: one wholly devoted to the abundance of God’s purposes in the world. Since God’s life is immeasurable, his generosity eludes any of our attempts to manipulate it - either as a power we can control or as a means for justifying or rewarding ourselves. This is why we are “worthless slaves”: those to whom nothing is owed. We serve in the banquet of God’s kingdom simply because of who we are, or more importantly, because of the One to whom we belong.

Instead of worrying about the size of their faith, perhaps Jesus is telling his followers, including you and me, that they should just get on with living out their faith in obedience to Jesus’ commands. After all, as Jesus also said in the dishonest steward story, “whoever is faithful in very little is also faithful in much.”

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And you and I indeed have much, because the size of God’s love is boundless.

And so should be our faith. And that’s pretty super.

In the name of the God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Amen.