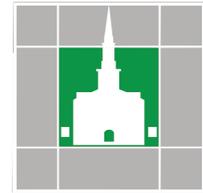


# New Day

Scripture text: Jeremiah 36:1-8, 21-23, 27-28; 31:31-34

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Center Church on the Green, November 22, 2020



I'm sure you have a favorite song and a favorite movie. It's pretty convenient for me that one of my favorite songs is part of one of my favorite films. The song is "As Time Goes By," and of course the film is *Casablanca*.

As my wife Alison knows well I could watch Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in this short gem two or three times a week all year long. I do other things in my leisure time, of course, but I do return to *Casablanca* from time to time.

If you don't know the film, it's set in French territory in colonized Morocco in the early days of the Second World War. Casablanca is the principal port city and is just across the Strait of Gibraltar from Portugal and Spain.

The American expatriate Rick Blaine owns Rick's Café Americaine. It is a neutral meeting place for all the factions struggling for control in northwestern Africa—French, Portuguese, German, and native Moroccans.

The story centers on the transit of a Czech Resistance leader and his companion through Casablanca. Victor Laszlo cannot be

arrested by the Germans while he is in the city, but neither can he leave. Laszlo is renowned for his ability to mobilize resistance to the German occupation.

Victor's companion is Ilsa Lund...secretly his wife, and for a few days Rick's lover in Paris just before the occupation. Ilsa thought Victor had died, and she received word of his escape from a concentration camp just as she and Rick were about to take the last train out of Paris. Her unexplained disappearance has left Rick bitter and disengaged.

You'd think with all that tension and the high stakes that there'd be no room for irony or humor in this little film. But, the story is also committed to reminding us that war affects real people in all their glory, and so there are funny little moments sprinkled throughout the film.

We see it when the chief of police, Captain Renault, engages Rick in a probing conversation about his intentions.

[Go watch *Casablanca*]

So, a little secret: *Casablanca*'s not really in the desert. It's a port city, and the prevailing winds bring in enough moisture that the filmmakers nod to it in the climactic final scene: when at an airport shrouded in fog and on a runway slicked with rain, Rick

dispatches Ilsa and Victor to an airplane and gives up his last ticket out of town.

If Casablanca were in the desert, Rick's cynicism would not have melted in the fog as a new agreement was forged between him and Captain Renault. That's a fact...or at least a movie fact.

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Facts have a funny way of hanging around and making their presence felt. Facts are hard to dismiss. Facts pull us back when we are indulging in fiction and fantasy.

And when facts are under attack as they seem to be in our time, it makes us uneasy. We feel anxious: What if other people are buying in to realities that we know fly in the face of fact? What if we ourselves don't have a firm grasp on the truth? What hope do we have that matters will proceed equitably and according to fact instead of fantasy?

With those uneasy questions nagging at us it might seem easier to just unplug and to ignore what's happening around us. It might seem easier to just let things happen however they are going to happen.

But whether we brush facts aside or embrace them, there is this to consider: Facts remain. There is such a thing as truth. And circumstances will change because truth does not change.

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Truth is durable. Facts are sharper than King Jehoiakim's pocket knife.

Can you believe that guy in today's narrative reading? I don't know if it helps to know that Jehoiakim was king, but he was controlled behind the scenes by the Egyptian Pharaoh who had installed him on Judah's throne. Jehoiakim inexplicably made decisions favorable to Egypt, and taxed the life out of his own people so he could send big tribute payments back to Egypt.

And here was a raging prophet on his doorstep, letting Jehoiakim know that a terrible fate awaited him. Even though Jehoiakim still professed his belief in God, God's messages back to the king offered nothing comforting. It shouldn't be a surprise: Jehoiakim was an utterly corrupt and debauched individual who was in the habit of killing a husband so he could then take the widow as a lover. Many times. He was closely involved with various female relatives of various ages. He appropriated property that he liked, and considered putting servants to death a just way of discontinuing their services.

In short, he was a rotten, corrupt, evil-minded tyrant who used every lever of power available to him to do whatever he wished.

And God saw it, and God promised him an end commensurate with his life.

That's what is on the scroll that Jeremiah sent to Jehoiakim, and that's what ends up in the fire...another indictment of Jehoiakim for his actual contempt of God's word.

And of course he does suffer an ignominious death—even though scholars don't agree on the precise details.

That humiliating death for Jehoiakim is paired with words of hope for the people who suffered under his reign. The people who now found themselves under Babylon's rule are promised a new covenant, in words that cannot be cut with a pocketknife and thrown into the fire. The people whose idea of a ruler had been warped and twisted by Jehoiakim are promised a renewed relationship with God that can be carried with them wherever they go.

The people are told to hold onto truth, and given hope.

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And yes, holding on to the truth is about listening for words of hope.

When we are trying to wash shameful memories out of our consciousness we need hope. The images of parents and children separated at our borders...the images of nurses and doctors

recycling protective equipment as they ministered to COVID patients...the images of peaceful protestors pushed aside by military troops. We need hope.

And to find that hope when we are frustrated with how facts are brushed aside, we rely on God's promises. Those promises are in Bibles, yes. But they are also promises in covenant with God and each other, promises that are not written on paper that can be burned. They are covenant promises written on our hearts. They are promises that make our hearts hospitable places for the truth to live.

And the truth is, a new day is coming. The facts point to it. Our faith points to it. God's Word points to it. The restoration of peace and just dealings and understanding has a home in our hearts today, because it is based on the truth of God's promises to us.

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In this time when we are keeping hope alive, we will gather around smaller tables this year. That's how we keep each other safe, and how we honor our commitment to treat each other with respect for life.

Our smaller gatherings will be about gratitude and giving thanks for God's love. But our larger gathering is built around the clean slate God promises for the new day to come.

When we offer a prayer of thanksgiving this week, let us be grateful for that promised new day. When we look for hope, let us find our hope in God's bountiful and enduring love for us. Amen.