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The story is told of two brothers. One was an incurable optimist and the other an incorrigible pessimist. No matter what happened to the one child his spirits could not be dampened, and no matter what happened to the other, his sprits could not be lifted up.

One Christmas, their parents tried to exercise some correctives on these extreme attitudes. For the pessimist, they bought Christmas gifts that anticipated his every wish, hoping that seeing such an array of good things on Christmas morning would produce signs of a sunny disposition. Conversely, they would give the optimistic child nothing but a bag of horse manure.

On Christmas morning, the pessimistic boy opened a box of magnificent electric trains. In response he said, with dismay, "They'll probably break." When he opened up the box containing a brand new stereo he simply groaned, "I don't have any CD's to play on this thing." He went on and on like that as he opened one gift after another. There were negative responses to everything.

On the other hand, when the optimistic child opened up his bag and found that there was horse manure in it, he started shouting and jumping up and down for joy. When his parents wanted to know what he was so happy about, he exclaimed, “Do you see what I got? Do you see what I got? There’s got to be a pony around here somewhere!”

And so it is with optimists everywhere! Christians are optimists! No matter what happens to us, we can stand up and say, “There’s a pony out there somewhere!” As we begin the new year let us be optimistic Christians, for our stories are not all told.

A few years ago my mother suffered two heart attacks in one day. She didn’t die, but she was in the ICU for about 10 days. While there, my siblings and I took turns at her bedside. One day when I was there, she had her eyes closed and began doing something strange. She took her right hand and made this sweeping gesture, in a wide arc, over to her left hand. And she kept doing it, one wide arc after another.

Her eyes remained closed but after several of these I asked, “Mom, what are you doing?” She said, “Turning the pages.” I asked her, “What pages?” She said, “The pages of my book.” She kept at it.

**This is what we do** – remembering the past as we continue to live our lives. My mother was reliving her history, her personal story. I didn’t get

any other dialogue from my mother that day but it didn't matter. She was at peace going back in time while healing in a hospital room.

Not only do we remember the past and share the stories of our lives, on a personal level, we do the same within our families, within our church, our communities, our country.

This is what Isaiah is doing for the people of Israel. His prophetic speech remembers their past and God's involvement in it. Isaiah is calling them to lean into the future, because God says, "Surely they are **my people...** and so **he became their Savior...** his **presence saved them...** in his love and mercy **he redeemed them... he lifted them up and carried them** all the days of old" (Isa. 63:8-9).

I love this message for us today. Perhaps there is a bit of a let-down after the big holiday. The presents are opened -- fragments of wrapping paper are hiding behind the sofa or under chairs. The tree, if it is real, is looking a little tired. We may still be eating leftovers. The high spirits and high hopes of Christmas Day seem short-lived. The beautifully decorated, full sanctuary, and robust hymn singing on Christmas Eve seem distant when the New Year rolls around.

"Why can't it be Christmas every day of the year?" we would protest to our parents when we were young. They would look at us and just shake

their heads. Back then we had been thinking mostly of the presents. Today I still carry that protest in my heart but, like most of us who've lived for some time, now I think of peace, goodwill, and joy. Why can't we have peace and joy every day of the year? These verses are an introduction to a prayer of lament for Israel that helps capture our yearnings for things to go well every day of the year.

God's people have been returned to their land, to rebuild Jerusalem and begin again. There is great joy in their liberation from Babylonian captivity; amazing restoration by the grace and mercy of God. ***But the way is difficult.*** The homecoming is not idyllic; much of Jerusalem has been destroyed, foreign people claim the grazing land, and only a remnant of the twelve tribes of Israel has returned.

In the midst of this situation, Isaiah issues ***a call to remember.*** God's people then and now are to remember what God has done for them. God has acted in the past to save God's people, and that has been grace upon grace.

How will we look back on 2016 and remember? Certainly we remember our losses; precious loved ones, health concerns, especially the loss of being able to do things which we once did with ease. Will we look back and see grace upon grace? Yes, there were difficult times, and good times, and ***all the time God was with us.***

**Isaiah says it beautifully, “In all their distress he too was distressed, and an angel of his presence saved them.”**

Our looking back on this past year, here at Valley Presbyterian Church includes grace upon grace; the pure joy and love that our choir brings to our worship services; our special times together sharing fellowship around food and fun; and the wonderful ministry of our Mission Committee, Faith Formation, Pastoral Care ministries, and on and on, all being supported by your selfless giving.

It is God’s “presence that saves us.” That’s what we celebrated at Christmas! Our trust in the future and our daily prayers reach a God who doesn’t have a long-distance phone line, whose office isn’t tucked away on the 89th floor and can only be reached by a locked, private elevator where a “bulldog” of an executive secretary guards God’s privacy. God is present in all of our daily existence; **present with love and compassion for us.**

Our scripture ends with the gracious image of God as the one who lifts up and carries those who are fallen. This is exactly what God did for God’s people, lifting up the people and bringing them out of slavery in Egypt and into a new life-giving covenant relationship. This is what God has already done for us and now we can move ahead, into this new year because God is about lifting up and carrying his people forward.

Just one week after Christmas the image that comes to mind for me is that of this church, still at work reaching out to others in need. Valley Presbyterian Church did not go away and hide! We, with God's help, lifted our people up, our missions up, our church up, no matter how exhausted we were. Valley Presbyterian Church, carried others in our love, glorifying God in the process and providing kindness and compassion so we would be ready for a new day of doing God's work. God is like this with us; He finds us wherever we are and in whatever state we are and lifts us up, restores us, and gives us a new start to a new day. **That's our future!**

God's people needed to remember and hear this good news as they faced the demands of returning to their homeland, or, in starting a new year. Remembering is good because it isn't just a look back; it is also a look forward. Since God has been faithful to God's people in the past and since God has promised to be faithful, then we never face the future alone. God is with us. God is with us so that the future holds mercy, steadfast love, and redemption. Amen.