

Isaiah 49: 8-16
Matthew 6: 34-24
February 27, 2011
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

Listen again to the beautiful words of Isaiah addressed to the exiles in Babylon:

I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people;
to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages;
saying to the prisoners, “Come out,” to those who are in darkness,
“Show yourselves.”

God through the prophet announces that he is offering Isaiah and his words as a covenant—an ironclad promise—of hope and deliverance. Through Isaiah, God promises to re-establish the land of Israel as God’s promised gift to God’s people. God will once again establish the lands belonging to each of the twelve tribes—what God calls their “desolated heritages.”

Then, in language that looks forward to Jesus at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, God tells Isaiah to say to the exiles, “Come out!” And: “to those who are in darkness, ‘Show yourselves.’”

The follows a series of beautiful images of how God will lead and sustain God’s people on the way back to their true home. This shall be no bitter journey through harsh and barren landscape. Indeed, the roads will be level. Springs of water will refresh the former exiles on their return journey. The path from exile to restoration will be a joyful celebration of what God has done.

And so Isaiah bursts forth with a cry of praise:

Sing for joy O heavens, and exult, O earth!
Break forth, O mountains, into singing!
For the Lord has comforted his people
and will have compassion on his suffering ones!

Isn't that great? Isn't that the ultimate motivational speech? Had the passage for this morning ended there I would have imagined the exiles caught up in a veritable tumult of excitement and anticipation. Yet listen to what follows:

But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me. My Lord has forgotten me."

Friends, I offer to you every preacher's nightmare. It's Saturday and God has given you a message calculated to raise the hearts of the faithful to the heights of spiritual excitement! This sermon will give sight to the blind, heal the lame and yes, call the dead out of their tombs! And now that the message is on the web how many thousands of souls will be transformed by this message! Yes, indeed!

The service ends and the pastor waits for the beaming faces of the rejoicing souls as they return to their homes. But what happens? The first person through the door says, "I don't know who that sermon was for; but it wasn't for me. I lost my job this week. My son dropped out of school. My mother was diagnosed with cancer." The parishioner doesn't use these precise words but they are certainly implied: "Pastor, You know what you can do with your sermon? He doesn't have to tell me. I know.

So after his brilliant and inspiring message, Isaiah has, to use MJ's colorful phrase, "A plop experience." But unlike the pastor I know so well, Isaiah doesn't go home and brood. He hears the legitimate cry of the heart which has responded to the message. He responds with an even deeper message of hope:

Can a woman forget her nursing child? (No!)
Or show no compassion for the child of her womb? (No!)
Yet even if these may forget, I will not forget you!
I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands;
Your walls are continually before me.

From this wonderfully honest and real encounter from scripture I derive this thought: We should never be shocked or discouraged when our message of hope does not elicit the response we expect. Why?

First of all, we cannot and should not seek to control people's reaction to God's word. There is never an inappropriate response to God's speech to us. God's speech to us is first of all to us *as who we are*. It is never to who we believe we *should be, wish we were, or might be if we were better people*. When God speaks to you it is *to you as who God knows you to be right now*. So the question becomes, who is the *you* who is hearing and responding? What are *you* thinking and feeling right now?

For the people addressed by God through Isaiah the answer included the experience of despair, abandonment, even anger at God. Nobody I know *likes* to feel these things. Yet nevertheless we *do* feel these feelings. We may suppress them or put a good face on them for a time; but the fact is for most of us there is an ongoing daily undercurrent of worry, disappointment, resignation and doubt. It is like that irritating "breaking news" bar that streams across the bottom of the TV screen; only, unlike that bar, this not breaking news. Ok, it might be breaking; but it is certainly not news. We live with it and try to forget it. And then we come to church and the preacher has the gall to remind us of what we want to forget. No wonder we feel like telling where to put his sermon!

But God never speaks, nor I hope do I, to rub our faces in our suffering. Like a hot compress on a painful boil, God seeks to raise our pain to the surface so that it can be lanced and healed. We may be meant to live with some suffering. But we are not meant to suffer. What is called the Serenity Prayer asks God to help us identify and accept that

we cannot change. But the assumption is that there is a lot that can change. If we trust God as spoken in his word of scripture and in and through the person of Jesus Christ and truly put our lives in his hands, not only can things get better, *they will get better*. As God says through the prophet it is a covenant, an ironclad guarantee.

Nowhere does God promise this will be easy. Nowhere does God promise we can grow without pain. Indeed not only the teachings of Jesus, *but his very life* demonstrates that true growth and new life *only* come through allowing that in us which suffers to come forward and be acknowledged. Thus we hear God through Isaiah,

I have given you as a covenant to the people to establish the land,
to apportion the desolate heritages; saying to the prisoners, "Come out,"
to those who are in darkness, "Show yourselves."

What can this mean that liberation from prison and darkness comes with the price of acknowledging that in us which *is in prison, is in darkness!* Is this difficult? You bet! Is it painful? Absolutely! Why do avoid our pain? Why do we try to live with it? Why do shrug and say, "We all have our cross to bear?"

I can say to you without embarrassment that apart from the grace of God in Jesus Christ I would never face my pain and suffering. It is only that on some level I believed God's promise that he could bring hope and healing to my life that I was able to hear him calling to me outside of the tomb of my life and yearn to take the steps that led me out to a new life. I stand before you as one for whom God did for me what I was unable to do for myself. It is why I believe with conviction that if God can touch my life he can touch yours. He never forgets you. Your life is carved in the palm of his hand. Your struggles are ever before him. Your life draws from God the yearning to bring healing to your soul.

That is why he sent Jesus who teaches us that this journey is a one day at a time walk of trust and faith. It is one we are not meant to walk alone but together, and to share with the world around us. Amen.