

“Hope and Help”

Isaiah 62:1-5

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

Frankfort, Kentucky

January 20, 2012

Once again, our attention is drawn to the words recorded in Isaiah. This time the prophet from Third Isaiah speaks from his heart to the people he dearly loves.

Let me remind you the book of Isaiah is comprised of three units of material written over two hundred years. Chapters 1-39 are by the eighth century BCE prophet who spoke out against the injustice and idolatry of Judah and Jerusalem shortly before the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 721 BCE.

Chapters 40-55, referred to as Second or *Deutero* Isaiah, were written one hundred fifty years later by an unnamed prophet after Jerusalem and Judah fell to the Babylonians in 597 and 587 BCE.

Last week, I spoke of these two invasions. In the attack of 597 BCE, the Babylonians did not destroy the temple or the city, but took control of it. They deported three thousand of Judah's finest citizens and officials, including the king and queen mother.

The next ten years was a time of upheaval in Jerusalem, even though the Babylonians allowed Zedekiah to serve as governor and interfered little in the affairs of the people. There was a strong faction in Jerusalem which wanted to completely throw off the Babylonian cloak, and they convinced Zedekiah to withhold the annual tribute to Babylon in 588 BCE.

The prophet, Jeremiah, warned Zedekiah not to do this and appealed to his friends and neighbors to quit being so antagonistic. They would not listen, however, and paid a high price for their stubbornness.

Nebuchadnezzar sent his army into Jerusalem to destroy the city. The beloved Temple, along with most of the homes and businesses were annihilated, and thousands more citizens were taken into captivity. Life as they had known it would never be the same.

You can imagine the mood of the captives in Babylon. The Jewish people were miserable. Despair and hopelessness were rampant. It was in this context the prophet of

second Isaiah spoke from among the exiles in Babylon of God's plan to use their suffering to teach the homesick Jews about life and faith.

Chapters 56-66, commonly called third Isaiah, were written after Persia, under the command of Cyrus, overthrew the Babylonians in 539 BCE and released the captives to return home to Jerusalem. Today's text is from this body of material.

You would think after fifty years in exile, the Israelites would be ecstatic about going home. I'm sure most were. However, some were reluctant to go because they had intermarried and put down roots, so they stayed in Babylon.

Those who did return wondered if they had made the right decision after they topped the hill overlooking their once proud city of Jerusalem. It was in shambles.

The Temple lay in ruins, along with their homes and businesses. All they had known was gone, and their dreams for a better life for their families were vanishing, too.

How do you rebuild your life after it has been turned upside down? When everything you thought you needed in order to survive is gone, how do you go on? How do you begin again when you think your life has come to an end?

Have you ever felt that level of despair and hopelessness? I am grateful I have not, but I have seen it on the faces of plenty who have.

I've seen it in the funeral home when a family member said goodbye to someone who had been a vital part of their life.

I saw it on the faces of the people in West Liberty last March after the tornado ripped their town apart and on the East Coast last fall after Hurricane Sandy hit New York and New Jersey.

I've seen it on the face of someone who filed for bankruptcy or divorce.

I've seen it in a hospital room after someone received a bad report on a medical test.

I've seen it on the face of a student who flunked out of school.

I've seen it on the face of a teenager or young adult arrested for drugs or stealing.

There is no shortage of things which can turn life upside down and leave us feeling hopeless. Sometimes it occurs because our bad decisions have caught up with us. At other times, we are victims of circumstances beyond our control. Both were true of the Israelites who lived in Babylon for fifty years and returned home to a place they no longer recognized.

So, how did the Israelites handle this challenge? What did they need to begin again? *Based upon our text, they needed hope and help.* One without the other was insufficient. Together, they could overcome any challenge.

So God sent them a message through the prophet of Third Isaiah.

“For Zion’s sake, I will not keep silent and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest until her vindication shines like the dawn, and her salvation like the burning torch.”

I think these comforting and reassuring words express the sentiment of God and the prophet. Both made a strong commitment to the returning exiles to help them rebuild their homes and lives.

What I love about this verse is the way it turns our attention to the future. That word “until” speaks volumes to me. It expresses commitment, confidence and certainty.

Life was not the way any of them wanted, but it would not always be the way it was at that moment. Through faith and with family and friends, they would build a new life, a better life.

The destruction of their beloved city and their deportation to Babylon would not have the final word in their lives. God would, and that word would be good.

The day would come when God would rejoice over them like a groom his bride. They would not be known as forsaken people, and their land would not forever be desolate. They would be given a new name by God, which depicted their beauty and splendor. This restoration would be so dramatic that all nations of the world would notice it, and people from every corner of the globe would travel to Jerusalem to see it.

I believe the reconstruction of any life begins with visions and dreams of better days ahead. There is no challenge we face which will cause God to throw His hands in the air and give up. Always and at all times, God is thinking about how to move forward. We see this over and over again in scripture, and our text is just another example.

About three years ago, I received a gift from a dear friend, who has since gone on to be with the Lord. He loved baseball as I do, and we would go to some games together.

One Sunday, I quoted that great sage and philosopher, Yogi Berra, in my sermon. Soon after, he presented me with a baseball signed by the former Yankee catcher with the words, “It ain’t over ‘till it’s over,” written on it.

I was overwhelmed and humbled. It is a gift I’ll always treasure.

“It ain’t over ‘till it’s over,” is just one of many things Yogi said which made people laugh. This one, however, has a much deeper meaning when you couple it with faith. What appears to us many times to be the end of the journey is just a bend in the road for God. It is the springboard to something new and meaningful.

Where you are now is not where you have to stay. Where you are now is where you must begin, though. Be honest; be realistic. Don’t look only at what you have lost, but also what you have left. Then, give God what you have left, and ask Him to help you use it to begin building a new life.

Almost thirty years ago, I received some wise advice from a dear friend. “If you have lost someone or something very dear and precious to you, and you can get it back, then do it. If you cannot get it back, then move on. Don’t live in the past or roll in pity and lose everything else you have.”

“For Zion’s sake, I will not keep silent and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest until her vindication shines like the dawn, and her salvation like the burning torch.”

I wonder who among us needs to hear that word, “until,” this morning. Who needs an infusion of faith and hope? Who needs to catch a glimpse of a new and better life? Who needs to know where they are now is not where they have to stay?

If you are the one, then this message is for you. I hope and pray you will hear it and ask God into your heart, letting Him join you on your journey forward. I assure you God wants to walk alongside you just as He did the forlorn exiles.

Who among your family members and friends needs to hear this message from God? Will you deliver it? You be their prophet.

Who needs you to walk alongside them as they rebuild their life? Who needs your companionship, advice, guidance and encouragement? Who needs you to roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty?

I grew up in a culture where the words hope and help were used interchangeably. “I am going to hope my neighbor,” I would hear from time to time from someone in the first church I served. “That nice person hoped me,” others would say.

At first, I thought it rather odd to hear the word hope used like this. I grew to appreciate it and realize it was most appropriate to be used this way.

Who needs to hear you say, “I will not keep silent or rest **until** you have rebuilt your life?” Will you be to them what the prophet of Third Isaiah was to the defeated and depressed exiles? I hope and pray you will, and I believe God does, too. Why not ask Him to “hope” you.