

The Promise That Is Our Hope

16th Sunday after Pentecost – September 19, 2004
Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

Psalm 137:1-6

¹By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
²On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
³For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
⁴How could we sing the LORD’s song
in a foreign land?
⁵If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
⁶Let my tongue cling to the roof of my
mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.

Today, we continue a four-week series on the reality of loneliness and the comfort of coming home to God -- our own return from exile.

Last week, we confronted the darkest period in Israel’s history: the destruction of Jerusalem and the ensuing exile in Babylon (see the timeline on page 2). As we heard Israel’s despairing laments, we learned that in the pages of Scripture we can find a voice to express our deepest, most private feelings, those we might never share with others. We found solace in the knowledge that the people of God, even Jesus, could be encircled by darkness and loneliness. Yet, in the midst of alienation and exile, prophets came to God’s people with words of comfort and hope. And these are our words too.

Prophets of hope

We’ve all seen the cartoon. A lone figure with bushy hair, a scraggly beard, dressed in rags standing on a street corner holding a sign reading, “Repent! The end is near!” This political season, I’ve heard more than few speeches referred to as “jeremiads” meaning a list of woes and complaints often delivered in a tirade. (Yes, it is a reference to Jeremiah of the Old Testament.) Sadly, we hear much more about so-called prophets of doom and gloom than we do about prophets of hope.

Psalm 149:1-4

¹Praise the LORD!
Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise in the assembly of the faithful.
²Let Israel be glad in its Maker;
let the children of Zion rejoice in their
King.
³Let them praise his name with dancing,
making melody to him with tambourine
and lyre.
⁴For the LORD takes pleasure in his people;
he adorns the humble with victory.

Second Isaiah

You can search your Bible from cover to cover and you won’t find a book called 2 Isaiah. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t there!

Sometimes, learning more about the Bible can be disconcerting. Many of us imagine that a book like Isaiah was penned by Isaiah (who lived about 700 years before Jesus) and passed on from generation to generation. Yet, most scholars believe that Isaiah 40-66 is the work of a second, anonymous prophet who lived and worked during the time of the Babylonian exile. Now you might be asking yourself, who cares? How might this change our understanding or appreciation of these writings?

Isaiah 40-66 contains some of the most comforting, hopeful, and encouraging passages in all the Bible. It is one thing to be hopeful when times are good; it is something else altogether to be genuinely hopeful in the midst of tragedy and despair.

The Jews believed that their exile and Babylonian victory was God’s punishment for his people’s sins. They felt completely cut off from God, alone and isolated. Knowing the context of these words – written during the exile – strengthens their impact upon our hearts:

“O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me, I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you.”
(Isaiah 44:21-22)

Yet, in the depth of Israel's despair, as they tried to rebuild shattered lives a thousand miles from home, as they tried to hang on to one another and to the LORD God, a prophet brought them a message of hope ~ a promise that God had not forgotten them, that their exile and alienation was not the end of their story. Hear these words written during the exile: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term . . .

The Hope of Israel

In the midst of exile and alienation, a prophet brought powerful words of hope to the Jewish community living in Babylon. What were the dimensions of this hope?

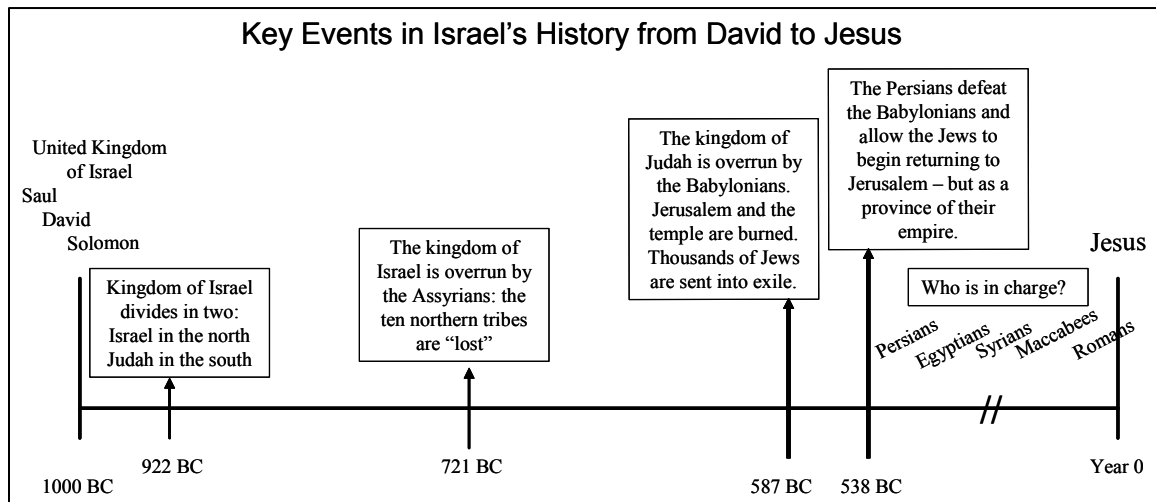
Israel's hope was focused on the end of the exile which entailed three expectations: (1) liberation from oppression, (2) the restoration of the land, and (3) the rebuilding of the temple. All three expectations pointed toward the restoration of the people's relationship with the Lord God, to the forgiveness of Israel's sins, and to a new covenant.

It is easy to see why many would have thought that the exile was ending when Cyrus allowed the Jews to begin returning home. But as time went on their hopes would be crushed. Yes, they were back on the land but it was occupied by foreigners. Indeed, the Jews were oppressed by one conqueror after another for centuries. Yes, they were allowed to rebuild the temple, but it was a pale reflection of the temple burned down by the Babylonians. As time passed, the Jews came to realize that the exile never really ended, that their sins had not been forgiven, that they still awaited their homecoming. We'll have to keep all this in mind next week when we come to Jesus' great parable about a father's extravagant welcome home (Luke 15:11-32).

For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the LORD, your Redeemer. . . . The spirit of the LORD God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners . . .¹ It is no accident that in Luke's Gospel, Jesus begins his public ministry by standing to read from Isaiah 61. Israel's hope found its realization in Jesus.

Praise God!

The hope of God's people, then and now, is a hope grounded in confidence and in our trust of God. Our hope is not about probabilities but about certainty, the certainty of God's love and faithfulness. It is this confident hope that is expressed in Psalm 149. This psalm proclaims God's sovereignty even in the midst of exile and opposition. Not surprisingly, there are numerous parallels between Psalm 149 and the writings of second Isaiah; they comfort people in despair. There is no promise that we will be spared loss or loneliness because we are not. But God does promise that he will never abandon us, that as lonely as we might feel, we are never alone.



¹These passages are from Isaiah 40, 54, and 61. These are the writings of a prophet usually referred to as "second Isaiah," see the text box on page 1. Though theories surface now and then as to the identity of this prophet, all we can be sure of is that God's people cherished these writings on a level with those of Isaiah.

Daily Bible Readings

(words of comfort and promise from "second Isaiah")

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Isaiah 40:1-11 God comforts his people.</p>	<p>Day 2 Isaiah 42:10-20 Compare this song of praise with Psalm 149.</p>
<p>Day 3 Isaiah 43 This is a lengthy passage, but imagine that you are living in exile reading these words of restoration and protection.</p>	<p>Day 4 Isaiah 52:13-53:12 Might Israel's salvation come through suffering? You can read this passage as a mini-summary of Jesus' ministry.</p>
<p>Day 5 Isaiah 61 The good news of deliverance. Jesus quotes from this passage when he begins his public ministry (see Luke 4).</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Adult Sunday School Open House – next Sunday!!

Have you ever thought about joining a Sunday morning class but haven't been sure how to begin? Mark your calendar now. The **adult Sunday morning classes** are going to host an **open-house** next week, on **September 26**. ALL the classes will be hosting visitors. This will be a great chance to check out a class!

Today, volunteers will be passing out copies of the Adult Class newsletter. It has the rundown on all the classes that are meeting. Be sure to grab one.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Last week's and this week's scriptures are studies in contrast. In the midst of heart-rending laments over the profound losses suffered by the Jews, a prophet brings words of profound comfort. The context of the hope makes the hope that much brighter. Perhaps it is a little like turning on a light in the middle of the night. The light is made brighter by the darkness.

Last week, I suggested that you discuss or reflect upon the causes of loneliness in our community and perhaps share some of your experiences with loneliness. This week, you might discuss the hope in our lives. What are some of the ways people go about dealing with loneliness, despair, and darkness in their lives? Alcohol? Sex? Shopping? Are such things really sources of "hope" or are they ways to divert or numb? Many Christians have difficulty embracing God's hope and presence in dark times. Have you experienced this yourself? What prevents us from always embracing and feeling God's love for us?

Here's an exercise: Try to put yourself in the place of those exiled Jews more than 2500 years ago. Imagine that you have been uprooted from your home in Plano or Carrollton and shipped to a camp more than 1000 miles away. As you are led away, you see your home, your children's school, even St. Andrew burning in the distance. I still don't think we're getting close to the despair the Jews must have felt; I don't know that we could. But still, try to put yourself in exile, feeling cut off from God - and then open your Bible to Isaiah 40. Just spend some time reading through Isaiah 40-66, not for any detail, but just to get a sense of how hopeful, even shockingly hopeful, such words must have sounded to the Jews living in exile. I think you'll come to appreciate Isaiah in a way you probably never have before.