

**READING THE
PROPHETS AGAIN:
THE LANGUAGE OF
HOPE**

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Isaiah 49: 5-7, 14-15

Reading the Prophets Again: The Language of Hope

Just by a show of hands, how many of you lost power during Wednesday night's storm? How many of you have trees or limbs on your property that were blown down by the wind? How many of you discovered leaks in your roof that you didn't know you had before? How many of you are drying out carpeting that got wet with the flood run off?

It was quite a storm that blew through Battle Creek on Wednesday evening. We got more than 3 ½ inches of rain in just a few hours with winds gusting in excess of 65 miles per hour. The storm hit just about the time that John and Bev Goddard were putting out the food they had worked all afternoon to prepare for our Wednesday evening supper before the AWE-struck worship service. Just as we sat down to eat an ominous darkness enveloped those of us who had gathered in the courtyard and the full fury of the storm struck. Sheets of water started cascading down the glass ceiling, lightning lit up the sky, and spectacular waterfalls began flowing from the roof.

Whenever a sudden storm strikes, our lives become pretty basic very quickly. We immediately become preoccupied with our own survival needs. All of our attention gets focused on the

things that have to be taken care of for our own well being and safety. If the power goes out, do I have fresh batteries for the flashlights? Do I have enough drinking water on hand? Is there food to eat that doesn't require heating or refrigeration? If my basement is flooding, is there anything that has to get moved up off the floor to protect it from getting wet?

Every freshman psychology student learns about Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In 1943 Maslow published a paper on the theory of human motivation. He noticed that we are initially preoccupied with satisfying our own physiological needs, and only after our survival and safety needs have been met, can we turn our attention to higher order things like friendships, the welfare of the community, personal growth and self-actualization (fulfilling one's full potential for life).

Jesus said, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4)." Abraham Maslow said, "Man does live by bread alone...when there is no bread." When a sudden crisis threatens our well being, we instantly focus our attention on our most basic needs. Our survival and our safety become our primary preoccupations.

But we can't stay focused on those things very long. It is just not enough for us to preoccupy ourselves with our own survival. God has created us with a yearning for something bigger.

Last week we started our focus on the prophets by observing that they are the ones who always tell us the things we don't want to hear. They call our attention to the inconvenient truths that we'd rather just ignore. But the prophets are also the people who help keep hope alive. They help us persevere during times of crisis and hardship by reminding us that God's love for us is unfailing. This morning we heard the voice of God saying, "I will not forget you, see, I have inscribed you on the palm of my hand."

But the language of hope that prophets speak is always tied to a deep sense of purpose. They comfort us, not simply by reminding us of God's persistent love, but also by reminding us of the mission that God has entrusted to us. They tell us why it is important for us to go on.

That is the message that Isaiah spoke in our text for this morning. After forty long years of living as exiles in Babylon, the Israelites had finally been liberated and allowed to return to their homes. Their survival fears had finally been put to rest. They weren't all going to die in exile. The dark storm had passed and the skies were sunny and clear again.

In the aftermath of their disaster, the Israelites were overwhelmed with the task of rebuilding their own homes and cities. They weren't just cleaning up after one bad storm. Their cities that had been reduced to rubble. The Israelites were returning to homes that had been lying in ruins for forty years. Foreigners had moved in and taken possession of their properties.

But at the very moment when everyone was preoccupied with putting their own houses back in order, Isaiah reminded his people that it wasn't enough for them to simply return and rebuild their cities. It wasn't enough for them to survive just for the sake of survival. God had given them a higher purpose in life: "It is too light a thing that you should...restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 43:6)."

Isaiah told his people that it wasn't enough for them to be preoccupied with their own survival. God had chosen them to be a light to the nations. God was working through them to bring salvation to the entire world.

The church that I served in Webster, NY, held a worship service once a month at the Hill Haven nursing facility. I don't know how it ever got started, but on the first Thursday of every month, volunteers from our church would wheel about thirty residents down to an activity room that served as a make-shift chapel.

When I first took over leading the services, I thought of it as a prelude to a funeral service. Everyone in the room knew that they were never going home again. Many of the residents spoke openly about not wanting to be alive anymore. They were waiting to die and some were getting impatient. Their bodies had worn out, their friends had all died or moved into other nursing facilities, their houses had been sold and their possessions had been distributed to family

members or auction houses. All they had left in the world were a few faded photographs and some small trinkets that adorned their nightstands.

I thought my role was to comfort them with the assurance of new life that awaited them. I would read the kind of texts that are often read at funeral services: “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want... (Psalm 23)...I lift up my eyes unto the hills, from whence does my help come? (Psalm 121: 1-2) In my Father’s house are many rooms, I go to prepare a place for you...(John 14).”

Most of the residents who came to the service were on death’s doorstep and I thought the message that God wanted me to proclaim was the Easter message that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God. But then one day I was asked to lead a memorial service at the nursing home for one of the residents who had died there, and that experience changed my whole perspective.

That day I watched the residents of the nursing home comfort the family members and staff who came to service. I listened to them tell stories about the experiences they had shared with the person who had died. They knew him, not as someone who was terminally ill, but as a human being who had wonderful gifts to share. They knew him as someone who lightened their day with humorous stories and playful banter. They knew him as someone who spoke up as an advocate for other residents when there were issues that needed to be addressed with the staff and with the

administration. They knew him as a man of faith who rarely complained about his own illnesses and always showed deep compassion for others.

That day I realized that these were some amazingly courageous people. They weren't just sitting around waiting to die. They were creating a loving, caring community. Some couldn't hear, some were confused, some couldn't see, some weren't mobile, but they weren't absorbed in their own pain and they weren't preoccupied with their own survival. God was working through them to bring healing and comfort and companionship and love to people who had been cast off and forgotten by society.

That day I realized that my job wasn't simply to comfort these nursing home residents as they waited to die. It was to speak the message that Isaiah spoke to the exiles who were returning home.

My job was to keep hope alive by reminding them that God had important work for them to do.

It is never enough for any of us to focus our attention on getting our power back on, and our carpets dried out, and the downed tree limbs cut up and hauled away. It is never enough for us to be preoccupied with our own survival needs. As the prophet Isaiah reminds us, "God has given us as a light to the nations, that salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

Amen.

