

January 27, 2019

The National Presbyterian Church

"Bright Hope in Dark Trouble"

Isaiah 6:1-11; 2 Kings 17:1-7; 18:1-20:21; 22:1-23:30

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In our sermons this winter we're working our way through the story of the Bible, and we come to a period of time (about 600-850 years before Jesus) when the descendants of a man called Abraham (we call them "the 12 tribes of Israel") have split in to two independent nations: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. And while things are not too bad economically, the fact is that politically, spiritually and morally, things are spiraling down into the pit.

And the reason? Well, by and large the people, and especially their leaders, if they've not actually completely forgotten about God, then they've certainly forgotten "who God is": a God who loves us and calls us into his service; who has a purpose and moral laws for our lives.

And as a consequence of this forgetting, the great religious leaders in Israel, the prophets, not only began calling people back to God, to remember and repent, but they also warn them – again and again – that without repentance, without a dramatic change in the way they think, believe and act, then judgment is inevitably on its way.

The judgment they speak of is a judgment that first of all results in the experience of "FUTILITY."

This is what I might call "Rolling Stones" judgment! Not sure what I mean? Well, "Rolling Stones Judgment" is when people by and large get what they want (even if they have to bend the rules to get it: so "the end justifies the means"). But, when they actually get what they want, they "*can't get no satisfaction! . . . they try and they try!*"

In other words: you've got everything, but you're still empty! And it's a sign of God's judgment; it's a call or prod from God to wake up and realize that something's wrong and needs to change.

So, Israel's Prophets address the political, spiritual and moral chaos of their age and human accountability with a word about "The judgment of futility" – and then they add a second word of judgment: CORPORATE JUDGMENT on the Nations, which, they say, is on the way as well. This is God's sentence on the political viability of their nations as a whole.

In fact, in this period, both Israel in the north and Judah in the south are already losing their freedom, and becoming vassal state of their powerful enemies. And before too long they will actually also lose their very existence. They will be defeated by their enemies and will be carried off into exile by the armies of the empires of Assyria and Babylon (both located, by the way, mainly in what is now modern day Iraq).

SO THESE ARE DARK and TROUBLED TIMES. But not all is bleak.

"The light" hasn't gone out completely, and God is still very much at work in these years from 850BC to 600BC. And not just in judgment, but in grace. Shining his light into human darkness and providing powerful reminders that he is still in charge and has not forgotten us, or his world.

This is as true today -- as it has ever been. When the world is dark – God loves to shine his light. In fact, fast-forwarding to our own day and age: one of the most powerful stories that I know of about God’s light shining in darkness comes from World War II, and from the concentration camp at Ravensbruck.

Among the thousands of prisoners, there were two Dutch sisters: Corrie and Betsy ten Boom. (Corrie actually visited here at NPC and spoke in the 1970’s). Corrie and Betsy are imprisoned there because their family has been discovered hiding a Jewish family. SO -- they arrive at the camp, and are put into this huge room which is not only infested by fleas, but holds 1400 women. It was awful -- but in that flea-infested room, something remarkable happened.

The two sisters had managed (miraculously!) to keep a Bible, and began to read it together with any others who would gather. And Corrie, tells the story like this. She says:

Soon a growing crowd of women began to gather for these reverential worship times. Life-giving truth was read from the New Testament, first in German, then translated into French, Polish, Russian, Czech and Dutch. Prayers were whispered. Hymns were softly sung and gradually life in the miserable barracks began to dramatically change.

Before -- there had been the continual sound of brawling, sobbing, cursing.

But Now – the room buzzed with considerate words, and even the sound of gentle singing.

That December, though, Corrie’s sister, Betsy, died. But not before telling Corrie that she HAD to survive, and after the war, be a witness to this experience. Betsy said:

*“You must tell them what we have learned here.
You must tell them that there is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still. They will listen to us, Corrie, because we have been here.”*

From: The Hiding Place

“There is no pit so deep, that God is not deeper still” . . .

And time and again -- in places of darkness throughout history (most of them, thank God not nearly as dark as Ravensbruck – though we may feel our own darkness keenly) God has shown up when least expected. Often doing something beyond human control (like finding a way for a Bible get into a prison camp!) -- that changed things; shining his bright light when (from a human point of view) all was hopeless: a dead end and darkness.

This morning, then, what I’d like us to think about are the experiences of three individuals in the Biblical Story in our period; three people in particular to whom God gave hope and light in different ways, at just the right moment during the dark days of the 9th to 7th Centuries BC. One was a prophet, and two were kings.

1. The Prophet was Isaiah, who, in the year 740 BC, was minding his own business (well, it was actually religious business – he’s in the Temple in Jerusalem at the time) when, out of the blue, quite unexpectedly, God overwhelms him, blows him away with His awesome presence; calls him, and energizes him to speak-out against the troubles of his day, and to keep-on doingso, even if no one listens.

Remember our passage in Isaiah 6:1?

*In the year that King Uzziah died
I saw the Lord, high and lifted up
And his train filled the temple*

And God does this, to be sure, not always in such an overwhelming fashion -- but God does this repeatedly: shining his light into the darkness of our lives and situations, not just with pastors and priests, but with all kinds of people, just minding their business. God creating hope through an inescapable (powerful) sense of the Divine Presence.

It happened, for example, to the great professor and author – C.S. Lewis – not in a church, or temple, but on the top of a double-decker bus! And in his case, he describes this divine experience as “God closing in on him”

(Surprised by Joy, 179)

The odd thing was that before God closed in on me, I was in fact offered what now appears to be “a moment of wholly free choice.” I was going up Headington Hill on the top of a bus. Without words, and almost without images, a fact about myself -- was somehow presented to me. I became aware that I was holding something at bay. I felt myself being given a free choice.

I could open the door or keep it shut: I chose to open.

Or, if you like: I was wearing some stiff clothing, like a suit of armor, OR a corset.

I felt myself there and then being given this “free choice”:

I could open the door or keep it shut;

I could un-buckle the armor or keep it on.

Neither choice was presented as a duty; no threat or promise was attached to either, though I knew that to open the door or to take off the corset, meant the incalculable.

God does that sometimes – emotionally or unemotionally – bringing light into our darkness; sometimes out of the blue and beyond our control, and sometimes in response to our prayers.

2. Which was the case with one of the kings of Judah: – **King Hezekiah**, who came to the throne of Judah in the year 716-BC, 24 years after Isaiah’s experience, at a time when the enemy Assyrians have conquered the northern ten tribes of Israel, and carried off the Israelite leaders into exile. They’ve become the world’s super-power, with no one around to challenge them or resist them successfully.

But Hezekiah wants to try! And does try! And the retaliation from the Assyrians is swift. The Assyrians under the leadership of their king, Sennacherib, conquer most of Judah, and are at the gates of Jerusalem, but Hezekiah refuses to give up the city of Jerusalem without a fight. And so a siege begins. And this situation scares Hezekiah so much that he prays (2 Kings 19:14)

- But it’s not a perfunctory prayer
- Nor is it a casual prayer
- Rather, it’s a cry of the heart in desperation for HELP!! FOR SALVATION

“We’re in trouble! We’re weak. But You, Lord, are strong, the maker of heaven and earth. So SAVE US! So that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, the LORD, are God alone.

And God hears, and in this case, while there's no "amazing powerful experience" of God, for Hezekiah (like Isaiah), something remarkable still happens -- BUT it's to the Assyrians; to the enemy, out in left field!

Even as Hezekiah cries out in prayer, thousands of the enemy soldiers in one night die and their deaths decimate and demoralize the army-- so they pack up and leave! And SO just like that -- the siege is over.

HOW EASY TO FORGET that our vision is limited. We don't see half of what's going on! And especially when times are dark, our world tends to shrink around us, and within us, so we sink into hopelessness because of our limited field of vision. While – all the while – God is looking down on the big picture! . on a huge array of factors that affect our lives, most of which we have no clue about; and have no control over – BUT GOD DOES!

I can think of a number of times when life was dark, and when someone – quite unexpectedly entered the picture, from left field, and transformed a situation that seemed utterly hopeless.

1. There was this counselor I met -- in "a chance meeting" on the steps of the civic center in Laredo, Texas, when I stepped outside a Presbytery meeting for a moment: a person I'd known of but had not talked to before – who would dramatically change my life and marriage.

2. And then, before that, there was a dark time, when I was a 25-26 – a young whipper snapper straight out of seminary, and people in my small congregation were questioning my integrity. It was not good! BUT into the church and into my life comes the one person in the town whose faith and integrity was questioned by NO ONE. And he becomes my friend and helper – and defense!

God sees what we do not, and has his eye on the BIG picture, and ON incalculable resources available FOR US TOO . . . when we pray, just as God did with Hezekiah – in his darkness.

3. And then – one more person – another king: **KING JOSIAH**, who reigns in Judah about 60-70 years after Hezekiah (c. 640BC).

In Josiah's case, light comes into the midst of his darkness

- Not just from a remarkable Divine experience
- and not just from unexpected Divine Resources from left field
- But from *the discovery and reading of God's divine book.*

After Hezekiah's reign -- In the early and mid-600's BC, Josiah's father and grandfather, Amon and Manasseh, were probably the worst kings ever of God's people – worshiping idols, indulging in magic, well as practicing human sacrifice, just like their pagan neighbors

But Josiah was different. For whatever reason, he always wanted to honor God, and follow God's word. But it was hard, primarily because there was no Bible, no written word to be found or followed.

Somehow the writings of Moses, in whatever form they took on those days – had been lost until Josiah's servants found at least one of them during a construction project (Read all about it in 2 Kings 22: for us, we need to note that there can be wonderful unintended consequences and benefits of a major project!!)

They were renovating the Temple in Jerusalem at the time it had fallen into disrepair). And as they were cleaning out the accumulated junk, lo and behold, they found a book, and realized what it was:

- It was one of the Books of Moses!
- almost certainly an edition of the Book of Deuteronomy and the simple reading of the book was transformative for Josiah

As he read it,

- somehow it spoke – as if God were speaking
- and he found himself re-committing his life to God
- And others did too --

This is what we read in 2 Kings 23:

²The king went up to the house of the Lord,
and with him went all the people of Judah,
and he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord.

³The king stood by the pillar
and made a covenant before the Lord,
to follow the Lord, keeping his commandments,
his decrees, and his statutes,
with all his heart and all his soul,
to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book.
and All the people joined in the covenant

WOW!

It was a remarkable moment: a moment of light and hope and joy in the midst of dark days for the nation. It was an experience many have shared in – and perhaps many of us here today -- picking up the Divine book, and reading – do not underestimate its power: WHICH BRINGS US BACK to the story of Betsy And Corrie Ten Boom . . .and the power of their “simple reading of the book, in a dark place”

Soon a growing crowd of women began to gather for these reverential worship times. Life-giving truth was read from the New Testament. Prayers were whispered. Hymns were softly sung and gradually life in the miserable barracks began to dramatically change. Before, there had been the continual sound of brawling, sobbing, cursing. Now, the room buzzed with considerate words, and even the sound of gentle singing.

Dark days, back then. And, perhaps, for some of us now, too, dark days, for many different reasons. Maybe because we’re feeling stuck, and desperately needing hope, just like Isaiah and Hezekiah and Josiah.

Like ISAIAH – Never fail to remember that God is standing at the door knocking – longing for us to experience his divine presence: perhaps not in such an overwhelming way as Isaiah, but absolutely, in a transformative way.

And maybe that’s our prayer: “*Lord overwhelm me loudly or quietly with your presence, and so renew me in your love.*”

Or as with HEZEKIAH – Never fail to remember that God’s horizons and resources are bigger than we can imagine. Pray that he would bring new resources into your dark places. He can, and he will as we pray: *“Lord, bring forces into play that you see—but I am not aware of”*

Or as with JOSIAH – Never fail to remember that God has spoken in his written word. Pick up the book AND READ, and pray, *“Lord -- Bring me back to the book, that I would have a daily sense of my connection with you, the author.”*

LORD, shine your light in whatever way you will, into my darkness. And restore my energy and hope.

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