

A Realistic Hope

When we read the Bible, it's easy to think that each book is a unified work by a single author. That's how most of the books we read today are written, right? For example, some of us are reading Octavia Butler's novels over the summer. Both of them are a unified work by a single author and meant to be read as such. But much of the Bible is not that way.

During August, we'll be sitting with this same passage of Scripture from the 55th chapter of Isaiah. But before we get into the specifics of that chapter, it's important to know that what we have in our Bibles as the book of Isaiah is at least two (and maybe 3) separate works by different authors in different time periods. (Scholars disagree whether there's two or three).

But before I say more about Isaiah, I want to invite you to think of seminal moments you've lived through. Now we all have those in our personal lives – meeting our spouse, the birth of a child, the death of a loved one. But for our purposes today, I want you to take a moment and think of those collective seminal moments we've lived through as a people – those moments where you remember exactly where you were and what you were doing when it happened.

For example, some that come to mind for me are the attack on 9/11, the moment quarantine began for COVID, the attempted coup and insurrection at the Capitol.

The thing about these types of seminal moments is that you just know that the world is forever changed. There's no going back to how things were before. And because all of the examples I named were all very hard, very bad things, for those types of seminal moments, there's also this tendency to wonder if anything good can ever happen again. These types of moments confront us with questions like:

Do we have any hope?

Will life ever be good again?

Or even in its most existential form, can life continue?

But then time passes and the rawness of these moments fades just a little a bit. We still know that things won't go back to how they were, but we begin to hope again, we begin to believe that life can still be good again. We never forget these moments, but we go on living.

In our reading today, the prophet offers a hope filled invitation to the people:

Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.

²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread
and your earnings for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,

and delight yourselves in rich food.
³Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.

It's an invitation to live, an invitation to enjoy life, and invitation to see the beauty and the joy and the hope that, the prophet at least, believes is all around them.

But it took quite a bit of faith to believe these words.

The Hebrew people had come through one of their worst seminal moments. It's a moment that so much of the Old Testament is written about or in response to. In the year 586 BC, the Babylonian empire's army marched on Jerusalem, laid siege to the city, broke through the gates and plundered the people. They burned the city and the temple to the ground and they forced the survivors of Jerusalem to go to Babylon to live as exiles, to live as servants to the Babylonians.

It was one of the most traumatic moments of the people's history. It was a moment that brought them to the very brink of their existence and a moment that would have raised those same questions:

Do we have any hope?

Will life ever be good again?

Can life continue?

The first part of Isaiah (chapter 1-39) was written while this attack by the Babylonians was imminent. While there's still plenty of hope within those chapters, the overarching theme is that something really, really bad is about to happen. The enemy is on our doorstep. They will attack us. They will destroy us.

And the prophet was right. The very worst thing happened. The enemy did attack. The enemy did destroy most of what they held dear. Psalm 137 expresses the sheer pain and anguish of the people:

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down, and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.

²On the willows^[a] there
we hung up our harps.

We can never sing again. We can never be joyful again. Life is pointless now – that's how the people felt.

But then time passes.

The rest of Isaiah, chapter 40-66, was written later during a time when it looked like those living in exile would be able to return to Jerusalem. The tone is now one of hope and resilience.

God will provide for us.

The land will produce fruit.

We are going home again.

And there will be life.

One of the things I find interesting about Isaiah, and really all of the prophets for that matter, is that they tend to be just a little bit ahead of the rest of us. Isaiah saw the threat of the Babylonians before the people did. He tried to warn them. He tried to prepare them. But most didn't listen.

But the second part of Isaiah also saw hope before the rest of the people did. When they were still wallowing in despair, he prophesied that a new day is coming.

If we put the two parts of Isaiah together, the message is one that invites us to see what's really happening. It invites us to not turn a blind eye to the things that might work for our destruction. But ultimately, it's a message of unbelievable hope that life can overcome even the very worst of tragedy. It goes something like this:

Life can be hard and unbelievably cruel at times. Pay attention to that. Don't ignore it. There will be times when we don't know if we can go on. There will be times when it feels like God has abandoned us. There will be times when we don't even know what the point of life is anymore.

But don't give up.

Life will have the final word. Hope will have the final word. God has prepared a table for us. Come and eat that which is good.

Precisely because Isaiah and all the prophets are so realistic about the pain, suffering, and evil of the world, the hope they ultimately offer is a real hope...not a naïve one. This is a hope that takes seriously all that is wrong with the world and all that could go wrong and yet it trusts that all that is wrong doesn't have the final say.

As a Jewish man well versed in the prophets, Jesus understood this hope very well. It's the foundation behind this table of bread and juice. The imagery the prophets so often use in speaking of hope is about the bounty of the land, the gifts of nature. In fact, Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis says that the number one sign as to how the people's covenant with God is doing is the health of the land. In this chapter of Isaiah, we see a vision of a land that is healthy and alive, that is providing for the people and bearing fruit.

Come to the water and drink.

Here is wine and milk that does not cost.

Eat what is good.

The sign of hope for Isaiah after being devastated in exile is that God's creation is ultimately good. There is beauty and there is bounty.

It is the same sign of hope this table represents. On the night before the worst was about to happen, when Jesus would be arrested and killed, he sat down at a table prepared with the fruits of the earth – wheat and grapes, bread and wine. And he broke bread and passed the cup saying, "Remember me." It's an invitation to remember deeply, especially for when things seem hopeless.

When the worst happens, remember me.

Remember this table.

Remember that God gave us a world of beauty and bounty.

Remember the bread and the wine.

Remember there is always hope.