

### **“A Spark of Hope” – Isa 64:1-8**

That passage from Isaiah that we heard a few minutes ago really seems to connect with the world as we know it today, doesn't it?. Just as it was for the people of Israel somewhere around 550 BC our time can also seem pretty bleak. With the winter solstice only three weeks away we are rapidly approaching the shortest and darkest day of the year. Perhaps even darker however is the sense we often feel that the church – and the Christian faith – is losing ground in our society. The relatively recently-embraced religion of science provides the secular world with a colourful and deterministic (albeit it invalid) ‘justification’ for claiming there is no God. Civility toward one another has been replaced by vitriolic attacks on ‘social’ media. Any sense of reasonableness and realism in politics has disappeared down a rabbit hole. Our celebration of the Christmas nativity has been forcibly taken over by reindeer and Santa’s and tinsel and trees and mall sales (although if we’re being honest we do have to admit our Christmas did take over and borrow from a number of secular festivals!) But there’s another reason that the Isaiah passage connects with our situation today and that is the certainty of hope that comes from faith in God. Let’s take a look at both their situation and ours and see if you agree with me.

The Israelites at the time that the Isaiah passage was developed were indeed experiencing a bleak and dismal time. Their nation had once again been conquered in war, only this time not everyone had been moved out of their native land as had happened some 150 years earlier under the Assyrians. Unlike that earlier purging where the inhabitants of the Southern Kingdom had been dispersed all across the vast Assyrian Empire (leading to the concept of “the ten lost tribes of Israel”) this time it was mostly the leaders – politicians, religious leaders, and teachers among them – who had been relocated, and they were sent to Babylon. It seems they were not treated harshly; however, as they sat by the rivers of Babylon, they felt completely cut off from God, strangers in a strange land so to speak.

They were definitely unhappy and they were in little doubt about the cause of their situation. While today we are very reluctant to ascribe to God as being the author of woes and misfortunes, the ancient Israelites – and their prophets especially – had little hesitation in doing so. It was clear to them that it was their turning their backs on God, wandering away from obeying the demands put on them by the covenants established by God, that had caused God to let them be turned over to their enemies and to endure their current hardships.

And yet, even in the midst of their despair, they had hope, and they prayed with confidence that God would come and redeem them. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down ...” they ring out with a cry of faithfulness and confidence that God will not only hear, but respond. Even in a foreign land, unable to call upon God in what they believed was his holy residence in Jerusalem, they nevertheless had faith that God would still hear their repentance and would relieve them from their torment. They had hope that even in their current darkness God would shine the light of a brighter and better future and lead them into that better place.

So here we are, almost three thousand years later, also feeling a bit alone and feeling isolated as the culture around us becomes unrecognizable with time and the church as we knew it is measurably disappearing. Congregations are closing all across the country as numbers dwindle, arguments flourish within the church as to who’s right and who’s wrong, while outside the church the vast majority shrug and ask, “who cares?” Easter has turned into egg hunts and Christmas has turned into glittering party time, and we bemoan the lost days in the old and familiar of our past. It is easy to hear the discouraging parallels between our situation and that of the ancient Israelites in Babylon.

However, when we pause in our moaning and listen, we can also hear a different parallel, namely that of the thread of hope that points to a restoration, to a better and brighter future. The theologian Walter Brueggemann points out that even though “the Old Testament is characteristically preoccupied with ethical concern, ... nevertheless both the temple traditions and the wisdom traditions ... are alert to the aesthetic dimensions of reality and to Yahweh’s availability and skill as an artist.” Yahweh is portrayed in many places in the Old Testament as a potter who with skill, sensitivity, and delicacy forms the human person, the animals and birds, the earth, and also Israel. That image is invoked here in the peoples’ affirmation, “Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.” While it is true that the image can have and is sometimes expressed with very negative connotations – for example the concept of the clay not yielding to the potter’s urging and being splatted to be reformed – in our Isaiah passage God as the creative former is a very positive concept. The verb ‘form’ that is used in this imagery signals a certain satisfaction or delight on the part of Yahweh, who is able to imagine a formed object that has never yet existed and then implements this from imagination to reality. Sitting as strangers in a strange land the people are still confident that God can reform Israel into something new, something good.

Of course we who are Christians can recognize how this did happen in a way even those who sat by the rivers of Babylon could not have imagined. True, their dream of being reformed back into their native Israel did come true, and many centuries elapsed with the faithful worshipping there. But then God shaped – formed – the relationship and covenant between himself and humanity into something totally new and wonderful. Shifting the emphasis from a covenant of ethics and rules into a covenant of redemption and supportive and forgiving love, God joined with his people in the form of Christ, bridging that gap with a relationship that cannot be smushed or broken.

And thus, even more so perhaps than the people of faith whose prayer is echoed in the Isaiah passage had hope even in the darkest of times, we also have hope. Our hope is certain and sure, formed fully and irrevocably in the new covenant in Christ Jesus. We are certain that God will continue to form us into something good. We have a solidly-based hope that the church will not disappear; with certainty the church will change, will adapt to continually be relevant to God’s faithful, but the church will last. Here at Central we even have faith that God will sculpt our new building into a facility that will enhance our faith experience and that will reflect his goodness, grace, and glory for years to come.

Even though the days right now are short and the nights long and dark, even though sometimes it seems as though the church is losing ground, even though we are faced with uncertainties not just in our redevelopment project but in our own lives, we have that most precious gift from God: hope – and a hope that is certain, and sure, and sealed in the coming of the baby in Bethlehem whose arrival we anxiously await yet one more time.