

## Hope For Hurting Hearts (Isaiah 2:1-5; Hebrews 10:19-25; Matthew 11:1-6)

Imagine John the Baptist in prison, awaiting his execution. Never a very cheerful prophet anyhow, imagine his mood at this point. Before he'd even been born, he'd been commissioned to do God's work. And throughout his life, John had been faithful to his commission. He'd given his life for God's work. He'd given his life trying to get people to see the error of their ways and repent, so that God's kingdom might come. But now, as John the Baptist looked around himself at the bars and the cold walls, it seemed as if the powers and principalities of the world and not the God he had served had won. But then John remembered Jesus, and he wondered if perhaps there might be hope in Jesus.

So John sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus didn't answer the question directly. Instead, Jesus answered, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

Jesus knew that these words would give hope to John's hurting heart. For Jesus knew that John would recognize these words as coming from Isaiah, our Older Testament book for today, and Jesus knew that quoting these words from Isaiah would give John hope.

Knowing Isaiah can also give hope to hurting hearts in our time. For all around us, there are people who wonder, "Is there really a God who knows and cares? And if so, does he really have a plan for the world? A plan for me? Lord, are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

To understand the hope Isaiah can give us, however, we need to know a little bit about Isaiah and the times in which he lived. Isaiah lived more than 500 years before John the Baptist and Jesus. The mighty Babylonians had conquered the small nation of Judah, which was all that remained of the kingdom of Saul, David, and Solomon. The Babylonians had burned the Judean cities to the ground. Then they'd killed or rounded up the leaders--the rulers, teachers, and priests--and taken them off to Babylon to live as exiles. The Babylonians hadn't even left the Jews their God to worship.

They'd destroyed God's house, the temple in Jerusalem. As the people of Judah looked around at the ruins of the lives, God sent them the Prophet Isaiah. And through the Prophet Isaiah, God provided hope for their hurting hearts, hope of a better future.

Isaiah said, "In days to come, the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains....all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord...that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths'....He shall judge between the nations...they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more....come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"

Isaiah's words give hope because they remind us that the world that disappoints us, beats us up, wears us down, frustrates us, makes us feel hopeless is not the world that God intends for us. It helps us know God's heart to know that the world he desires for us is not like this world at all. The world in which God wants us to live is not a dog-eat-dog world, a competitive world; it's a world where the wolf and the lamb lie down together, the leopard and the baby goat sleep together, a little child reaches down into a cobra's den and isn't hurt. That's the world God intends. It's a gentle world. It's not a violent world. It's a world in which, everyone "shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." God's heart is for a world of unity and peace.

Isaiah's words also give hope because they remind us that God is in control and in the fullness of his own time, will change this present competitive, fragmented, violent world into his kingdom of unity and peace. Frederick Douglas, an eloquent spokesman for abolition, was addressing an audience. He was talking about how hopeless the cause was. He lamented that everything was against his people. One political party had bowed to slavery; the other proposed not abolition but restriction. The Supreme Court had ruled in favor of slavery. As Douglas continued with his despairing words, a great darkness seemed to settle over the audience. There seemed to be no hope for the African-descended Americans. But then everyone noticed an old woman in the front row slowly rising to her feet. She was Sojourner Truth, known far and wide as a prophetess. Frederick Douglas stopped speaking. Every eye in

the auditorium was on Sojourner Truth. She reached her long, bony finger out toward and cried out, "Frederick, is God dead?" This prophetess reminded Frederick Douglas and everyone in the audience that day that their situation was not hopeless because God was not dead. Isaiah's reminder is the same. God is not dead. He's watching. He's in control, and in the fullness of his own time, he will change this present competitive, fragmented, violent world into his kingdom of unity and peace.

Isaiah's words of hope also tell us what we are to do while we're waiting for God to bring in his kingdom. Isaiah tells us what we can do while living in this "meantime."

First, we can wait patiently, trusting in the God who does not like the world that inflicts hurt any more than we do, the God who is working on a better world of unity and peace. And to help us trust God more fully, we need to work on strengthening our relationship with him, by spending time with him in worship, study, scripture reading, and prayer. This will help us develop the kind of trust and faith illustrated by a 10-year-old girl who went out swimming with her father and brother one day. A few summers ago, the three of them went swimming in the Atlantic Ocean, along the coast of New Jersey. Some distance from shore, the father and son became separated from the daughter. The father realized that the girl was being carried out to sea by the tide. So he called out to her, "Mary, I am going to shore for help. If you get tired, turn on your back. You can float all day on your back. I'll come back for you." Before long, boatfuls of searchers were in the Atlantic Ocean looking for one small girl, and hundreds of people gathered anxiously on the shore. After four hours, the girl was found, exceedingly far from land. Nonetheless, the girl was calmly floating on her back, not at all worried or frightened. As the rescuers came to shore with the girl, there were cheers and tears of joy. The little girl remained calm. She said, "Daddy said he would come for me, and that I could float all day, so I swam and floated, because I knew he would come." How important it is for us to nurture this same trust in our Heavenly Father, as we wait for his kingdom to come on earth.

But there's something else we can do while we wait in hope. We don't have to simply resign ourselves to the warring condition of the world, waiting for God to break in one day and change everything. Nor do we have to completely

disengage from the world, believing that we can't make a difference. Isaiah makes it clear that we have responsibility as persons who have at least glimpsed that "someday" world of God. As Isaiah puts it, we are to "walk in the light of the Lord," doing what we can to make a difference here and now.

Through Isaiah, God calls us to live today in the light of his tomorrow. National and personal heartaches are part of life in this current world, and we don't know what role these play in God's plan, nor would these experiences be less painful for us if we knew the plan. Nonetheless, we are not to just sit around and wait. Nor are we to disengage ourselves from living in the world. Through Isaiah, God calls us to live our lives establishing beachheads for God's coming kingdom.

We do this first within ourselves. We must reconcile the wolf and the lamb inside us. Dr. Bill Bouknight, in a sermon entitled "The Wolf And The Lamb Inside Us, wrote,

*There is a tiger within you and me that wants to snarl at people on the other side of the political or ideological fence. There is a wolf within us that re-opens old wounds and past failures even within our own households, just to make sure that even those nearest to us know we haven't forgotten their failures; maybe forgiven, but not forgotten.*

*There is a cobra within us that lies in wait for people who are different from us, so that we can catch them fulfilling our prejudices about them. There is a bear within us that gives other people only once chance to disappoint us; and if they do, we reject them forever.*

*An Army staff sergeant from McComb, Mississippi...was convicted in a sex scandal. In his plea for mercy, he said, "I got the devil in me. I got out of my character. I lost the ground I was standing on." Each of us could offer similar testimony. What a bundle of contrasts we are!*

*Edward Sanford Martin has described all of us with these words:  
"Within my earthly temple there's a crowd;  
There's one of us that's humble, one that's proud,  
There's one that's broken-hearted for his sins,  
There's one that unrepentant sits and grins."*

Yes, while we wait for God's new world, we can do what we can to help God's kingdom come within us. And we can also establish those beachheads for God's kingdom around us in our everyday living. Thus, in closing, I want to share something from a sermon by David E. Leininger ("Hope For Hurting Hearts").

*A story. It's been around for awhile; it's even been set to music. He was driving home one evening on a two-lane country road. Work, in this small mid-western community, was almost as slow as his beat-up Pontiac. But he never quit looking. Ever since the Levi's factory closed, he had been unemployed, and with winter raging on, the chill had finally hit home. It was a lonely road. Not many people had a reason to be on it, unless they were leaving. Most of his friends had already left. They had families to feed and dreams to fulfill. But he stayed on. After all, this was where he had buried his mother and father. He was born here and knew the country. He could go down this road blind, and tell you what was on either side. With his headlights not working at the moment, that came in handy.*

*It was starting to get dark. Light snow flurries were coming down. He almost did not see the old lady, stopped on the side of the road. But even in the dim light of dusk, he could see she needed help. So he pulled up in front of her Mercedes and got out. His Pontiac was still sputtering when he approached her. Even with the smile on his face, she was worried. No one had stopped to help for the last hour or so. He did not look safe, he looked poor and hungry. Was he going to hurt her? He could see that she was frightened, standing out there in the cold. He knew how she felt. It was that chill which only fear can put in you. He said, "I am here to help you, ma'am. Why don't you wait in the car where it's warm. By the way, my name is Joe."*

*Well, all she had was a flat tire, but for an old lady, that was bad enough. Joe crawled under the car looking for a place to put the jack, skinning his knuckles a time or two. Soon he was able to change the tire. But he had to get dirty and his hands hurt. As he was tightening up the lug nuts, she rolled down the window and began to talk to him. She told him that she was from St. Louis and was only passing through. She could not thank him enough for coming to her aid. Joe just smiled as he closed her trunk. She asked him how much she owed him. Any amount would have been all right with her. She had*

*already imagined all the awful things that could have happened, had he not stopped.*

*Joe never thought twice about any money. This was not a job to him. This was helping someone in need, and God knows there were plenty who had given him a hand in the past. He had lived his whole life that way, and it never occurred to him to act any different. He told her that if she really wanted to pay him back, the next time she saw someone who needed help, she could give that person the assistance that they needed, and Joe added "...and think of me."*

*He waited until she started her car and drove off. It had been a cold and depressing day, but he felt good as he headed for home, disappearing into the twilight.*

*A few miles down the road the lady saw a small cafe. She went in to grab a bite to eat and take the chill off before she made the last leg of her trip home. It was a dingy looking restaurant. Outside were two old gas pumps. The cash register was like the telephone of an out-of-work actor - it did not ring much. The waitress came over and brought a clean towel to wipe her wet hair. She had a sweet smile, one that even being on her feet for the whole day could not erase. The lady noticed that the waitress was very pregnant, but she never mentioned it or let the strain and aches change her attitude. The old lady wondered how someone who had so little could be so giving to a stranger. Then she remembered Joe. After the lady finished her meal, she paid her check with a hundred-dollar bill. As the waitress went to get change, the lady slipped out the door.*

*She was gone by the time the waitress returned. She wondered where the lady could be, then she noticed something written on a napkin. There were tears in her eyes when she read what the lady had written. It said, "You don't owe me anything, I have been there too. Somebody once helped ME out, the way I am helping you. If you really want to pay me back, here is what you do: Do not let this chain of love end with you."*

*Well, there were still tables to clear, sugar bowls to fill, and even a few more people to serve. The waitress made it through another day. That night when she got home from work and climbed into bed, she was thinking about*

*the money and what the lady had written. How could the lady have known how much she and her husband needed it? With the baby due next month, it was going to be hard. She knew how worried her husband was, and as he lay sleeping next to her, she gave him a gentle kiss and whispered soft and low, "Everything is gonna be all right. I love you, Joe."*

Friends, we live in an imperfect world, Isaiah's vision is based on the faith that this world will never know peace and harmony and goodwill until all human beings acknowledge God as their Sovereign Lord and live in love, as God has commanded. Leaving God out of our lives results in the kind of world we know today. But, putting God at the center of our thinking, planning, and living, gives us a foretaste of the amazing and glorious time when God will establish his united, peaceful kingdom. Indeed, there is hope for hurting hearts. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; July 4, 2010

Communion:

A remarkable woman was interviewed on television sometime ago. She was a woman who all by herself had managed to feed, clothe, and educate eight children in a tar-paper shack in Louisiana. What enabled her to do this, in spite of all the odds against her? The woman answered this question by saying, "I seen a new world coming." We too have seen a new world coming. In fact, every time we gather around this Table we're reminded of the new world God is planning, a world in which all of his children are invited and gather, in unity and harmony, around his Table.