

**Hard Times:
Hope From the Prophets
“Hope Beyond Hope”**

**Isaiah 25:6-9
Revelation 21:1-7**

Our hope is greater than the trouble of this world.

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
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I referred in a sermon a couple of weeks ago to the book and movie *The Perfect Storm*, in which a fishing crew out on the Atlantic Ocean finds itself in the midst of three converging weather masses that create the worst storm ever.¹ Over the last six months, we have been living in the perfect storm. We have been assaulted by one tragedy after another: coronavirus pandemic, economic collapse, the murder of George Floyd and subsequent protests against racial injustice. Added to all that is the recent awareness that all these storms are inflicting a burden on the mental and emotional health of people everywhere. Four months of fear about catching the virus, grief over those who have become sick or died from the virus, loss of income, anger over the persistence of systemic racism—all these factors have taken their toll, making existing mental health issues worse, and starting new problems for many people.

These mental and emotional health issues cause physical problems, because our bodies, minds, and spirits are all interconnected. Scientists have long proven that mental instability causes vascular spasms which can lead to heart attack or stroke, and depression can suppress your immune system, making it easier to catch diseases. Late last month, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres wrote an opinion piece in *Time* magazine stressing the cumulative impact of stress, grief, and anxiety. He concluded, “Unless we act now to address the mental health needs associated with the pandemic, there will be enormous long-term consequences for families, communities and societies.”²

Do you know what this tells me? We are in desperate need of hope today. We need a word of hope that will give us strength to overcome the stress, grief, and anxiety we are now experiencing. We need hope for the future, hope above trouble, hope for all time. Where can we find hope today?

The rest of this summer, we are going to look for (and find) words of hope from the prophets of Israel. These ancient preachers account for nearly a third of the Hebrew Bible, yet most of their writings are relatively unknown to many of us. The prophets spoke to a nation that was even more stricken with stress, grief, and anxiety than we are today. In their writings we find nuggets of good news, powerful proclamations of hope that can be a tremendous resource for our mental and spiritual health today.

So as we begin the series, let's take a minute to establish some background. Like, what is a prophet, anyway? Sometimes we hear the idea that prophets foretold the future. Isn't that what prophecy is all about? While sometimes the prophets spoke to the future consequences of actions in the present, they were mostly speaking to their contemporary situations. Later on, especially in the New Testament, the words of the prophets were applied to Jesus, and even today, you will hear preachers who say the prophecies are foretelling something in the 21st century.

Another school of thought looks at the prophets as the social activists of their time. They were calling out the arrogant, oppressive, sinful leaders and institutions of their time and preaching repentance to a stiff-necked and wayward people. Which they were, but if that's all they were doing, I think their words would have died in the dust of time.

Rather than looking at the prophets as fortune-tellers, I think we should look at them as truth-tellers, speaking God's word to a particular time and place. Rather than merely strident reformers, let's look at them as spiritual leaders trying to make or re-make a connection between the people and God.

Walter Brueggemann, probably my favorite Old Testament scholar, wrote a book we'll be using as background for this series. It's called *From Judgment to Hope*. Brueggemann's term for the prophets is "emancipated imaginers of alternative."³ That's just fun to say, if nothing else! What he means by that is that the prophets may be seen as spiritual leaders who had a divine imagination to see an alternative future to the one that was bringing destruction on the nation. They were free to speak because they were emancipated by the Spirit of God from slavery to the religion and the government of their time. That's the kind of spiritual leaders we need today—"emancipated imaginers of alternative"—and that's why I think the prophets can say something profound to us in 2020.

So as we approach the words of hope from the prophets, we are going to pay some attention to their historical background and the political situation of their day. Then we are going to see how their words function in the whole canon of Scripture. How were these words used by the church as Christianity was being established? Then we will look each week at how

these ancient words of hope can bring hope to us today as we face the stress, grief, and anxiety of our contemporary world.

The first literary prophet (the ones who left books behind) that we encounter in Scripture is probably the greatest. His book is the biggest anyway, and he is quoted in the New Testament more than any other prophet. His name is Isaiah, and he lived in the eighth century BCE (Before the Common Era, when Jesus came on the scene and Jews and Christians began to share the world). Isaiah was the first prophet to be a regular presence in the halls of power in Judah. He was comfortable in conversation with the King, whichever one he was addressing. His career spanned forty years and four kings. He saw the invasion of the mighty Assyrian Empire come from the north. He predicted the futility of the resistance by the kings of the northern kingdom. He saw the destruction of Israel, the northern kingdom, by the Assyrians, which brought about the existence of the Samaritans, who were still hated in Jesus' time. Finally, Isaiah watched as the Assyrian army marched up to the walls of Jerusalem itself, before a miracle from God turned them away.

For Isaiah, Jerusalem was the center of the universe. Jerusalem was where God had established God's people. Jerusalem and the Temple were God's hometown. So it was no surprise that over a century later, when Jerusalem finally did fall to the Babylonians, the prophets who wrote about the restoration of Jerusalem would look to Isaiah for inspiration. In fact, they became so identified with Isaiah that their work became combined with the eighth century prophet. So what we have today in the book of Isaiah is 39 chapters from the eighth century, then chapters 40-55, which were written 150 years later when the Jews were in exile in Babylon, then chapters 56-66, which were written almost 200 years after the historical Isaiah lived, as Jerusalem was being restored after the exile. But these later writers so captured the spirit of Isaiah and so focused their writing on the health of Jerusalem, that it was natural just to combine them all in one scroll.

As you read Isaiah (and I would encourage you to do so), you see a grand movement from judgment to hope. Initially, God is angry with the leaders of Judah because they have neglected two things that are very important to God: justice and righteousness. The king and the upper crust of society

have become arrogant, self-centered, and hard-hearted. They have forgotten the poor, the widow, and the orphan, the ones on the margins whom God loves intensely. But it seems like even Isaiah was uncomfortable always preaching doom and gloom. So he will utter judgment for a while, then back up and offer words of hope and promise. The further you go in the book, the more it become weighted toward hope and promise.

That's the sort of text we're looking at today. Isaiah chapters 24-27 are in the eighth century section of the book, but they really seem to speak more from a perspective of the exile in the sixth century. Jerusalem has been destroyed, and Isaiah offers a vision of hope and restoration. Like any good preacher, he sees a big potluck going on: "*On this mountain (Mount Zion, Jerusalem) the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.*"⁴ You don't even have to bring a covered dish; God is going to provide everything you need!

Then God is going to do something amazing: "*He will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.*"⁵ Ever since Jerusalem was destroyed, the Jews have had a dark cloud hanging over them, the cloud of disgrace, exile, suffering, and death. But God is going to take all that away. He is going to wipe every tear from their faces and wipe their disgrace off the face of the earth. Then they will be able to rejoice again: "*Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.*"⁶ Can you feel the joy in that statement?

This is our ultimate hope. The worst thing is never the last thing with God. God will turn our destruction into restoration, our exile into reconciliation, our grief into peace, and our sadness into joy. God will make the bitter sweet again.

Pastor Lee Eclov talks about the bittersweet experience of the Lord's Supper. When we eat the bread and drink the wine of Communion, we remember the bitterness of the death of Jesus on the cross. But the sweet part is that we hope for a day when death will be no more, and we will share

in the restoration meal of heaven with our risen Lord. Eclov mentions a Russian marriage custom, portrayed in a painting by Konstantin Makovskii. The bride is standing, and the guests are holding out their cups to her. Though you can't hear them, they are shouting, "Gor'ko! Gor'ko!" which means, "Bitter! Bitter!" The wine they are drinking is bitter wine until the bride kisses the groom. Then the wine becomes sweet again.

Eclov comments, "Isaiah 25:6 promises, 'On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines.' When we are finally together with Jesus, when the Bridegroom and his bride kiss, Isaiah's promise of a feast with the finest of wines will come to pass. The wine, once bitter, will be sweet indeed."⁷

This is exactly how the words of Isaiah came to be used in the Christian tradition. In the book of Revelation, John ends his apocalyptic tale with a great vision of the restoration of Jerusalem: "*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*"⁸ In the new Jerusalem, there will be an eternal fellowship between God and humans: "*See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.*"⁹ And what is God going to do for God's people in the new Jerusalem? To echo Isaiah, "*He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. ...See, I am making all things new.*"¹⁰

There is our hope. There is our joy. There is our salvation. Strengthened by that hope, we know how to view the trials and the troubles of this world. We know how to cope with the stress, the grief, and the anxiety. These trials are only temporary. These troubles are only reminders that we have a better place to go to, a perfect day coming, a home that will never be destroyed. Our struggles just remind us that we are not there yet.

Paul David Tripp compares this journey through life to a wilderness camping trip. He says the whole purpose of camping is to make us long for home. He writes:

On that first day in the woods, putting up the tent is exciting, but three days later your tent has unpleasant odors you can't explain. You love the taste of food cooked over an open flame (that's ash!), but three days later you are tired of foraging for wood and irritated by how fast it burns. You were excited at the prospect of catching your dinner from the stream running past your campsite, which is reported to be teeming with trout, but all you have snagged are the roots on the bottom.

You're now four days in and your back hurts, there seems to be no more felled wood to forage, and you're tired of keeping the fire going anyway.

You look into what was once an ice-and-food-filled cooler to see the family-sized steaks you have reserved floating gray and oozing in a pool of blood-stained water. Suddenly you begin to think fondly of home. ...You stand there hoping that someone will break the silence and say, "Why don't we go home?" Your four days in the wilderness have accomplished their mission. They have prepared you to appreciate home!

Tripp adds: "Our world isn't a very good amusement park. No, it's a broken place groaning for redemption. Here is meant to make us long for forever. Here is meant to prepare us for eternity."¹¹

This is our word of hope today. We have a hope beyond the trials and troubles. We have a hope beyond the pandemic, the economic disaster, the injustice of oppression. We have a hope beyond the stress, the grief, and the anxiety of life. Because we have a home. We have a home on the mountain of God. We have a place at the table for the feast. We have a place where all of God's children will be free and happy. We have a home where every tear will be wiped away; mourning, crying, and pain will be no more; and death will be swallowed up forever. One day we will see the new Jerusalem! Won't that be the glory?!

¹ Sebastian Junger, *The Perfect Storm* (New York, Norton, 1997).

² <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/facing-mental-health-fallout-from-the-coronavirus-pandemic>.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *From Judgment to Hope: A Study on the Prophets* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), vii.

⁴ Isaiah 25:6.

⁵ Isaiah 25:7.

⁶ Isaiah 25:9.

⁷ Lee Eclov, *PreachingToday.com*.

⁸ Revelation 21:1-2.

⁹ Revelation 21:3.

¹⁰ Revelation 21:4-5.

¹¹ Paul David Tripp, *Forever: Why You Can't Live Without It* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 37-39.