

Hard Times: Hope From The Prophets

NEVER FORGOTTEN

Isaiah 49:13-18

John 14:15-18, 25-27

God will not abandon us.

A sermon preached by
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“Saving Mr. Banks,” is a movie telling the story of Pamela Travers, author of *Mary Poppins*. Her children's books caught the eye of Walt Disney, and he and his team tried to convince Travers to turn her book and characters into a film. Travers was reluctant throughout the entire creative process. Finally, she shut down emotionally and returned to London, unable to let the film continue.

Travers' characters were not simply literary to her; they were family. In fact, the father in the book, Mr. Banks, was modeled somewhat after Pamela's own very flawed father, and Mary Poppins was modeled after her aunt. In a powerful scene near the end of the movie, Walt Disney (played by Tom Hanks) comes to Travers' house in England to talk with her about the film. After sharing about his own painful childhood, Disney delivers this profound monologue to Travers:

Give [Mary Poppins] to me, Ms. Travers. Trust me with your precious Mary Poppins. I won't disappoint you. I swear that every time a person goes into a movie house ... they will see George Banks being saved. They will love him and his kids, they will weep for his cares, and wring their hands when he loses his job. And when he flies that kite, oh! They will rejoice, they will sing.

In every movie house, all over the world, in the eyes and the hearts of my kids ... George Banks will be honored ... Maybe not in life, but in imagination. Because that's what we storytellers do. We restore order with imagination. We instill hope again and again and again. Trust me, Ms. Travers. Let me prove it to you. I give you my word.¹

Walt Disney could have been a prophet. That's what prophets do. They tell the story and restore order with imagination. They instill hope again and again and again. Remember our definition of a prophet from Walter Brueggemann? “An emancipated imaginer of alternative.”² Prophets see a different future for the people of God, alternative to whatever destruction and devastation they have brought upon themselves. Prophets are free to imagine a new day and to tell the truth about God and humanity and the world.

The prophet we call Second Isaiah spoke the truth to a people who had experienced devastation. Their homes, their nation, and their Temple had

been destroyed. The Babylonians had carried the leaders of their nation away into exile. The judgment that the historical Isaiah had seen coming 150 years previously had finally come down upon them, and they were lost, broken, defeated.

It was a time for sadness, grief, and despair. Isaiah sings a song of lament, “*Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.’*”³ Can’t you sympathize with them? Everything they had known, everything they had, everything they loved had been destroyed. Surely it felt like God had completely forgotten them.

But then the Lord answers the lament with a word of hope: “*Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?*” Not likely, but it could happen. But even if it did, the Lord promises, “*Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.*”⁴ The Lord will not forget Zion because he has written them down on his hands. Isn’t that the way you remember something? If you don’t have a piece of paper, you just write it on your hand. The walls of Jerusalem are continually in the Lord’s sight; God cannot forget his holy city.

Then there is a great image of the homecoming they can expect. The builders will outdo the destroyers. The ones who laid waste to Jerusalem will be sent packing, and the faithful will stream in from everywhere to repopulate the city: “*Lift up your eyes all around and see; they all gather, they come to you.*”⁵

It’s like the scene at the end of the classic movie “Field of Dreams.” Ray Kinsella, a farmer in Iowa, hears a message whispered from his cornfield, “If you build it, he will come.” He interprets that as a command to build a baseball field in his cornfield. Against all odds, he does, and who should appear but Shoeless Joe Jackson, the hero for the Chicago White Sox, and with him the eight other baseball players who were banned from the game in 1919 over a gambling scandal. But that’s not the one who is coming. It’s Ray’s father, who died at odds with his son. As the movie closes, father and son, now reconciled, play a game of catch on the baseball field. And as the camera moves back, we can see a line of cars—car after car after car with their headlights on—all coming to see baseball on Ray Kinsella’s field.⁶ If

you build it, they will come. When the Lord remembers his people, they will come. Again. Home. To Jerusalem.

So the prophet sings out with praise for the hope they have in God: “*Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones.*”⁷ What kind of word of hope does this Scripture bring to us today?

We can imagine the pain of feeling abandoned. Some of us have felt it. African-American slaves echoed the words of Isaiah when they remembered families torn apart and taken across the ocean to be sold as property: “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child. A long way from home.”⁸

One would think that a mother or a father could never abandon a child, but it happens all too often. Children who go through the divorce of their parents many times carry feelings of abandonment into adulthood. In her book *Primal Loss*, author Leila Miller explores the impact of divorce on children. One adult shared the continuing effect of that trauma on her life: “I believe [the divorce] instilled a fear of abandonment in me with regard to all of my relationships. I developed problems trusting people to be there for me, believing that when the going got rough, people would leave me. I never learned any skills for solving conflict in relationships. As much as I desperately craved intimacy and love, the closer someone came to me, the more terrified I was of getting hurt, or worse—abandoned. I unconsciously sabotaged relationships, as I didn't know how to receive and accept real love.”⁹

Even Jesus had his experience of abandonment on the cross. As he took the sins of the world upon himself, God the Father abandoned the Son to death, so that God could raise him up, so that sin, evil, and death would be defeated forever. But for that to happen, Jesus had to experience the absence of God. That's why he cried out in the agony of crucifixion a line from one of the Psalms of lament: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*”¹⁰

One of the worst things that can happen is to be forgotten, left alone, abandoned. Those feelings are behind much of the mental health issues that

are afflicting people in this pandemic. Connections are lost; people get isolated; they feel lost and alone.

This is the word of hope that we hear from the prophet today. You are not lost. You are not alone. You have not been forgotten or abandoned. This is the assurance of faith. God is with you always. God loves you forever. God will never ever forsake you. You can depend on that. *“Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you,”* says the Lord.¹¹

We see this promise again in the New Testament in the Gospel of John on the night before Jesus was crucified. The disciples were fearful and anxious. Jesus was about to be taken from them; he had said as much. What were they going to do? How would they function?

So in his farewell address, Jesus promises them a Helper: *“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.”*¹² Jesus promises, *“I will not leave you orphaned.”*¹³ He is providing the Holy Spirit to lead, guide and direct their lives. The Spirit will teach them the way they should go and how they should live: *“The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”*¹⁴ The disciples need not be anxious or worried or fearful. They can have peace. In one of the greatest verses in all of Scripture, Jesus promises: *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”*¹⁵

This promise, like the promise of God to the Jewish people in Isaiah 49, is written on Jesus’ hands. After the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, he appeared in bodily form to the disciples. Again, he said, *“Peace be with you.”*¹⁶ Then he showed them his hands and his side, which still bore the marks of the crucifixion. This is how they know. This is when they saw. God will never abandon us. Jesus endured the crucifixion for us. Jesus suffered death for us. Jesus rose again for us. How could God forget us now? And the Scripture says, *“Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.”*¹⁷

Here is the word of hope today. When you feel lost, lonely abandoned, forgotten, or overwhelmed by the struggles of the day, God is there for you. God is with you. God will never forsake you. God will provide for you in this and every time of need. Depend on it.

One of the greatest Methodist preachers ever was Charles Albert Tindley. He was born in 1851 to a slave father and a free mother, and when his mother died, he was sent to live with an aunt, so he could retain his freedom. He married at 17, and he and his wife moved to Philadelphia. Tindley was self-educated, teaching himself to read and write from scraps of newspaper. He worked as a janitor at the East Bainbridge Street Methodist Church, and eventually he took Greek by correspondence and learned Hebrew from a rabbi in Philadelphia. He became a Methodist preacher by taking an exam, on which he outperformed all but one who had seminary degrees. He served several appointments in the late 19th century, and in 1906, he was appointed the pastor of the church where he had previously worked as the janitor.

From 130 members when he arrived, God and Charles Tindley grew the church to over 10,000. They eventually moved to a larger facility and named the church East Calvary Methodist Episcopal Church. After Tindley's death, they re-named the church Tindley Temple, and it is still an active congregation in Philadelphia today.

Tindley was known as "the Prince of Preachers," but he was perhaps better known for his hymns, several of which are in our Methodist hymnal today. He is called "the grandfather of Gospel music." He wrote the hymn that became the basis of the civil rights anthem, "We Shall Overcome."

The reason I'm telling the story of Charles Albert Tindley today is an incident that happened in his very first appointment. In 1885, Tindley was appointed to be pastor of the Methodist church in Cape May, New Jersey. He and his family moved in the middle of a snowstorm, and by the time they reached the parsonage, all they had for food was a stale crust of bread. The parents soaked the bread in water to soften it so the children could share it. But that was it for food.

The next morning, Charles instructed his wife Daisy to set the table as if they were going to have breakfast. They had no food, but she did it anyway. Charles and Daisy gathered their kids together and knelt on the floor and

prayed. Later, their son E. T. recalled, “Not once did he complain about the shortage of provisions, but thanked God for what they had.” They got up from their knees and sat at the table, empty except for dishes and silverware.

Suddenly there was a commotion outside. Charles went to the door, and there was a man with a big sack on his shoulder. He dropped it on the floor and said, “Knowing you were the new parson here, and not knowing how you were making out in this storm, my wife and I thought you might need some food. I have a cartload of wood out here, too. I’ll just dump it and be on my way.”

Tindley said with tears streaming down his face, “You are an answer to prayer, for we didn’t have anything to eat but a stale crust of bread. We are not going to worry, though, for we know God will provide a way.”

Later that evening, in response to the miracle of the day, Tindley sat down and wrote a new song, “God Will Provide For Me,” part of which says:

Here I may be weak and poor,
With afflictions to endure;
All about me not a ray of light to see.
Just as He has often done,
For His helpless trusting ones,
God has promised to provide for me.¹⁸

This is your word of hope today. God will never forget you. God will never abandon you. “*Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his suffering ones.*”¹⁹ In the midst of your trouble, in the depths of your struggle, at the height of your anxiety, let your heart be joyful. Let your mind be at peace. Let your step be light. Let your hand be raised. Let your courage be strong. God is with us. We will overcome.

¹ “Saving Mr. Banks,” Directed by John Lee Hancock. Burbank, CA: 2013. Walt Disney Pictures.

² Walter Brueggemann, *From Judgment To Hope: A Study on the Prophets* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), vii.

³ Isaiah 49:14.

⁴ Isaiah 49:15.

⁵ Isaiah 48:18.

⁶ W.P. Kinsella, Phil Alden Robinson (writers), Phil Alden Robinson (director), *Field of Dreams*, Universal Pictures, 1989.

⁷ Isaiah 49:13.

⁸ African American spiritual.

⁹ Aaron M. Renn, "The Masculinist #12," *The Masculinist* (8-14-17).

¹⁰ Psalm 22:1.

¹¹ Isaiah 49:15c.

¹² John 14:16-17.

¹³ John 14:18.

¹⁴ John 14:26.

¹⁵ John 14:27.

¹⁶ John 20:19.

¹⁷ John 20:20.

¹⁸ Steve Beard, “Barren Table Faith,” *Good News*, July/August 2020, p. 6.

¹⁹ Isaiah 49:13.