

2nd Isaiah: Comfort My People
10/16/11 **Isaiah 53**
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AH, BABYLON!

There were two Babylonian Empires.

The first occurred under the leadership of Hammurabi and lasted from roughly 1700-1650 BCE when it was overrun by the Hittites. Historically, Hammurabi is considered one of the great kings of the Middle East and is remembered as the author of the Code of Hammurabi – the first set of codified laws in western civilization -- which he created some 500 years before Moses brought the Ten Commandments down from Mt. Sinai.

As we said, the first Babylonian Empire was overrun by the Hittites in about 1650 BCE and the great city of Babylon was sacked. It was not destroyed, however, and Babylon continued to be an important center of trade and culture for a large region of Mesopotamia (Iraq & Iran) for over a thousand years.

BABYLON 2.0

The second or Neo-Babylonian Empire arose in about 612 BCE when Nabopolassar the Chaldean led a rebellion against the Assyrian Empire and, with the help of the Medes, captured the capital city of Nineveh. He declared himself king, set Babylon as his new capital and set about expanding his borders as well as his power and influence.

Three years later, in 609 BCE, a remnant of Assyrians arose and attempted to retake Nineveh. They failed in that attempt but they continued to harass the Babylonian army for four years and, by 605 BCE, word reached Babylon that the Egyptian king, Neco, was on the move, coming north to assist the Assyrians. If the Egyptian army arrived, the Assyrians would be strong enough to be a serious threat, so Nabopolassar sent the Babylonian army, under the leadership of his son, Nebuchadnezzar, to defeat and destroy them.

The Egyptian army might have arrived in time to help their old Assyrian allies except, as they passed through Palestine, they were met on a plain called Har Meggido by King Josiah leading the army of Judah. The Egyptians were victorious at Har Megido but the battle stalled them long enough for Nebuchadnezzar, with help from the Medes, to get the upper hand against the Assyrian remnant.

The final and decisive battle with Egyptians and Assyrians on one side under the leadership of Neco, king of Egypt, and Babylonians and Medes on the other side, under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was fought in May of 605 BCE at a place called Carchemish where the Babylonians won a decisive victory.

In September of that year, Nabopolassar died and Nebuchadnezzar became king of Babylon. Under his rule, the Babylonian Empire would reach its zenith in power and influence, militarily, yes, but culturally as well. Under Nebuchadnezzar, the city of Babylon would be the hub of the civilized world and the center of art, music, medicine, trade, and education. The home of over a million souls, it would be the New York City of its day.

Situated about 55 miles south and east of what is, today, Bagdad – roughly half way between Bagdad and Falujah, and sitting astride the Euphrates River, its environs reached all the way to the Tigris river and the confluence of the two at the Persian Gulf. The Babylonian Empire would reach from the city of Babylon west, up the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, south through Palestine and then west to Egypt.

It would engulf what is, today, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt and parts of Turkey and Iran.

And it was into this strange and cosmopolitan culture that about 50,000 Israelites were taken by force and told to thrive or die.

BY THE RIVERS OF BABYLON

Immediately after the defeat of Judah and the total destruction of the city of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar had about 50,000 Hebrews, the leaders, intellectuals, aristocrats, priests, and influential people of the country, taken by force back to live in the city of Babylon. Most scholars consider this to be a minimum number and would include, with it, their families who would have followed them voluntarily.

Call it an even 100,000 people -- probably more than first came into the Promised Land with Joshua.

We tend to think of the "Babylonian Captivity" as a time not unlike the sojourn of the children of Israel in Egypt, where they were slaves. But there are some important differences.

The Hebrew leaders were not taken to Babylon to be slaves. No doubt the 400 mile journey was an arduous one and some probably died along the way. But once they arrived, they were free to live in the city by whatever means they could come up with.

The Babylonian system for dealing with conquered people was not one of oppression but of assimilation. The goal of bringing these people to Babylonian was to turn them into Babylonians or, as was often the case, Chaldeans.

The descriptive sobriquet, Chaldean, had two meanings in Babylonian culture. On the one hand, it referred to people who came from the province of Chaldea, near the Persian Gulf. People from Chaldea were generally thought to be more cultured, better educated, and more urbane than other Babylonians. They were the ruling class, the cultural elite

of their country. The founder of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, Nabopolassar was a Chaldean, as was his son, Nebuchadnezzar. So to be called a Chaldean might mean that you were just being identified as someone who came from Chaldea or it might mean that you were being identified as someone who was wealthy, worldly, highly educated and a member of the upper class. Sometimes the biblical writers refer to all Babylonians as Chaldeans but that certainly was not the case. Most Babylonians were not Chaldeans...but they all wished they were.

When conquered people were brought to Babylon the best and brightest of their youth were turned over to the Chaldeans to be educated in Chaldean culture.¹

The Hebrew captives were thrown into the foreign culture of Babylon's different language, different religion, different, urban environment, different customs, and told to thrive or perish. Some sat by the river and sang sad songs of remembrance and died, as much from homesickness as anything.

But some followed Jeremiah's advice. They built houses, planted gardens, learned the language, got educated, married, had children, found work and not only survived, but eventually, prospered. Some assimilated into Chaldean culture and blended in. Others managed to thrive while retaining their ethnic, religious and cultural heritage.

So well did they do in Babylon that, seventy years later, when the Hebrews were told that they could return to their ancestral homeland if they wanted to only about 25-30 percent actually did. They had learned some important lessons during their sojourn in this strange land – some lessons about themselves and some about their god, YHWH of Hosts.

ASSIMILIATION AND SUCCESS

How is it that the Hebrews who were forced to live in Babylon thrived and those who remained behind in Judah all but perished?

One reason is that those who went to Babylon were the leaders, the educated, the achievers and over achievers of Judean culture. They were adept at succeeding. They were driven by a need to succeed. They had done it before and, once they got over the shock of the journey, they were able to do it again.

Another reason they succeeded is that they stayed together. At least for the first generation, they retained their cultural heritage by living together, working together, and helping each other. Most scholars believe that it was during this period of the captivity that Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus were compiled and first written down. It was during this time that they began to take seriously the need to record and preserve their cultural heritage. So they wrote down the psalms, rituals, and stories and put them in chronological order as well as they could.

They also succeeded because Babylonian culture was a culture that rewarded innovation and creativity. The doctrine of assimilation brought conquered people from around the world into Babylon and taught them the Babylonian way of doing things. But Babylon also learned from these foreign people. Babylonian culture was constantly expanding and broadening to include the good and helpful things that came to it through the assimilation of foreign peoples.

Babylon had been a cultural crossroads for more than a thousand years and it was not afraid of foreigners. The Babylonians knew that there was more to be gained than lost in a culture that allowed for liberal immigration.

Finally, scholars believe that the Hebrews thrived in Babylon because of the new message and the new theology that 2nd Isaiah introduced into their religion.

Under 2nd Isaiah, Yahwism would begin to evolve into what, today, we know as Judaism. The people who had been called Hebrews and the Children of Israel would soon be called Jews.

THE MESSAGE OF ISAIAH

Back in Jerusalem the common theology was that YHWH lived in Jerusalem. He even had a room in the temple that was his own, called the Holy of Holies.

God lived there and could be approached only by the priests, members of the tribe of Levi who had been set aside to intercede with God on behalf of the people.

When the priests went before God they wore special garments or "vestments" that protected them from the overwhelming and lethal glory that emanated from God's presence. They also made sacrifices to God on the altar which sat outside the Holy of Holies. They sang the songs and performed the rituals that not only pleased but pacified YHWH and kept him at a safe distance.²

According to the popular theology of that time, God had formed the universe, had created the twelve tribes of Israel to be his people, had set them up in the Promised Land, and then had retreated into his room to pretty much let them live as they chose. Occasionally, he would come out and perform some miracle or other, or maybe direct the course of a battle, but mostly, he was not active in day to day human affairs.

¹ Cf. Daniel, chapters 1-4. The stories of "Daniel in the Lion's Den" and "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego" refer to this practice. In fact, the names of Daniel's three friends are Chaldean, not Hebrew names. Apparently, part of the re-education process included giving these young men new, Chaldean, names.

² Remnants of this theology can be seen in much of our church architecture and ritual, today. We still have an altar, the ministers often still wear vestments, and the building still contains a space that once was the Holy of Holies, behind the altar.

And that was just fine with most of the people. They liked to keep God close, living in Jerusalem, say, but also at arm's length. God was loosely tied to the people and the land and rarely, if ever, left Israel.

The prophet Jeremiah was the first to question this notion in his letter to the first group of captives who had been taken to Babylon. 2nd Isaiah would take up the theme and expand upon it.

God, he says, over and over, is not tied to any one place. YHWH, the Lord of Armies (Hosts), can go wherever he chooses and he chooses to go with his people. God, unlike human beings, can, in fact, be two places at once. He can be in Palestine with his people AND he can be in Babylon at the same time with his people, there.

God, he would tell the people, has not abandoned you any more than he abandoned your ancestors when they suffered in Egypt worse than you are suffering here. God has come with you and abides with you, here.

What does this mean? It means that your success, your identity, your authenticity is no more tied to one piece of real estate than God is. You can be the People of God anywhere you go. You can be faithful followers of Yahweh right here in Babylon... or anywhere.

Now get up. Stop singing your sad songs and start living your lives in the city where you find yourself. In fact, pray for this country. Work to make it strong and wise and benevolent, for as it succeeds so you will succeed. As it prospers, so you will prosper. As it lives, so you will live.

The second innovation in Isaiah's theology was in his new understanding of the relationship between God and God's People.

Think back and we see throughout the Hebrew Scriptures that God has tried many different relationship models with his people and some have worked better than others. He has been God the Creator and the people his creation. He has been God the redeemer and the people his redeemed. He has been God the Father and they his children. He has been God the General and they his army. None of these was exclusive. They were all intended to show different aspects of the relationship between God and his people at different times.

Now, Isaiah will introduce a new concept, a new relational model: God as the benevolent master and the people as his faithful servants.

God's redemptive work, Isaiah says, does not end with the Hebrews, his chosen people. God's redemptive work is now aimed at the whole world and he will do that work with the help and assistance of his faithful servant, Israel. And that redemptive work is going to start right here in Babylon.

REDEEMING THE WORLD

The first step will be for Israel to show the world how well they are able to endure suffering.

Today, we believe that suffering is anomalous to the human condition. We are not supposed to suffer and if we are suffering, then something is very wrong and should be corrected. In the sixth century before Christ, however, people understood that suffering was part of life. An unpleasant part, to be sure, but a certain and unavoidable part of life that must be endured from time to time and a person's character was often measured by the way they endured it.

The Hebrew people suffered well. They have suffered before and they can suffer now because they are sustained by their God who gives them comfort and aid in their times of misery, stress and pain.

The text we heard read by the choir, this morning, is from the 53rd chapter of Isaiah and is often referred to as the "Song of the Suffering Servant." Usually we hear this passage in reference to Jesus but remember, it was written some 600 years before Jesus was born and it was written in Babylon to a people who had just come into captivity in a strange and foreign land.

Yes, eventually, Jesus would come to be recognized as the fulfillment of this prophecy, but, first, it applied to the Hebrew people, themselves. The voice we hear speaking is that of the Babylonians as they watch in awe, how the People of God are able to suffer and endure with dignity and courage.

They are drawn to these people, these worshipers of YHWH, who are able to withstand so much with such grace and strength and by this attraction, as they are drawn to God's people, they are also drawn to God himself. In this way, the suffering of Israel is redemptive for the Babylonian people.

By their suffering, the People of God have brought others to God before they had to suffer, too. The People of God have suffered, as it were, on their behalf.

The second phase of this redemptive work will occur when Israel flourishes.

Her suffering will be rewarded and she will be allowed to flourish. Isaiah speaks to this in chapter 40, some of which you also heard read and sung this morning. Again, this passage is usually associated with John the Baptizer, announcing the coming messiah.

But six hundred years earlier, when it first appeared, it applied to the People of God in Babylon.

When he speaks of the highway being made straight in the wilderness, many will think of the wilderness that separates them from Jerusalem. But others will think of that metaphorical wilderness that separates them from successful, authentic living, wherever they are.

The promise which Isaiah gives to the people is that God has seen their suffering and has proclaimed it sufficient. He is now going to activate phase two of his redemptive plan for the world through his servant, Israel. He is going to

remove all of the impediments to their success. Mountains will be brought low, crooked ways will be made straight, rivers will flow in the desert and “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and ALL PEOPLE shall see it together.”

All People! Did you catch that?

And this is not a prediction about something that’s going to happen six hundred years in the future. It’s going to happen right now. It IS happening, right now.

God is redeeming his people unto himself, wherever they are. He is offering to them success and joy and authentic life. Maybe not the way they had expected it. Maybe not the way they had hoped for. Maybe not the way they had planned.

But real, nevertheless.

ISAIAH TODAY

Has there ever been a more pertinent message for us than this message is right now? No one is denying that we are going through tough times as a nation and as a community.

The temptation at times like these will be to turn on each other, to fling accusations, to hurl epithets, to throw insults and to sow disunion and dissention. But 2nd Isaiah offers a better vision and a better way.

He offers the hope that our suffering at this time may be redemptive for the rest of the world. He reminds us that, at no time, is our witness more authentic and convincing as when it arises out of suffering and grief. It is when times are hard that our witness has its greatest impact. It is when we are in pain that our story has its greatest power. It is when we suffer that our example pays its richest dividends.

These are tough times, yes, but they are times of great opportunity as well.

Never in recent history has the Christian witness of love, kindness, tenderness, hope, humility and generosity had more fertile ground to be sewn upon and a better chance of growing.

And if we sew that witness, the promise which 2nd Isaiah gives us is that it will grow and flourish and, in the future, pay rich dividends – not just for us, but for everyone in the world.

If we walk the path that God has set before us, even though that path may lead through dark and difficult places, then we will see that time when “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and **all people** (I said, ALL PEOPLE!) shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

AMEN