

**February 18, 2018**  
**Lent: Is there any Good News?**  
**Isaiah 52**

It's February. It's the dead of winter. It feels like it will never end. Like the unfortunate souls in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, we are caught in an endless chill that is always winter and never Christmas. A cynic would look at the human condition and draw some bitter parallels. You read the news: it's bad news. Listen to the pundits: it's about despair. And we wonder, where's the hope? What's the future? What can we do?

In our reading guides we've been working through Luke's gospel, His narrative of Jesus' life. People in Israel in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century asked the same questions – only more so. They were being ground under the heel of the occupying Roman army, the most powerful fighting force ever assembled. Their own leaders "King" Herod and the chief priests were in cahoots with the occupying forces. Some of their own people were Roman agents – tax collectors – extorting outrageous taxes and commissions, putting people into unpayable debt and destitution. People were sick. People were dying. Where's the hope? What can they do?

The BIG story of Scripture is God creates the universe, loves His creation, and never abandons it. He loves us and never abandons us. Even when we feel like the world is out of control, even when we feel we have no hope, God is here with us. That was the message of Advent/Christmas: "*Immanuel*" – "*God with us.*" And that is the meaning of Lent/Easter. The word "Lent," referring to the 40 days leading up to Easter, means "Lengthening." The days are getting longer. Spring is coming. Easter is coming: Jesus will defeat the powers of darkness and death. There is hope.

Through Lent we will be looking at Old Testament passages of hope in Isaiah 52-54 – hope in and through, Jesus, God's Son and Servant. We'll see how amazingly well, through Isaiah, God foreshadows Jesus' suffering and death. And how God offers us hope in tough times.

***Wake up! (Isaiah 52:1)***

Sometimes we need a wakeup call: we have to shake of the winter blues. Sometimes we need a wakeup call to remember who we are. We are people whom God loves! "*God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16). Do we believe it?

Isaiah's message to his people was about God's love, too! His people were without hope, groaning in exile in Babylon. They saw no hope and no future. Isaiah is calling them to wake up and remember who they are, God's beloved people.

***Shake off the dust! (Isaiah 52:2-6)***

I suspect the Israelites responded, "Yeah right!" Their lives were hard. Most of them were born in Babylon, in captivity, as slaves. They didn't know Jerusalem. They did not know

freedom. Like the people in Jesus' day, their lives were marked by discrimination, persecution, pain, and bad memories. It was difficult to believe in God's love their lives were so hard. Isaiah's fine words sounded great, but their experiences did not match up.

When some of us hear about God's love, all this "love, love, love" stuff doesn't fit our experience. Life is tough. It has been unfair. We have seen suffering. We have problems. Love just doesn't "fit" your experience of life. When life has been hard, you can draw back from love ... from God's love, and from the love that other people extend to you.

Isaiah's challenge is to face the messiness in our past and the pain in our present, and recognize His presence: *"Yes, it is I"* (52:6). Old Testament Jews understood God as their redeemer and deliverer from slavery in Egypt. Could they see His presence now, in slavery in Babylon? Under occupation by Rome? Is there hope? What do they do?

*"Shake off your dust," "Rise up," "Free yourselves from the chains on our necks."* Do something! Does this mean it's all up to us? Not at all! It does mean that, though God forgives and forgets the past, **we** need to forgive and forget the past. If we want to know God's hope today and tomorrow, we must let go of some of our baggage.

Remember Jacob Marley, Scrooge's business partner in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*? Marley, a ghost, carries the horrible weight of chains he forged in his life of dishonesty and greed. As Christians, we believe God could have forgiven Marley completely. Marley could have been freed from those chains had he come to Jesus. Right? But Marley chose to keep the chains. In the end, Scrooge will discover there is hope for a new life, through forgiveness and love.

Do we hold on to grudges? Do we nurse old wounds? Do we hold onto the pain of the past? God wants us to shake off the dust, rise up, and be set free. He forgives us. Can we forgive ourselves? He urges us to let go of the past and move on. Can we? He is NOT asking us to pretend it never happened, but He is inviting us to move forward, in hope. And in healing.

### ***Listen! (Isaiah 52:7-10)***

Isaiah has a message of good news! *"Your God reigns!"* To exiles in captivity and Jews under Roman occupation, this is good news! To us, in our lives, this is good news!

In Isaiah's day, Jerusalem is still in ruins, but God's promise is He will rebuild it. He stands on the ruins and proclaims salvation ... God is alive and well and will help the Israelites rebuild (notice they will have a lot of work to do to make it happen).

Our lives may be in ruins, but God's promise is that He can rebuild it. He stands on the ruins and proclaims salvation ... God is alive and well and will help us rebuild (we may have some work to do though). As we approach Easter, we remember the crucifixion, we also remember the resurrection: *"Our God reigns! ... the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem ... and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God"* (52:9-10). God's good news is for all people, everywhere!

## ***Get out of there! (Isaiah 52:11-12)***

*"Depart, depart, go out from there!" God is saying: "Your God reigns. He has saved you. Burst into song. Put the past behind, and get on with your lives!" (52:7-10).*

*Choosing to allow Jesus to come into your life involves transforming your **mind**. You change some of the things you believe. You change the way you think.*

*Choosing to allow Jesus to come into your life also involves transforming your **will**. You choose to do what Jesus would have you do ...to follow His principles for your life.*

*Choosing to allow Jesus to come into your life transforms the way you think about your **physical body**. God describes your physical body as the temple of the Holy Spirit... so you treat it as such! *"Touch no unclean thing!"* Isaiah says; you choose to keep yourself pure.*

*Choosing to allow Jesus to come into our lives also transforms our **emotions**. Sometimes we treat our feelings and emotions as "not that important." But they are! They affect how we view the world. They are what give us life. Otherwise, like Data on Star Trek, we'd be rational beings, but not truly alive. When we allow God to "convert" (if you will) our emotions we can grow closer to God.*

Some of us struggle with fear. There are two types of fear in the Bible: positive fear and negative fear. Positive fear warns us of danger and gives us wisdom to "go out from there." Negative fear is when we're paralyzed into inaction. Time and time again, God says, *"Do not be afraid!"* (over 100 times in the Bible). When we allow the Holy Spirit into our lives, we can change the way we think about fear, develop strategies to deal with our fears, and grow in our faith. Perfect love, the perfect saving love of God, casts out fear. *"The Lord will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard"* (52:12).

Some of us struggle with guilt. There are two types of guilt in the Bible. Positive guilt warns us that we have crossed the line between what God considers right and what He considers wrong. When we sense this true guilt, we need to ask God for forgiveness; we need to repent (to change the direction of our lives); and we need to deal with the consequences of our sin (perhaps to make things right with a person against whom we have sinned). Negative guilt happens when we really haven't done anything wrong, but we feel guilt. Or when we know we've dealt with things and we're forgiven (as above), but we can't let the chains go; we cannot forgive ourselves. We get angry, depressed, or frustrated. The Holy Spirit can help us *"free ourselves from those chains around our necks!"*

## ***See my Servant ... (Isaiah 52:13-15)***

How does this happen? How do people without hope and a future find purpose and meaning? Isaiah introduces us to God's "Servant." Over the next few Sundays, through this season of Lent, we'll look at several intriguing pictures of God's Servant – the Messiah, Jesus, the Deliverer, Redeemer, and Saviour we need. Isaiah helps us understand Jesus better.

Isaiah foreshadows our HOPE in Jesus. He also foreshadows Jesus' suffering and death. The last image we have of Jesus prior to the resurrection – when He is buried – is with his face bruised and ripped by thorns, his back in shreds, his hands and feet pierced, and his side scarred. It's a horrible sight! *"His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness ..."* (52:14). According to Islam, Jesus (such a holy man) did not die on the cross (another man, similar to Jesus was crucified in His place); Jesus was lifted, alive, to heaven. According to Jewish scholars, the cross represents failure. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, Jesus' crucifixion was a sign of weakness.

What Isaiah is highlighting is that things that seem like failure or weakness or to us, may be the exact opposite. In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul talks about how the cross is a "stumbling block" to the Jews and "foolishness" to the Gentiles. Who could have imagined that this appalling sight was God? *"But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong"* (1 Corinthians 1:17).

Holman Hunt (painter of "The Light of the World") has an intriguing painting, *"The Shadow of Death."* Inside a carpenter's shop, Jesus, stripped to the waist (as at the crucifixion), stands by a wooden trestle on which he has put his saw. A makeshift, blood-red headband (like a crown of thorns) is at his feet. He lifts his eyes toward heaven ... the look on his face is either pain or ecstasy or both. He stretches, raising both arms above his head. As he does so, the evening sunlight, streaming in the door, casts a shadow, cross-like on the wall behind him. The tool rack is like a horizontal bar on which his hands have been crucified. The tools themselves remind us of the hammer and nails. In the foreground, his mother, Mary, kneels among the wood chips, her hand resting on a chest in which the gifts of the magi are kept. She looks, startled, at Jesus' shadow on the wall.

The paradox of Lent and Easter is that love defeats power. Suffering overcomes pain. Sacrifice triumphs over violence. With God, what looks like failure may actually be success. God's power can change weakness into strength, anger into peace, and sorrow into joy. Those who humble themselves are exalted. Those who are brought low are lifted up. The last become first. Alas, He doesn't always do it when we want, or how we want. One day, God will turn our mourning into laughter, our weakness into strength, and our pain into joy.

And so, as people of the cross and resurrection, we find hope in Jesus. We do see a future. Because our God reigns. He is a God who stands on the ruins and rebuilds. He is a God who reaches out in the pain, and brings healing. He is a God who comforts His people.

This is good news. It's not the news of military parades, booming stock prices, great trade deals, or even medical breakthroughs. It's good news of life: new birth and new life by coming to know Jesus, the suffering Servant. Do you know Him? Shake off your dust. Free yourself from your chains. Your God reigns. Tiny Tim has the last word in *A Christmas Carol*: *"God Bless Us, Every One!"* Yes, if we notice, God does bless us, Every One.