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Isaiah 54:1-3

8th Message

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WHAT ARE YOU HOPING FOR?

SERIES: GREAT EXPECTATIONS

What role does hope play in your life? Do you ever allow yourself to dream? Do you believe God has a glorious future for you? The title to my message “What are you hoping for?” is designed to provoke and stir you on more than one level. On the one hand, I want you to think about how you approach the future. *What* do you really long for? If God could do anything for you, what would it be? Here the emphasis is on the first word – “what.” If you would permit me to probe a little deeper into your story, I would ask, “How have your longings changed or deepened over time?”

If you are honest, I’m sure many of you would admit that it didn’t take long for the idealistic dreams of youth to be dashed upon the unforgiving bedrock of reality. In the musical version of Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables*, Fantine gives voice to the death of dreams, and with it life itself.

I dreamed a dream in time gone by
 When hope was high
 And life worth living
 I dreamed that love would never die
 I dreamed that God would be forgiving
 Then I was young and unafraid
 And dreams were made and used and wasted
 There was no ransom to be paid
 No song unsung
 No wine untasted
 But the tigers come at night
 With their voices soft as thunder
 As they tear your hope apart
 As they turn your dream to shame
 I had a dream my life would be
 So different from this hell I’m living
 So different now from what it seemed
 Now life has killed
 The dream I dreamed

I suspect many of you can identify, so much so that perhaps you’ve lost your ability to dream. “What are you hoping *for*?” now strikes the cynical chord of despair – why hope at all? Who dares hope against hope? Better to just get up in morning, turn the crank and survive below the radar than hope for more, only to be subjected to more heartache.

Nurtured on the promises God gave to Abraham, the nation of Israel began with high hopes for her future – a future thriving with children, like “the stars of heaven and the sand that is on the seashore” (Gen 22:17); a prosperous future, dwelling in a rich and fertile homeland, flowing with milk and honey (Exod 3:8).

But after a short honeymoon, God’s bride was lured into idolatry and the lascivious ways of the nations around her. After centuries of obstinate rebellion, God was forced to give Israel a certificate of divorce, making public her adulterous addictions. At that moment she gained the freedom she always wanted: to do as she pleased.

When God grants this sort of freedom it is a very dangerous thing. Israel won the right to do as she pleased, but lost her relationship with the Lord and with it, his divine protection and care.

In the last half of the 8th century B.C. the powerful and militaristic Assyrians overran the northern tribes of Israel as effortlessly as Hitler’s panzer divisions overran Czechoslovakia and Poland. One hundred thirty-five years later King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon invaded Judah and laid siege to Jerusalem. The city was ravaged, its walls torn down, and the temple destroyed by fire. In 586 B.C. Judah ceased to exist and, for all practical purposes, Israel’s God died as well. (In the ancient Near East, when a god’s temple was overrun, that god died in history). In utter agony Jeremiah cries out, “My wound is incurable!”

Woe is me because of my hurt!

My wound is incurable.

**But I said, “Truly this is an affliction,
 and I must bear it.”**

**My tent is destroyed,
 and all my cords are broken;
 my children have gone from me,
 and they are not;**

**there is no one to spread my tent again
 and to set up my curtains.**

(Jer 10:19-20 ESV)

Israel was childless, with no future; homeless, exiled from her land; and hopeless, abandoned by God. How do you resurrect hope for a people when God has abandoned them? Isaiah addresses these deep wounds in our text today – Israel’s despair over her lost children, and her broken-down tent (which speaks not only to lack of a place to call home, but more importantly there is no sanctuary to worship God).

I. The Basis of Hope: The Work of the Servant

The basis of Israel’s hope is not found in anything they have done or can do, but solely and completely in the work of God’s servant, who takes on Israel’s role to do for the nation and world what Israel failed to do. In Isaiah’s fourth Servant Song (Isa 52:13-53:12), the exiles discover that the Servant has accomplished the impossible.

But he was pierced for our transgressions;

he was crushed for our iniquities;

**the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
 and by his wounds we are healed.**

**We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
 each of us has turned to our own way;
 and the lord has laid on him
 the iniquity of us all. (Isa 53:5-6 TNIV)**

Out of the anguish of his soul,

he will see the light of life and be satisfied;

by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,

for their iniquities he himself will bear.

(Isa 53:11 my translation of last verse)

In chapters 54 and 55 the tone dramatically shifts from the dark anguish of the servant's tortuous death, to a celebration of resounding joy and jubilation.

As John Oswalt comments,

Chapter 54 is a love song by God to Zion, his estranged bride, telling her all the things he is going to do in restoring her. Chapter 55 is the invitation proper, calling on the bride not to miss through unbelief what is hers. Together they constitute one of the most beautiful pieces of literature in the entire Bible.¹

For the believer hope is not whitewashed optimism based on vague promises that life will somehow get better. Biblical hope is something that finds its source in the Living God, whose word is faithful and true. You can hang your life on his promises, and all his promises find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. All of them.

For all the promises of God find their Yes in him.
(2 Cor 1:20 ESV)

Today from our text we will hear Isaiah speak to Jeremiah's cry as he gave voice to the pain of losing children and not having a home.

II. The Promise of a New Seed (Isaiah 54:1)

**“Sing, O barren one, who did not bear;
break forth into singing and cry aloud,
you who have not been in labor!**

**For the children of the desolate one will be more
than the children of her who is married,” says the lord.**

(Isa 54:1)

A. Hope is honest about the pain

Hope doesn't deny pain and suffering, but looks it straight in the eye. The prophet's penetrating gaze goes right to the core of Israel's pain. Zion is barren. Like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah, her womb is shut, which makes the dream of children impossible. I'm sure most of you at some time have been touched by a woman's private grief over her inability to conceive children. When the numbers rise, an entire community may feel the sense of loss and desolation, for children are the sign and hope of our future. In the ancient world, the stakes were even higher. The inability to bear children exposed a woman to public ridicule and shame and even threatened her status as a wife.

But Zion is not only described as barren, she is also one who has never travailed in labor, in contrast to the “one who is married.” This suggests she is either divorced or widowed, and as such, has no husband or children to care for her.

Finally the word “desolate,” takes her pain to the limit. The root *shamen* means “to lie deserted, become stiff (with fear), be terrified, to be cut off from life.” The verb takes on violent connotations. It describes a life that is torn to pieces and mangled by a bear (Lam 3:10-11). When a city becomes desolate, jackals devour it; when a land is desolate, it mourns (Jer 12:10). Whenever desolation occurs, onlookers are appalled, speechless with horror. The only woman in the bible who is described as desolate is David's daughter, Tamar, who was raped and then abandoned by her half-brother Ammon (2 Sam 13:20). From that day onward, “Tamar lived, a *desolate* woman, in her brother Absalom's house” (2 Sam 13:20). Like Tamar, Zion has been raped and ravaged by the Babylonians. But worse, she is abandoned by God and remains desolate in a foreign land.

B. Hope is ignited by memory

When we begin to comprehend the depth of Israel's pain, it comes as a shock to us that the first word to this broken woman is “sing.” The verb *nanan* is better translated “give a ringing or resounding shout of joy,” a term that is used in response to the most remarkable events, when fortunes are suddenly, dramatically and unexplainably reversed. To hear it addressed to an infertile woman is stunning. As Claus Westermann suggests,

How could a barren woman be summoned to sing? This was both meaningless and pitiless. But these are the exact feelings of shock that Isaiah wishes his metaphor to evoke, for he has something undreamt of and quite incredible to explain.²

Given God's promise, we should not be surprised when the first announcement of salvation in the gospel of Luke comes to a woman who is barren, Elizabeth. It is a retelling of Sarah's story of a barren woman who, through divine intervention, will give birth at a ripe old age. This is followed with a second announcement to a young virgin who never has had the opportunity of experiencing labor, because she isn't yet married. She will conceive life by the Holy Spirit. When these two women meet, Mary's song of praise – a recapitulation of Hannah's song centuries earlier—*resounds* to the glory of God (Luke 1:46-55).

When we search the gospel for Tamar's *desolate* counterpart, we wonder what new twist will the new story bring? Whose body will be ravaged like Tamar's? Whose life will be shunned in isolation and forsaken in shame? Who will never marry because of the sins of others, and as a result never know the joy of bearing children or seeing their grandchildren? Who is the *desolate* one in the New Testament?

We don't have to look to the New Testament, because the prophet himself supplies the answer:

**Just as there were many who were appalled at him —
his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being
and his form marred beyond human likeness—**
(Isa 52:14 TNIV)

Isaiah uses the term to describe the reaction the Servant's appearance evoked when he was beaten beyond recognition. Onlookers were “*appalled* at him” (*shamam* – speechless with horror). Our Jesus was “desolate,” and the land mourned.

C. Hope is fueled by prophetic imagination

Yet after he is “cut off from the land of the living,” Isaiah pronounces that “he will see his offspring; he shall prolong his days” (Isa 53:10). This is one of the clearest professions of resurrection in the Old Testament, not to mention a transformation of the people of God. What is true of the Servant who never married will be true of all God's people. Every new birth will appear to be miraculous since it is indeed life from the dead.

**But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with
which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses,
made us alive together with Christ. (Eph 2:4-5 ESV)**

Like Isaac, the new seed of Israel will be children born of promise not of flesh.

**But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he
gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not
of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but
of God. (John 1:12-13)**

This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. (Rom 9:8)

For it is written, “Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.” Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. (Gal 4:27)

Not only will the new seed be supernatural in origin, its fertility will be greater than Israel’s physical seed.

“For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married.” (Isa 54:2b)

I suspect this might be a reference to Hannah, whose rival Peninnah had many children and used them to bitterly provoke Hannah because the Lord had closed her womb. Out of her deep sorrow, Hannah poured out her heart to the Lord and he miraculously opened her womb with the gift of a son, whom she dedicated to the Lord. Peninnah may have had ten sons, but Hannah’s son of promise brought a spiritual revival to the entire nation.

Question: To what areas of your life might the label barren, unfulfilled, desolate apply?

Barren – Where have you been infertile, unable to conceive life? Where is the place all your efforts have been wasted?

Unfulfilled – Where do you feel you’ve missed the opportunities you longed for?

Desolate – Where have you been ravaged by other’s sins or shunned by the very people you want so much to belong to or with?

It is the very place of this pain where, in the Messianic age, you become fertile. All you have to do is read the Gospel. Jesus goes to Samaria and he finds a woman who hasn’t married once or even twice; she’s married five times and the man she is with now isn’t even her husband. She is shunned by the women of the town and has no community. She is old, she is used, and she’s very likely childless. What does Jesus do with her? He offers her living water at the very moment that she must address her deepest pain: “I have no husband.” She drinks deeply of that living water and, unable to contain herself, she goes into town and in one day she has a community of children – the whole town receives Jesus based on her testimony.

Do you doubt the Gospel stories apply to you? Consider the story of Ida Scudder.³ Ida was born to medical missionary parents in India, and like all girls, when she came of age she expected to get married and settle down in the United States. She traveled to the U.S. for seminary, but in 1890 she traveled home unexpectedly to help her father care for her ailing mother.

One night, there was a knock at the door. A Hindu man had come looking for medical help for his pregnant wife who was in labor and having difficulty. Ida offered to send the doctor but the Hindu man insisted that only a female physician could attend to his wife. There were no women doctors, so the man went away without help. A few hours later, a second man arrived with the same circumstances, the same request. He too turned away without receiving help. Amazingly, that night a third Hindu man arrived in search of a female physician for his laboring wife, and again he left disappointed, for there were no women doctors. Later, Ida learned all three women died in childbirth. The experience convinced her that God wanted her to become a physician and help the women of Southern India.

She graduated from Cornell Medical College, New York City in 1899, as part of the first class at that school that accepted women as medical students. She then returned to India, fortified with a \$10,000 grant, and with the money she started a tiny medical dispensary and clinic for women. In two years she treated 5,000 patients. Ida realized that she would be foolish to go on alone in her fight to bring better health to Southern India’s women, so she decided to open a medical school for girls. Skeptical males said she would be lucky to get three applicants; actually she had 151 the first year (1918), and had to turn many away ever since. Of 242 students today, 95 are men.

Ida never married. How many children do you think Ida Scudder has? How many babies were born out of the desolation of those three deaths?

III. The Promise of a New Home (Isa 54:2-3)

**Enlarge the place of your tent,
and let the curtains of your dwellings be stretched out;
do not hold back; lengthen your cords
and strengthen your stakes.
For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left,
and your offspring will possess the nations
and will people the desolate cities. (Isa 54:2-3)**

A. Hope Ignited by Memory

Once again the prophet ignites the exile’s hope by reminding them of what God had done for their ancestors. The metaphor changes from a mother, to a homemaker who is creating a nest for her new family. The term “tent” is reminiscent of the patriarchs, who lived in tents that were mobile rather than in homes, as well as the Lord who dwelt in a tent during Israel’s time in the wilderness. “Dwellings” (*mishkan*) was the term for the Lord’s tabernacle, and the term “curtains” “designates both the linen curtains of the *tabernacle* and the goat hair curtains of the *tent* surrounding the tabernacle”⁴ in Exodus.

Isaiah reminds the exiles that just as the Lord took 70 persons who entered Egypt and they “multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them” (Exod 1:7), once again God can be counted on to do it again.

B. Hope is fueled by prophetic imagination

Isaiah commands us to dream. “If you’re going to dream, dream big!” The problem with most of us is that our dreams are too small. Isaiah is speaking to one who has no children, whose tent is torn down, and boldly says, “Don’t hold back!” – this tent needs to be plenty big and will have to stand for a long time. As my friend Karen reminds me, “If you’re going to dream, you might as well dream BIG!” (She explained that this was her dad’s favorite saying. His 2nd favorite – “The first 100 years are the hardest”).

The reason is that this new seed is going “to spread out” beyond its borders. The term *paratz* means to “burst forth” or “break out” and is somewhat more violent term than mere spreading forth. It is used of breaching a city wall to make it defenseless. ‘Right and left’ recalls the restraint Abraham imposed upon himself when he sought to separate himself from Lot (Gen 13:9).

“If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.” (Gen 13:9)

That same restraint – “not to turn aside to the right hand or to the left” – was offered to the king of Edom when the children of Israel sought permission to pass through Edom on King’s Highway

on their way to the Land of Promise (Num 20:17). Now it appears that Sarah's children of promise will have no limitation placed upon them.

Therefore not only will the once desolate cities of Judah be rebuilt and restored, but the children of the Messiah will "possess the nations." It must be noted that "possessing" also connotes the prior activity of "dispossessing," and could simply mean that Judah will regain possession of Palestine. But given the broader scope of Isaiah's worldwide vision in chapters 40-55, not to mention the apostolic mandate to go into all the nations with the gospel, I'm inclined toward a no holds barred vision of the whole world. Israel's new seed cannot be confined within any geographical boundary. This accords well with the blessing given to Rebekah by her family:

**"Our sister, may you become
thousands of ten thousands,
and may your offspring possess
the gate of those who hate him!" (Gen 24:60)**

Jesus said, the "on this rock I shall build my church and the *gates of hell* shall not prevail against it" (Matt 16:18). This is not a defensive position, it is an offensive one. The Church will penetrate the very gates of hell, which tells us there is no place you cannot go in your company, into any country on earth or any place of danger. There is no part of the world that is off limits for the Christian carrying the Gospel. This is our mission.

So how do you dream, and even more, how do we even begin to dream again when we stopped dreaming a long time ago and feel that we no longer have the ability? Where do you get our dreams? We import them from the inspired visions of the prophets. Abraham Heschel describes it this way:

Prophetic utterance is rarely cryptic, suspended between God and man; it is urging, alarming, forcing onward, as if the words gushed forth from the heart of God, seeking entrance to the heart and mind of man, carrying a summons as well as an involvement. Grandeur, not dignity, is important. The language is luminous and explosive, firm and contingent, harsh and compassionate, a fusion of contradictions.

The prophet seldom tells a story, but casts events... The prophet does more than translate reality into a poetic key: he is a preacher whose purpose is not self-expression but communication. His images must not shine, they must burn.⁵

Without dreams you will die. You have to ignite and then fuel your imagination with prophetic vision. When you read the prophets, they constantly challenge us that our dreams aren't big enough! The spiritual seed that is birthed out of our pain and desolation is going to populate the new heavens and the new earth.

IV. Embracing Hope: "Sing...do not hold back"

What is the authentic evidence that people truly have hope? When your hope has grown cold, it's not enough to ignite a spark with good kindling (memory); and then fuel the flame with seasoned wood (prophetic imagination) to create a roaring fire. Ultimately you have to lean into it and warm yourself with the heat. Thus the prophet commands the exiles first "to break forth into a singing of

resounding praise" as if the future were already present. When saints have hope, they sing with full-throated praise.

Second, they are told to spare no effort ("do not hold back") in their preparations for Zion's new children. Saints who are possessed by hope have a passion for God's mission for the whole world. They are those who spare no effort to boldly cross every political, racial, geographical and social boundary to raise up another generation for the Gospel.

When you end your life and the curtain rises on the horizon, what do you want to see? This is what I want to see –

**"Lift up your eyes around and see;
they all gather, they come to you.**

**As I live, declares the LORD,
you shall put them all on as an ornament;
you shall bind them on as a bride does.**

**The children of your bereavement
will yet say in your ears:**

**'The place is too narrow for me;
make room for me to dwell in.'**

Then you will say in your heart:

'Who has borne me these?

**I was bereaved and barren,
exiled and put away,
but who has brought up these?**

**Behold, I was left alone;
from where have these come?"**

Thus says the LORD GOD:

**"Behold, I will lift up my hand to the nations,
and raise my signal to the peoples;
and they shall bring your sons in their arms,
and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders."
(Isa 49:18, 20-22)**

This sermon is dedicated to Dr. David Ille, who has dedicated his life to stemming the epidemic of abortion and abusive health care for women in Romania. May the Lord fulfill his dream of building LIFE Medical Center in Cluj-Napoca, where women will be treated with dignity that Christ affords, and that another generation may be given the opportunity for life.⁶

1. John Oswalt, *Isaiah* NIVAC; (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 595.
2. Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 272.
3. Wikipedia contributors, "Ida S. Scudder," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ida_S._Scudder
4. Anthony Tomasino, "curtain" NIDOTTE 2:535.
5. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 6-7.
6. Currently, the abortion ratio in Romania is 5.8 abortions for every 10 babies born. The rate jumps to approximately 7 abortions per 10 live births in urban areas such as Cluj-Napoca. In the capital, Bucharest, the abortion rate could be as high as 18 abortions/10 live births. The average Romanian woman will have three to four abortions during her reproductive years; and there are known incidents of women having upwards of 20. For more information or if you would like to help make David's dream a reality go to www.healthbridglobal.org.