



Marc Chagall, *The Three Candles*, 1938-1940

## What Are You Hoping For?

Isaiah 54:1-3

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The title of my text this morning is “What Are You Hoping For?” and I’ve illustrated it with a painting entitled “The Three Candles,” by Marc Chagall. To the casual observer the painting captures one’s eye with Chagall’s bright and vivid colors and the idyllic setting of a wedding, with candles lit and the bride and groom rising up with the angels in dream-like love and hope.

However, if you look at the date of the painting, it was painted during Hitler’s rise to power and the Nazi invasion of Poland and France. Before the invasion, Chagall fled with his family to Provence in the south of France. When the Vichy puppet-government began to offer increased cooperation to the Germans, Chagall realized it was not safe to remain there either. At one point, Chagall was seized by the authorities, but soon released, after pressure from the United States. In June 1941, Chagall set sail from Marseille and arrived in New York June 23, 1941.<sup>1</sup>

Within that context, the painting takes on a different tone. With the clouds of a new conflict already gathering in the world outside, the male’s embracing arms are cradling and protecting his bride, rather than caressing. Below the woman’s feet, a dark angel unrolls a trail of red across the earth, prophetic of an unspeakable Holocaust to come. After such an event, how can we can ever speak of hope again?

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); and 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 be able 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 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. the powerful and militaristic Assyrians overran the northern tribes of Israel as effortlessly as Hitler's panzer divisions overran Czechoslovakia and Poland. One hundred and 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,

**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 after God has abandoned them? In chapters 53 and 54, Isaiah addresses these deep wounds – her 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 the loss of their 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.**

**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 53:5, 11 NIV)**

In chapter 54 the tone dramatically shifts from the dark anguish of the servant's tortuous death, to a celebration of resounding joy and jubilation. "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."<sup>2</sup> All things are being made new: a new seed, a new land, a new covenant, a new city, a new education and a new security.

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)**

In our text today we will hear Isaiah speak to Jeremiah's painful cry as he gave voice to the pain of lost children and their homeland.

Before looking at our text, I would like to give you a simple tool to help you understand how the prophets wrote about the future. "*Roots and wings*," the Spanish poet Juan Ramon writes, "*But let the wings take root and the roots fly.*" Whenever the prophets describe God's new future, they use images that evoke God's faithful acts of salvation in the past. Once we are grounded in the bedrock of history, the prophets supercharge the old symbols by hyperbole. "Edmund Clowney says, 'The outward symbols of the old covenant are so intensified with the fullness of the glory of the new covenant that they are transfigured and transformed.'"<sup>3</sup> The result is that when we comprehend their significance, we are grounded in the history of God's faithfulness, but with burning hearts we capture a glimpse of a future beyond our imaginings.

## **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 ESV)**

### **A. Hope is brutally honest about the pain**

Hope doesn't deny pain and suffering; it looks at 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 *shamam* 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 assaulted and then abandoned by her half-brother Amnon (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 assaulted and ravaged by the Babylonians. But worse, she is abandoned by God and remains desolate in a foreign land.

### **B. Hope 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 *ranan* 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.<sup>4</sup>

Looking back into Israel's history, we are reminded of the story of Hannah and her rival sister Peninnah. Peninnah had many children and used them to bitterly provoke Hannah, because the Lord had closed her womb.

After years of unspeakable grief, Hannah poured out her soul to the Lord and he miraculously opened her womb with the gift of a son, Samuel. With a ringing and resounding shout of joy she penned a poem of praise that shaped history as she dedicated Samuel to the Lord.

**My heart exults in the LORD;  
my horn is exalted in the LORD.  
My mouth derides my enemies,  
because I rejoice in your salvation.  
There is none holy like the LORD,  
for there is none besides you;  
there is no rock like our God. (1 Sam 2:1-2)**

### **C. Hope fueled by prophetic imagination**

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 Mary, 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, using the same term to describe the reaction the Servant's appearance evoked when he was beaten beyond recognition.

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

Onlookers were "*appalled* at him" (*shamam* – speechless with horror). Our Jesus was "desolate" and the land mourned. 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 and the promise of a radical transformation for 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 2:5)**

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)**

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 many,  
more than the children of her who is married. (Isa 53:2)**

In John's gospel, Jesus travels to Samaria and finds a woman who hasn't married once or even twice; she's been 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 gives birth to a new community—the entire town receives Jesus based on her testimony.

**Question:** 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?

It is the very place of suffering where, in the Messianic age, you flourish and become fruitful. This is the mystery Jesus revealed to Cleopas and his wife on the road to Emmaus. With a strong rebuke, but one that is necessary for us to hear as well, he explained that they were “slow of heart to believe all the prophets have spoken!” (Luke 24:15). Tom Wright explains,

They, like everybody else in Israel, had been reading the bible through the wrong end of the telescope. They had been seeing it as the long story of how God would redeem Israel *from* suffering, but it was instead the story of how God would redeem Israel *through* suffering; through, in particular, the suffering which would be taken on himself by Israel’s representative, the Messiah.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus’ rebuke was followed by an act of extreme kindness and grace. He gave them “new eyes” and a “new heart” to understand the Scriptures.

**And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:27)**

With that new lens, their hearts burned, and their eyes were open to see Jesus, who had been in their midst all along.

### **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 (lit. “break out”) 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 exiles’ 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"<sup>6</sup> 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, and as my friend Karen says, "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.

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 a somewhat more violent term than mere spreading forth. It is used of breaching a city wall to make it defenseless. Now it appears that Sarah's children of promise will have **no limitations** placed upon them. Isaiah broadens the scope of their vision beyond their imaginings. The new seed will not be confined within any geographical boundary, for in the Messianic Age, God is making the whole earth holy.

This explains why the theme of "land" practically disappears when you come to the New Testament. There are only two references, one in Matthew, the other in Romans: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the **earth**" (Matt 5:5; Ps 37:11); "For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the **world** did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith" (Rom 4:13). This is critical to understand, given the age-old fight over "whose land is it?" It is a non-issue when the whole world lays open before us.

### **IV. Summary: Restoring Hope**

1. Ignite hope with a spark of good kindling (memory).
2. Fuel the flame with seasoned wood (prophetic imagination) to create a roaring fire.
3. Lean into the fire and warm yourself in the heat.



The prophet leaves us with two commands. First, the exiles are encouraged “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.

Secondly, 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 in the light of the Gospel.

Last month, while visiting the International Justice Mission in Bucharest, Romania, we were introduced to Pastor Ionel (John) Iubaş, whose church has made herculean efforts in serving the Ukraine refugees flooding into Romania since the Russian invasion. Ionel writes,

When the War in Ukraine escalated in March 2022, we asked ourselves how can we be the hands and feet of Jesus? We looked at ourselves and to our meagre resources and said: “God this is what we have. Please use us so we can be a blessing for the people that are running from War.”

In the first two weeks our budget was consumed with every *lei* spent, helping hundreds of people who came every day to the transit center at our church.

By God’s grace we have now established five centers in Bucharest and serviced more than 10,000 Ukrainians with shelter and food, along with the gift of God’s love through the work of the countless volunteers. We continue to labor and serve with great joy, declaring that everything we do is because of the faithfulness of God and for his Glory. We are not doing something extraordinary this is what the church of God should do!

So what are you hoping for? For those who lean into the fire, Isaiah offers us a glimpse of what we will see on the horizon at the end of history.

**“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, 18-22)**



May the memories of God’s saving acts ignite the flame of hope in our hearts.  
May that fire become a roaring fire by a prophetic imagination that allows us to  
dream big dreams for the kingdom of God.

May the warmth of God’s love burn in our hearts so that we spare no effort to  
bring the gospel to a generation not yet born. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.marcchagall.net/the-three-candles.jsp>

<sup>2</sup> John Oswalt, *Isaiah* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 595.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 819.

<sup>4</sup> Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 272.

<sup>5</sup> N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 294.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Tomasino, תְּרִיבָהּ “curtain” *NIDOTTE* 2:535.