

Sermon 5-17-20 Hope: Finding hope in the Prophets

Based on a sermon by Adam Hamilton

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My name is Kim Fields and I am one of the pastors at Central Church. I want to welcome you to worship and thank you for joining us today. Last week, we started a sermon series on hope, based on a series by Adam Hamilton. We surveyed the Psalms looking for what they had to say about hope. We were reminded that the Hebrew people also experienced hard times, including pandemics. Their hard times led to hard questions like where God was in the midst of their troubles. Yes, the Hebrew people asked hard questions, too, but they invariably returned to the hope that God would rescue them, setting them back on solid ground.

Last week we asked the question, “What do we do when we are at the end of our rope?” We concluded that the answer was found in Psalm 41. I asked you to memorize it. Did you? Can you tell me where our hope is found? That is right, at least one translation of the verse reads, “**I put all my hope** in the Lord.”

However, this past week, I was reminded that that is sometimes easier said than done. For some, it is not as simple as grabbing onto the end of the rope. Many can't even find the rope. They seek God, but seem unable to find him. Which leads me to wonder whether they are seeking God in the right places? Like Elijah, we often look for God in the big events, like the wind, an earthquake, a fire, or a flashy miracle when God is more often found in the still small voice of a neighbor or a family member reaching out with God's love.

That love is something we are trying to embody here at Central Church. We are doing it through the caring **phone calls** members are making to each other; by delivering food and medicines to members who can't pick them up for themselves; with the cards that people are sending; and through the meals and care items we are delivering to over 100 neighbors and **Lunch Buddies** who are experiencing an especially difficult time. We are also doing this through special gifts to ministry partners who are touching lives with God's love in this community and around the world. A couple of weeks ago, we provided \$5,000 in special donations to Second Harvest, Adult Teen Challenge, Communities in Schools, and YouMedical for the important work they are doing right here, right now. We are also doing it through the small caring gifts we give to one another. A neighbor received a May basket on her step. Lorraine and I were given a beautiful **sketch of Central Church**.

These gifts are important. And they have one thing in common. They are gifts of hope. They are gifts of hope with flesh on them. They are gifts of hope and love from God's people, going out to incarnate God's hope and love in the world.

But let me get back to our theme for today. Last week, we looked for hope in the Psalms. This week, we are going to look for **hope in the Prophets**. Last week, we pointed out that during the good times, when all seems right with the world, we sometimes forget our need for God. Too often, we don't realize our need for God until the dark times wake us to our own inadequacies. Which may be why, it was often during the dark times, that the prophets appeared. While it is true that the prophets predicted those hard times, they also preached and ministered to the people, offering words of hope in the midst of the darkness.

But before we get to that, let me begin with a short history and geography lesson. I hope it will help tie all this together. We will focus today on the **four major prophets**: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel.

But first, let me give you some background to help you understand the historical context to which they were speaking. **Judah was a small strip** of land in the middle of Israel, surrounded by Middle Eastern super powers. In 605 BC, the **kingdom of Egypt**, which was set to the South and West, was one of the most powerful kingdoms in the world. In many ways, they were the dominant power in both Israel and Judah. However, at about this time, a new emperor came into power in **Babylon to the North and East** and his influence began to expand. The Babylonian emperor, Nebuchadnezzar, was ambitious and made plans to seize control of northern Israel.

What resulted was a clash between the Egyptian and Babylonian armies at a place called **Carchemish**. These were the most powerful armies on the planet at the time. They were seeking to control the trade routes between the continents of Africa, Asia and Europe. These trade routes ran right through Judah. Which meant that the relatively minor kingdom of Judah was caught right in the middle.

To give you some perspective, the state of Washington is twenty-one times the size of Judah. Egypt, on the other hand, was fifty times the size of Judah. Babylon was even larger, nearly eighty times the size of Judah.

The Babylonians defeated the Egyptian army at the battle of Carchemish. And, as a result of that victory, King Nebuchadnezzar of **Babylon gained control of most of Israel** and all of Judah. He drove the Egyptians South, forcing them back into

Egypt and, as he passed through, he paid a visit to Jerusalem, informing them that there was a new sheriff in town. He allowed the king to continue to reign in Judah, but let him know in no uncertain terms who was in charge. Before he left, Nebuchadnezzar collected tribute from the Israelites, along with some of the treasurers of the temple, and returned with his **troops to Babylon**. They also took a few captives back with them to serve as advisors to the emperor. You might remember the names of four of those advisors. Their names were Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Judah had become accustomed to Egyptian rule. They chafed under the rule of Babylon. Thus, when the Egyptians began to flex their muscles again, the Judeans cast out the Babylonian occupiers and sought to align themselves one more with Egypt. However, this did not last for long. In 598 BC, the Babylonian emperor returned to Jerusalem. He sacked the city, plundered the temple, and took ten thousand of its leading citizens back to Babylon. Among the ten thousand, was a man by the name of Ezekiel. If you have been keeping track you know that we now have two prophets living in exile in Babylon. First, there was Daniel, who was taken as an advisor in 605 BC, and now Ezekiel who was taken as a part of the ten thousand exiles in 597 BC.

Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, there was another prophet. His name was Jeremiah. By this time, Jeremiah had been prophesying for over twenty years, warning his people that if they did not repent, God would withdraw his protection. Jeremiah warned them over and over again, but they refused to repent. Sure enough, just as Jeremiah had prophesied, the Babylonians invaded and led the first group away into exile. About this time, false prophets arose among the people proclaiming that God would bring them home soon, which led Jeremiah to write

those in exile, saying, “Don’t listen. It’s not going to happen. You are not coming back for seventy years. So, you had better make the best of exile. You need to settle into the land and pray for your captors. If you bless them, things will go well for you. But if all you do is dream of coming back, it will not go well at all.”

Jeremiah proclaimed the same message to those living in Jerusalem. He told them that if they refused to recognize that God had allowed this to happen and tried to fight against the Babylonians, it would not go well for them, either. Sadly, the people refused to listen and, as we pointed out earlier, just short of a decade later, the Jews living in Jerusalem rebelled. They declared their freedom and cast out the Babylonian occupiers. But their new found freedom did not last for long. The Babylonian army returned and this time they returned with a vengeance. Let me read a part of the account from 2 Kings: **Now Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon. So in the ninth year of Zedekiah’s reign, on the tenth day of the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army. He encamped outside the city and built siege works all around it... He set fire to the temple of the Lord, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down. The whole Babylonian army under the commander of the imperial guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem. Nebuzaradan, the commander of the guard carried into exile the people who remained in the city, along with the rest of the populace and those who had deserted to the king of Babylon. But the commander left behind some of the poorest people of the land to work the vineyards and fields. — 2 Kings 24:20, 25:1, 9-12**

That was the end of Jerusalem, and not just Jerusalem. It was the end of Judah. The Babylonians killed the crown princes and gouged out the King’s eyes, so that

the very last thing he saw was his sons' deaths. You talk about hopeless, his kingdom was gone, his sons were gone, his sight was gone, and now he and most of his people were being led into exile.

And it wasn't just hopeless for the King. All Jerusalem lost hope. Their city was burned. Their temple was destroyed. Their crown princes were dead. Their king was blinded and in chains. There was no hope, only exile in Babylon.

Which brings us to the question that many of you are no doubt asking, why should we care about what happened in Judah 2,500 years ago? It is important because this story shapes much of what happens in the Old Testament. The reason it shows up in 28 of the 39 books in the Old Testament is because every generation of Jews who came after that looked back at those events and saw themselves in the story. And not just the Jews. Nearly everyone who listens deeply to this story realizes that they too have been in exile at some point in their lives. All of us have found ourselves in hopeless situations where we asked, why isn't God helping now? We then read the words of hope that the Prophets brought to the people in exile and say, "Those words of hope are not just for them. They are for me, too."

Certainly many need a word of hope now. This pandemic with its deaths, lockdown, and economic hardships is hard. It is hard. But compared to what the Babylonians went through, this is nothing. The good news is that we will transition out of this thing. I fear it won't happen soon, but in time, there will be a vaccine, maybe even a cure. I don't know whether it will be months or years, but I do know that it will not take seventy years, like it did for the Jews.

So, if the words of hope the prophets spoke were of help to the people in exile in Babylon, they ought to be of help to us, too. So, let's see what they had to say. Let's look at a story or two from each of the prophets. Let's begin with Daniel. You remember Daniel. Daniel refused the order from King Darius to pray only to him and continued to pray to his God. When this was discovered, Daniel was brought before King Darius, who threatened him with the lions' den if he did not stop praying to his God. What did Daniel do? He refused to obey the king. He refused to deny his God. Sure enough, he was thrown into the lions' den. Do you recall what happened there? The lions lost their appetite. Why? Because God was with Daniel.

So, what is the message of hope in this story? It is a recognition that we all get tossed into the lions' den at some point. We will all face danger, fear, and threats. At times, our enemies may even seek to devour us. But, like Daniel, God will not abandon us in the lions' den.

Similarly, Daniel's friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to worship an idol. But instead of being thrown into a lions' den, they were tossed into a fiery furnace. Do you recall what happened there? As the king tossed them into the furnace, he noticed what looked like a fourth person in there with them.

First, I want you to note that God did not spare them from the furnace. They went through the furnace. But God did not leave them alone in the furnace. He was there with them. This serves as another reminder to every generation that the time may come when we are thrown into a fiery furnace, and it may look like there is no way out. But, if we remain faithful, we will find that God is with us, even in

the fiery furnace, and we will make it through. It is a message of hope in even the darkest times.

Ezekiel brings a similar message of hope. Recall the most famous passage in Ezekiel. You may have sung about it as a child. By this time, Ezekiel had been living in exile, trying to care for his people, for a very long time. Then one day, he had a vision. He was taken by God to a valley filled with dry, dusty bones, bones without a sign of life. God then asked him if he thought the bones could live again. To which Ezekiel replied, "Only you know, Lord." God then told Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, telling them to live again. And miraculously, the bones came together, and flesh grew on the bones. This army of people, people who died during the sacking of Jerusalem and in exile, rose and God breathed life back into them. What a message of hope to the lifeless Israelites living in exile. It was a reminder that, just as God breathed life into those dried up skeletons, he could breathe life into them again and take them back to the Promised Land. Of course, it was thirty three years before that actually happened. Still, the promise sustained them. It gave them hope and kept them going in exile. And it enabled them to get up, suit up, and go on even when they did not feel like going on. Ezekiel gave them the gift of hope. Because of that hope, they were able to trust that the future would be better than the present struggles they were going through.

Which brings us to Jeremiah and his most famous verse. You may have memorized it. Many have. That said, we often quote it without really understanding the context. Jeremiah was speaking to the exiles, reminding them that they were going to have to live in exile for a long time. Many of them would not return. It would be their children and their children's children who reclaimed the land. So he told them to make the best of it, to settle in the land and bless

those where they were living. However, he added, and this was a big however, that a day was coming when they would go home. Then comes this wonderful verse. Read it with me. It is on your screen: **“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” — Jeremiah 29:11.**

Too often, we read this verse and think it means that God is about to save us right now, today, but that is not what it says at all. This whole chapter reminds us that we may have to go through dark times for a while. For the Jews, it was thirty years. I really don't think it will be that long for us, but what God was saying was that in the end he, not Babylon, would have the final word. Similarly, this pandemic will not have the final word. Whatever trial you are going through will not have the final word. God will. God always has the final word.

Which brings us to the words of Isaiah. You might ask, why should we include Isaiah with the other three prophets? After all, Isaiah lived 125 years before the Babylonian exile. Still, if you read this book carefully, it becomes clear that the final chapters of Isaiah address the Babylonian exile. Scholars debate whether Isaiah was addressing events to come or whether these verses were added later by scholars from the school of Isaiah, but it really doesn't matter to us. What matters to us is that it speaks words of hope to the people in exile. They begin in chapter 40 where Isaiah writes, “Comfort ye my people,” says God. Then there is a promise that they will return to Zion. Then you get to the end of chapter 40 and you find these words of comfort, some of my favorite words in all the Bible: **Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and**

increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. — Isaiah 40:28-31

There you have it, that word Qavah again. You remember it is a Hebrew word that means both hope and wait. Isaiah is telling us that those who hope and wait on the Lord will receive a lifeline from the Lord. These words from the prophet are a lifeline. When things get hard, when we find ourselves at the end of our rope, cling to these words. They do not promise that we will not have to go through hard times, but they do promise that if we cling to God, he will renew our strength. When we feel like fainting, he will walk with us. When we run, he will provide us strength. And in the end, he will raise us up on eagle's wings and we will soar with him.

Which brings us back to where we began. The reminder that God does not leave us or forsake us, that God comes to us bringing hope. But he usually conveys that hope through people. He used the prophets to bring a word of hope to the people in exile. And he asks us, as his body to convey that hope to those around us too, both through our words and our actions.

What then is our memory verse for this week? You can probably guess. It is the words of hope from Isaiah 40:31, **Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.**

May you find hope this week as you memorize and carry that verse with you. And may you embody that hope for others.