

Hope in Difficult Times

First Presbyterian Church of Wilkes-Barre

November 12, 2023

The choice of topic for morning's message is a consequence of my own struggle to comprehend and live with the terrible things that are going on in our world today, in Ukraine, and especially in Israel and in Gaza.

Last week, the choir sang for their anthem a piece from Mendelssohn's Oratorio "Elijah." It was "Lord, Bow Thine Ear to our Prayer!" Perhaps you recall hearing it if you were here. It recalls a very difficult time in the life of Israel. There is a famine in the land. People are desperate. You hear the sopranos, in the foreground, singing "There is neither help nor comfort." Things are bad. I recall that when our choir first did this piece a few years ago, I was thinking to myself, "What a downer!" The problem was, I wasn't listening as I needed to. There in the background, behind the sopranos, was the rest of the choir, singing, "Lord, bow thine ear to our prayer." Yes, the reality of famine with no help in sight was in the foreground. In times when no answer appears on the horizon, one can only plea to God for help. Sitting there listening a week ago, I found it very moving. I was struck by how that music sung by our choir spoke to the situation that we see in our world today. So, when Reverend Zanicky emailed me to see if I could substitute for him today, this was what had been on my mind, and in my heart.

Now, there is an important difference between our situation now, here in the United States, and that of the people of Israel, and surrounding countries, in the time of King Ahab and the prophet Elijah. It was happening to them. We are sitting comfortably here in the United States, and the catastrophe is falling on people elsewhere. But God created mankind with a capacity for empathy. That's part of what is meant by our being made in the image of God, back in Genesis. We hear the news, we see images, and we cannot help but imagine ourselves in like circumstances. We can try to help, if there is some way to do that. We look for solutions. In the current crisis, we try to imagine some path toward reconciliation and true peace. Maybe someone has an answer. I certainly don't. Things seem as intractable and difficult as did the widespread famine in Elijah's day. Where is hope? That's what we, as Christians, need. We look to God. "Lord, bow thine ear to our prayer for hope, for a peaceful resolution, that your will will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

Our first scripture reading from I Kings, Chapter 17 which follows the beginning of the reign of King Ahab in Israel. He has just married a princess from a neighboring kingdom, Sidon. Her name is Jezebel. She is also a priestess of the Caananite god Baal. Jezebel moves into the Israelite capitol, the city of Samaria. She brings her pagan god Baal with her, sets up a temple there, and worships Baal with her new husband King Ahab. King Ahab allowed all of this to happen. And more. As the writer of I Kings puts it (in 16:23), **“Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the god of Israel, than had all of the kings of Israel who were before him.”** So, now, reading from I Kings Chapter 17:

17 Now Eli'jah the Tishbite, of Tishbe^[a] in Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.” ² **And the word of the Lord came to him,** ³ **“Depart from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, that is east of the Jordan.** ⁴ **You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.”** ⁵ **So he went and did according to the word of the Lord; he went and dwelt by the brook Cherith that is east of the Jordan.** ⁶ **And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the brook.** ⁷ **And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.** ⁸ **Then the word of the Lord came to him,** ⁹ **“Arise, go to Zar'ephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you.”**

What do you suppose happens to prophets who bring bad news to the king? That's right. It's a dangerous way to make a living. The pagan religious point of view coexisted in Israel alongside the Mosaic Law and belief in the God of Israel. The pagan idea was that the gods, representing things like the forces of nature, have to be compelled by incantations, or be bribed or cajoled, into doing their duties. In the case of Baal, a pagan god of fertility and rainfall, the priests of Baal were responsible for manipulating him in a manner to make it rain. The drought, and the consequent famine, was a direct challenge to the Israelites' worshiping and putting their trust in Baal. From Ahab's and Jezebel's pagan point of view, Elijah had

manipulated God to call down a famine on the land. The solution was, obviously, to kill Elijah.

Elijah at first flees to a hideout east of the Jordan River where he is fed by the ravens. But the creek there runs dry, and he is sent by God to be supported by a poor Caananite widow in Zarapheth. Remarkably, that's in the very country Jezebel comes from, Sidon! There, the widow is about to make a last meal with her son with the scant remaining food that she has, and then they will both die of hunger. Elijah has to see, firsthand, the results of this famine that he had the responsibility to announce. A miracle occurs. The food never runs out. Elijah, the widow, and her son are sustained. But all around them there is hunger and death.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus spoke of this to the people of Nazareth when he returned there early in his ministry. He told them, **“But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarepheth in Sidon.” (Luke 4:24)**

Through Elijah, that one widow and her son were saved. Similarly, through Jesus, during his earthly ministry, many were healed of illness, demon possession, and blindness and saved as a sign of God's presence and power. Jesus's calling was not only to heal everyone, as He explained to the skeptical people of his home town of Nazareth. Rather, the healing was a sign of God's presence, of his love and caring, and of Jesus as the Messiah.

In Elijah's time, God was trying to turn His people away from pagan idols. It was the Lord, not Baal, who had the power to send or withhold rain. There on Mount Carmel, Elijah called upon God, to show the people that he is God, and that he is in control. The Lord answers with fire sent from heaven, leaving no doubt who is god. Then clouds arise, and rain returns to the land.

About another 270 years after that, the prophet Habakkuk, in the surviving southern Kingdom of Judah, saw trouble coming. It was the Chaldeans. The Chaldeans were a warlike, violent, desert people. They had gained control of the civilized country of Babylon, then put an end to the Assyrian empire. Now they were poised to visit destruction on the rest of the world, including Jerusalem and the Kingdom of Judah, the remnant of the Children of Israel. Habakkuk pleads to God,

**Habakkuk 1: ² O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and thou wilt not hear?
Or cry to thee “Violence!” and thou wilt not save?**

³ Why dost thou make me see wrongs and look upon trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.

God answered Habakkuk’s prayer. From Chapter 2, we read:

² And the Lord answered me:

“Write the vision;

**make it plain upon tablets,
so he may run who reads it.**

³ For still the vision awaits its time;

it hastens to the end—it will not lie.

If it seem slow, wait for it;

it will surely come, it will not delay.

⁴ Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail,^[a]

but the righteous shall live by his faith.^[b]

This wasn’t the answer Habakkuk was looking for. Bad things are about to happen. Despite the centuries of prophets like Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah calling for repentance and the putting away of pagan ways, people did not listen. The destruction of Jerusalem was coming. That happened in 586 B.C. Most of those people of Judea who were not killed or had fled were carried off as slaves into the Exile, to Babylon. It looked like the end of history, the end of the Israelite people.

But something happened in Babylon. Something amazing. God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses and David: he was there in Babylon too! Exekiel, one of the exiles, was called to prophesy, and taught a message of hope and future redemption. Surviving priests and scribes collected together the Holy writings they had preserved. It is from that time that we have the collected and edited books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy, preserved in much the form we have them today. We have the acts of Elijah and Elisha and many others of the prophets, compiled by the followers of a now reformed religion. They now rejected the pagan idea of local, limited, gods. Instead, theirs was a single, all powerful, God. A god who cared for them, and sought the good. This transformation that could not be accomplished in the Kingdom of Israel, but was

finally completed in the crucible of the exile and the return of the exiles to Jerusalem. This religion, from this point forward, would be referred to as Judaism. No longer would these, God's people, chase after pagan idols.

The prophet Isaiah of the Exile, likely writing in Babylon, was also able to foresee a new relationship between God and mankind that was coming, along with an end of exile, and a rebirth of God's people. This is what we find in Isaiah 55, a message consistent with those earlier prophets, and others yet to come:

⁶“Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;

⁷ let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts;

let him return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on him,

and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Isaiah understands that a vast gulf separates our understanding from what God may be doing. In hindsight, sometimes we can see. The events of Elijah's time, and the later destruction of Jerusalem and exile, are interpreted many years later as having brought about an improved relationship between God and his people. Isaiah even foresees the family of God's children not being limited to descendants of Abraham, but other too. Including we who sit here today. In Jesus, we have the fulfilment of that prophesy, a development astounding in the effect it has had on human history, and our relationship to God.

So, we look at the world, and the terrible things that are happening. We tend to focus on the bad, and empathize with those who are suffering. But, also consider all of the good that has happened in the last few centuries, despite the devastating wars, the terrible dictatorships, and the corruption of institutions. I'll mention a few.

The United States of America came into being. Even if falling short of our lofty ideals, The United States has been a light to the world, in government, in innovation, in the ministry of missionaries, and other forms of help for others, and in supporting other countries dedicated to democracy and freedom. In the last mere century and a half, electricity as a public utility came into being. Can you imagine living without it? And consequent benefits like pumped water, air conditioning and refrigeration, telephones, radios, and so forth. Agriculture has been revolutionized

to the point where the modern world produces enough food for everybody. So much so, that farmers in this country are sometimes paid not to grow food. Western countries can afford to be so generous with welfare, support, and opportunity, that people from the rest of the world are trying to go to such countries, including ours, in numbers beyond imagination. How much better than being a place where everyone wants to escape!

There is reason for hope. In the time of Isaiah of Jerusalem, long before the exile, Isaiah told a discouraged King Asa, who was besieged by the armies of Israel and Syria, this:

¹⁰ Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, ¹¹ “Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” ¹² But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.” ¹³ And he said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman^[a] shall conceive and bear^[b] a son, and shall call his name Imman’u-el.^[c]¹⁵ He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶ For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

The sign of God’s continuing presence and salvation is just this: a child. We have that sign among us today as well. Children are being born, and being raised, by good parents, learning how to refuse the evil and choose the good. I see them every week as I teach my class over at Wilkes University. Yes, these in my class are young adults by now, no longer children, but they are the promise of our future. I can tell you this: They are smart, eager to learn, cooperative, helpful to each other, hard-working, and above all, nice. I see in them hope for our future as a community, and as a country, and for the sake of the world.

As Christmas approaches, we remember that Jesus was once such a child, born into a broken world to a people oppressed by the Romans. It was a world which, to the Jewish people and the early Christians, didn’t seem to be fixable. But they lived by faith in God. In the fulness of time, things got better, both physically, and in the relationship of God to his children. May it continue to be so in our day as well. Have faith. Our hope is in the Lord.

Amen.