

Sing, barren woman

Reading the prophets from Israel's most volatile and tragic period of history uncomfortably reminds me



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of our tumultuous world. No, I am not suggesting the United States is some kind of modern "chosen people," but that widespread violence in the name of God, the epidemic evidence of immorality, the epic spread of ethnic hatred and the decline of Christianity produces the kind of fear and anger appearing in our headlines and political campaigns. Our world resembles the eighth century BC when Judah and Israel were on the brink of collapse and exile.

I recently taught a portion of Hosea. He was from the northern kingdom, whose life parallels Isaiah in the southern kingdom. Hosea 1:1-10 uses the metaphor of the marriage of a wife who is a common whore (God's people prostituting themselves to pagan religions) and children born of that wife and named for the judgment of God. Isaiah uses the image of a "barren woman who has born no child," followed by the dramatic contrast of God's blessings with "break forth into singing and cry out, you who were never in labor, for the children of the wife who has been deserted will be more numerous than the children of the married, says the Lord" (Isaiah 1:1).

The first 39 chapters of Isaiah are dark warnings of God's punishment for a people who cast his love and blessings aside, but chapter 40 begins a theme of hope, a reminder that God loves his people and will take them back if they will turn to him. The focus of today's text is the faithfulness of God. The same Isaiah who has condemned a sinful people now says there can be a day when they "sing" again, when they will know the joy of God's love and

forgiveness.

As Christians we profess to believe that God can transform any life through faith. But if we are honest, we have trouble believing some people can ever be forgiven for their horrific deeds. We forget that God loves us not because we are lovable or good, but because he loves us! Grace does not judge, it transforms. Satan does not have the ability to overcome God in anything. Evil only succeeds with one agreement, our selfishness, fear and greed.

Could the children called Israel believe this idea of salvation, this return to all of God's promises? No, not as long as they saw themselves without hope in a world that could never be just or good! Make no mistake, it is never easy to be positive or optimistic when it seems that evil is triumphant. This is why Jesus came into our world as one of us.

Verses 9-10 assures an Israel snared in the ugliness of their world that God will never forsake them, but their world is much like the days of Noah (Genesis 6-8). After the flood, God promised that he would not repeat that punishment again. Listen to Isaiah's description of God's love for his people: "The mountains may shift, the hills may be shaken, but my faithful love won't shift from you, and my covenant of peace won't be shaken, says the Lord, the one who pities you" (v. 10). Our hope is not in a written document, not built upon philosophy, but firmly centered on the character of the Lord who is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of life.

Some of Isaiah's words make you smile, as in verses 2-3 he says, "You may be like a deserted wife today, but the time is coming when you will be blessed with so many children they would burst the seams of your tent, swing on the ropes, and play as far as the eye can see!" (Olmsted paraphrase). God also indicates he

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Scripture: Isaiah 54:1-10

is not changing who he is... "the one marrying you (forgiving and restoring you) is the one who made you — the Lord of heavenly forces is his name... the holy one of Israel... God of all the earth" (v. 5). This image of a compassionate God is not new, appearing repeatedly in Israel's history. Exodus 34:6 describes God as "merciful, very patient, full of great loyalty and faithfulness."

A reading of Isaiah, or any of the prophets, does not present the faulty thinking that God is a soft-hearted old man who always forgives and is a pushover. The consequences of sin are devastating, often leaving terrible scars even when we discover God's healing grace and a new beginning. Thank God for the gift of the Bible that does not wallow in sentimentality or spiritual excuses for our choices. Although much of the prophet's images are spoken in the words of a patriarchal society, the understanding of God's grace confounds every cultural standard of our world.

Move beyond the limited idea that this situation is different because Israel was "God's chosen people." There is one unbroken thread of grace that weaves its way through every book of the Bible. That grace promises hope and help wherever we are in life. God's love is not a corporate policy. Faith is only real as a personal relationship with God, the understanding that God loves you fully in Christ and your life can only be complete as you love him. You are invited by God through his prophet Isaiah to "sing with the barren woman" who has a bright future in the promise of God.

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.