

The Lord's Mountain

Considering the span of biblical writings over the history of our world, it is amazing to watch God's love



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and grace remain unchanged in spite of humanity's embrace of selfishness and pride. Hope is never impossible when God is involved. Today we study the words of two different prophets who point to the Lord's mountain. Because of varied textual clues the "book" of Isaiah is probably a compilation of three different Isaiah's. The first section (chapters 1-39) is thought to be the work of Isaiah son of Amoz, who resided in Jerusalem in the 700's BC and had access to the royal court. Zechariah prophesied 200 years later, was from a priestly family, and wrote during the time of exile under Persian rule. Both periods were marked by spiritual and moral decline, a deep sense of despair and the fear that God had turned away from his people.

Isaiah focuses on a pattern of God's judgment because of Israel's sin and the hope of redemption in the future. Even though the people have walked away from God, Isaiah calls them back to Mount Zion, the symbolic name for the hill on which Solomon built the great temple. Jerusalem is the "holy city of God," "the highest of the mountains" where they will find, not God's judgment but God's teachings. When that glorious day comes, not only will the Jews come back to God, but "all the nations shall stream ... to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."

Isaiah does not paint a picture of Israel as the ruler of the world or privileged over all other peoples, but as a people who exemplify God's teachings and open their hearts to a world lost without God's grace. God will judge and all who choose to follow him will "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Is. 2:4).

The newscasts I heard today were

filled with hate, threats, belittling words against political opponents and nations, with not a trace of charity or hint of resolution. In spite of our scientific advances, cyber communications, and nuclear weapons that are capable of destroying this world, the only true hope is found in the God who created our race and sent his Son to save us from ourselves. Isaiah's prophecy is a stark contrast to a rush for all citizens to carry a gun to the grocery store and church. Instead of "not learning war any more" we seem determined to believe that those with the biggest bombs will control our destiny!

Two centuries later, Zechariah, during the exile from the "promised land," points to the same hope as Isaiah. Like his predecessor, Zechariah frames God's blessings to include all the world: "Thus says the LORD ... many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favor of the LORD" (Zech. 8:20-22). The cry was not "Jerusalem First!" The call was "God First," the hope of all the world, the way to a new life. The prophet goes on to imagine the rest of the world "grasping at the garments of God's people and begging, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you'" (Zech. 8:23).

Be careful how you read this text. The desperate longing of the world was not for access to the temple in Jerusalem, but for the healing hope of God. Citizenship in the United States is a wonderful gift, but we do not own or control God's grace. We simply have the privilege of sharing Christ with the world as did Isaiah and Zechariah. The core of our witness is God's love and grace.

Reading Israel's ancient prophets is a dangerous exercise for two reasons. You discover how self-serving we have become in this broken and hostile world, and you realize that our calling is not to rule the world but to share God's love and grace in spite of the constant challenge of evil. An article in the recent *Atlantic Monthly*, written by a secular investigative journalist, explores how politics and the religious right have blended in the twisted politics of our day. The "religious right" of the seventies has joined forces with

Formations

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Scripture: Isaiah 2:2-4;

Zechariah 8:20-23

the far-right political organizations to produce a political powerhouse to supposedly bring America back to greatness.

How do we explain preachers and denominational leaders who back candidates that claim to be serving God while living immorally and ignoring even the most basic teaching of Jesus? When asked how politicians can support immoral and self-aggrandizing politicians I am told, "You have to focus on the greater good. They may be morally flawed but they support God's will in government!" The Apostle James addresses this issue clearly: "But someone may well say, 'You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works'" (James 2:18). Faith and works are inseparable. Empty words can never hide evil in the heart. One of the greatest barriers to the message of God's love is the failure of Christians to live as the people who have knelt at the cross of Jesus and never forget what God has done for us.

Through the years some people have told me the Old Testament has nothing to say to our day. Oh, really? What happened to an Israel that came into existence because God chose to love them and repeatedly brought them back when they rebelled and wasted his gifts? Isaiah and Zechariah understood the danger God's people faced, the loss of hope from a human perspective. Yet both prophets, over a period of several hundred years, saw hope. How could this be? God is the answer, not religious slogans or political organizations, not threats and armies. The hope of Israel ... the hope of the world ... the hope of our day ... is the grace of God who came into our world as Jesus Christ and continues to invite us to trust God and live as God's people. The words of the ancient prophets still invite us to come to "the Lord's mountain," where there is hope.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.