

Hope: God himself comes to solve the problem

A sermon for Lent 5.

We turn again to Luther's favorite Old Testament book, the remarkable book called Isaiah. Today we look at what it says about hope. What is the hope that those people had?

In order to see the hope we need to remember the setting. It goes back to the very beginning. We remember there was even a covenant with Adam and Eve; it says in Genesis 3:15 that the seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head. That is a covenant, and then there was the covenant with Noah, the covenant that there would never again be such a flood. The rainbow is the sign.

But we also talk about the covenant with Abraham, which is in Genesis 12 and following. It had three parts: 1) The promise there would be land, 2) The promise that he would be the father of many nations, and most importantly, 3) The promise that in him would all the nations of the earth be blessed.

That covenant continued to Isaac and Jacob and then came the second covenant. Although it is the same one but with Moses: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt out of the house of slavery...." And therefore this is the way you are to act. It is a **two-sided covenant**. They were led out of Egypt where they had been in slavery and brought to a land of promise. But that did not work out as easily as you might have thought. There were about 400 years and 15 to 17 judges. There was a cycle in which they repeatedly fell into idolatry and then repented. Then the Lord would send another judge to bring them out of idolatry and slavery, and so on.

The Lord ruled over them until they said they wanted a king. They had Saul, David, and Solomon and a kingdom. They had a land, but immediately upon Solomon's death it split in two—ten tribes and two tribes. For the 300 years or so there was that split, but most seriously of all, after playing the game of nation against nation, in 721 the ten tribes disappear. The Assyrians destroyed Jerusalem; they stripped the temple and the palace, and only two tribes remained.

But even they do not remain long because in 587 the Babylonians take what is left and destroy the city and the temple. In 538/39 Cyrus allows some of them to return. It is a motley crew. They were not many and not much. In fact they were so disheartened that somebody named Nehemiah had, in a sense, to force them to build some walls. They needed protection. And they built a very minor temple. Ezra, who was the lawgiver at the time, asked: What has happened to God's promises? Here we have not much of a land, just a little corner, and we are not much of a great nation. Where is the blessing? Has God changed His mind, or have we failed? Has God failed?

The problem is idolatry. So they make sure from then on and in every way they will abstain from any possible taint of idolatry. But had they misunderstood the covenant the Lord kept with them through all these judges and kings. Would he drop them now? Or has the Lord changed His mind?

We remember that it is in Exodus 32, when they built a golden calf, that the Lord said to Moses: I'm going to do away with these people. I'm going to start over with you. And Moses pleads with him: Please do not do that. Astonishingly, it says the Lord repented (Ex 32:14). Then the Lord continues with his people Israel, and he continues with them for the rest of their career.

This is very similar to what Paul does in Romans 9-11, where he asks: What has happened to these people? Has the Lord given up on them? No. He struggles with them, and we do not have time today to go through Romans 9-11, but it is that same problem. No, the Lord has not changed His mind. **Where is the hope?** Where is the fulfillment of this great promise to Abraham and all his followers?

In order to understand how this works we have to talk about the difference in the Old Testament, and particularly in Isaiah, between **prophesy** and **apocalyptic**.

Prophesy is the proclamation that God continues to work in his covenant and will finally bring about his promises. This is in contrast to the religions of the day, and for that matter of our day, which were and are all built on human calculation and on the cycle of things. Prophesy is a different kind of thing. The Lord is working in history and mainly then as the promise goes, in the Anointed One, whom we call the Messiah, this anointed king, and he would be David's successor.

How did that work out? Not very well. Where was David's successor now? Here they were in this little bit of a rebuilt walled city of Jerusalem and a visible temple. Then in Isaiah 11:1 and 11:10 we have the image that the Lord will continue because there is the root and there is the stump; there is the remnant. And even though the plant or the tree is gone, nevertheless the Lord is still working, so to speak, underground, and **he will continue to bring about his Sabbath**.

Along with the image of the root is the famous image of being the center of the world. They actually talk about themselves as being the navel, as did the Romans later. Elsewhere the Chinese have always said they are the center of the earth, and all of their maps show everything going out from China.

Therefore in the Old Testament and particularly in Isaiah, we see that the center of the world is Jerusalem and particularly in the temple where the Lord is present. What is promised, what they look for, is that at the end everything will return to Jerusalem, everything will flow towards Jerusalem.

And this is seen particularly in Isaiah 60. Three things to note. First, Isaiah 60:3: "And nations shall come to your light," meaning where the temple is. 60:4: "They all gather together, they come to you..." 60:6: "A multitude of camels shall cover you.... They shall bring gold and frankincense, and proclaim the praise of the Lord." This echoes in our minds from Matthew 2:1-12. There are the wise men who bring gold and frankincense (myrrh is not mentioned in Isaiah), and in both texts there are camels and the life and riches that camel caravans bring. Isaiah 60 is then a foreshadowing and reflection of Matthew 2. Everything is coming to Jerusalem. That is also understood in other passages here, where all the nations shall flow to it (Matt 2:2), to the mountain of the house of the Lord, which is the highest of the mountains. They knew it was not the highest, but it is the highest in the sense that this is how it is going to be at the end. That is the first way in which we have to understand their hope.

The second way is the hope that is called **apocalyptic**. There is a vast discussion about what apocalyptic is. It is, of course, a particular kind of literature. You find it in the book of Revelation and Mark 13, but before that in the second half of Daniel and the second half of Zachariah. There is a whole group of books like the book of Revelation, for example, the book of Jubilees. They all sound the same. There are certain kinds of words used, a certain lingo. But it is not only a kind of literature, it is a mood, a kind of thinking. It is a mood where people have come to the end of their rope, where they ask: Where is the Lord? Then they come to understand that the Lord is not working only in history as a kind of immanent God, but he is also transcendent and in control of history.

Therefore, although the Day of the Lord is mentioned already in Amos and is not something unique to apocalyptic, “the Day” is much more emphasized in apocalyptic. And also the Lordship of the Lord, how the Lord is in control of things. The Lord is the “can do” Lord, the Lord who can do anything and everything. We are reminded again of the astonishing statement in Isaiah 45:6 and 7: “That men may know from the rising of the sun and from the west that there is none beside me; I am the Lord and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe. I am the Lord who do all these things.”

That is astounding: “I make good and evil.” Earlier in Isaiah, the Lord is the one behind the tyrant Cyrus. Isaiah 45:1: “Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus.” This is also in 10:5, where the Lord says of Assyria: “Assyria is the rod of my anger.” All of this is an incredibly different way of thinking about how the Lord is working. **He is working not only in the history of Israel, but he is working much more broadly as the “can do” Lord.** Finally, there is the Day of the Lord, which is the day the Lord rings down the curtain, judgment, and he is in control his way.

Third, hope is about **newness**. It is not only that there is a difference between apocalyptic and prophesy, but there are two kinds of newness. There is the newness that is the restoration of what was before. What was is made new again, so the beginning is like the end. But there is also newness that is something different. The first kind of newness that they were looking for is this, that the end is like the beginning. And that is where we have a whole series of passages like Isaiah 11:6: “The wolf shall lay down with the lamb, and the leopard shall lay down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child should lead them.” The same is found in similar images in Isaiah 35 and 65. The end will be like the beginning. What is significant here is that all the enemies are destroyed. Babylon is destroyed; Assyria is destroyed, and so forth. All of the enemies are destroyed. That is newness as restoring what was. **What was is made new again.**

But then there is the different kind of newness. That comes out in an astonishing way when Isaiah talks about what is new. What is new, of course, is **the Lord is doing a new thing**. This newness is very different because the enemies are not destroyed. All things are restored in God’s final Sabbath.

In Isaiah there is a universal way of talking about God’s hope and salvation. We find it in 66:23: “All flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord.” Or in 60:4: “They [all the nations] all gather together, they come to you.” And also in 2:2: “...the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established....and all the nations shall flow to it.” That is the universal way in which this new hope, and the new heaven, and the new earth are brought about.

What about the hope for what we call life? It is very important to see how that is not as clear in the Old Testament. For example, in Ezekiel 37 the dry bones are the people of Israel as a nation. It is not talking about the individual, and it is not the same thing as what we mean by resurrection.

We also have the same difficulty in Psalm 116: 8-9, where it is not talking about resurrection; it says: “For thou has delivered my soul from death.... I walk before the Lord in the land of the living.” Also in Psalm 16:10: “For thou does not give me up to Sheol, or let thy godly one see the Pit.” They understood that the continuity and life of the people was in the tribe and not in the individual. When you died, you went into the grave. The Pit, the grave, and Sheol all mean the same thing.

Even in Psalm 139 it really it does not talk about resurrection. It simply talks about the Lord’s presence everywhere. In 139:7-9: “Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If

I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!" If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the outermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me." None of this is what we call resurrection.

Therefore what is astounding in Isaiah is the statement in 25:8: "He will swallow up death forever." And then in 26:19: "Thy dead shall live, their bodies shall rise." This reminds us, of course, of the 11th chapter of John about Lazarus dying, and what did Martha say? John 11:24: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Her response is no more than what was already here in Isaiah. In another way we see it in the book of Daniel 12:2: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." Which is precisely what we find at the end of the parable in Matthew 25:46: "And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." All of these things are **a foreshadowing and an opening up**, but not the hope such as we have it today.

What is it that that hope does not have? First, it does not have the surprising newness, the newness that is different. **That God himself comes.** Second, God himself comes and **he handles this by dying on the cross and rising again.** And third, there is **life individually as resurrected children of God.** It is not only in John 11 where it says: "I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me shall not die but shall live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." There is also that significant place by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:17: "If any one is in Christ, he is a new creature." Unfortunately the translation says "new creation," but the Greek text says "**new creature.**" And the Lord gives us **new hope**, not only some big, wide, universal hope. That is fine. But also a hope that is specific for you and me and in him forever. Amen.