

Isaiah 35:1-10 Pastor Bill Uetrict 3 Advent 12/11/16

We do who do Biblical work, perhaps even preach on it, pay attention not only to the text, the words and the meaning of the words, but also to the context—what surrounds the text, what comes before it and what comes after it and, also, what was going on when it was written—the historical context. Context is so essential. By the way, that is true for the communication and work you are involved in as well. You don't just want to listen to the words that someone speaks. You want to pay attention to what's going on when they say the words, how they say them, what surrounds what they say, what they are experiencing when they say them.

But that really is somewhat tangential for what I am considering today. Today I find myself reflecting on the context of this marvelous vision of hope that we get in our first reading for today from Isaiah, or what some might say is the lack of context for it. Like the vision of hope we had from Isaiah last week, this beautiful poetry seems to lack a context. It is hard for us to discern when it was written.

The immediate context of this beautiful poetry is a previous chapter that describes the judgment of the nations. It's brutal reading. It contains words like these, very Christmasy words: "The Lord has a sword; it is sated with blood, it is gorged with fat, with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams." And if that doesn't fit on your Christmas cards, how about this: "For the Lord is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their hordes; he has given them over for slaughter." And if that is not enough, how about this, reflecting that Isaiah's judgment includes even nature: "The streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch (black), her soil into sulfur, her land shall become burning black."

Isaiah's judgment of the nations is ruthless. And then, as if it fell from the sky, the poetry of hope plops onto the scene. All of a sudden, everything is changed: "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom. The glory of Lebanon (a rich, lush

place) will be given to it.” Quickly and without preparation, the judgment gives way to hope. And creation itself participates in the hope. The narrative of despair is interrupted. Here we have it—a word that couldn’t wait until it might have made more sense. In the midst of total destruction, one doesn’t anticipate hearing about total redemption, life as it ought to be.

But that is the way hope works sometimes. All of a sudden, when the darkness seems to be particularly dark, when all the data suggests that despair is the right response, hope plops into our laps, urging us not simply to look at the data. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says, “Israel’s doxologies (i.e., statements of praise) are characteristically against the data.” The data of your life, our life together, often suggests throwing in the towel. It all seems overwhelming sometimes. But hope shows up the scene, sometimes out of place, sometimes in the midst of cancer, sometimes in the midst of a divorce, sometimes in the midst of a family life that seems out of control, sometimes in the midst of frightening cultural changes.

The context would suggest that hope doesn’t belong here. It doesn’t belong in the place where death seems to have the upper hand, where brokenness and alienation seem to be running the show, where absurdity, craziness, self-centeredness, meanness are the air that we breathe. But hope comes, nonetheless, like a word out of season, like bright, warm sunshine in the midst of the coldest, darkest winter day. All of a sudden, the desert rejoices and blossoms. The burning sand becomes like a pool. The thirsty ground springs up water. The haunt (the home) of jackals becomes a swamp. Desert grass becomes like reeds and rushes. Hope bursts onto the scene.

Who would have expected that in Isaiah’s telling of the story? The immediate context in his book would not have prepared us for the poetry of hope. The historical context would not have prepared us for it either, although I must admit that I am not sure what the historical context is. Admittedly, it could indeed be one of the darkest times in Israel’s history, the time when the Judah was overtaken by the

Babylonians, when some of Israel's brightest and best were sent off into exile. This poetry of hope seems to be speaking to exiles who are said to be coming back home on a safe highway that is prepared for them.

That could be the historical context. The exiles could be the ones having hope plopped onto their laps. But all the text tells us is that those being addressed are the ones with weak hands, the ones with feeble knees, those with fearful hearts (literally, those with "racing hearts"). The ones being addressed are those who feel like they can't go on, those who are overtaken by anxiety. Maybe this poetry of hope is meant not just for Israel's exiles, but for all those who seem dominated by anxiety, all those whose bodies are wired either for fight or for flight. Maybe the poetry of hope from Isaiah that seems to plop onto the scene without being expected is designed for all of us who are convinced that the data that leads to despair is the data that is worth trusting. Barbara Lundblad says, "We know the data all too well, and [truthfully] we long for a word out of place." Here is that word. Isaiah puts it this way: "Here is your God," a God who makes things right. Here is a word out of context that brings surprising hope.

And that word will take on flesh at Christmas. That word will become a little baby, born out of place—born to no-named parents, in a cattle stall. And trust me. This baby will plop onto the scene in the midst of a lot of drama, a lot of activity that will try to suck the life out of life, a lot of political and social theater that will reveal alienation, craziness, and paranoia. Luke will situate this birth story in a Roman world, where big bossy leaders seem to get to establish the data. Matthew will tell us of a particular bossy guy, Herod. This paranoid, large-and-in-charge figure will try to snuff the baby out. The hope that will come at Christmas will seem not to fit the context, feel like a word out of place, light shining in the darkness.

Folks, we cling to a word of hope—a word that comes sometimes without our expecting it. This word brings a great reversal. The judgment of God gives way to the salvation, the glory of God. Dry land

becomes arid land. Deserts bloom. The blind can see. The deaf can hear. The lame leap like a deer. The speechless sing for joy. Or as Barbara Lundblad so marvelously puts this segment of Isaiah: “the blind woman and her dog process with the choir; the deaf man who sees what we often miss paints the text on the sanctuary walls; the veteran in the wheelchair breaks the bread of life, the homeless man who cannot speak signs the hymns for everyone to see.” This word of hope, that comes out of place, that doesn’t seem to flow naturally in light of the context, brings a great reversal. Despair leads to joy—joy for all of creation and joy especially for those who are often left out of the joy of creation.

We who get that, we who live trusting the hope that unexpectedly bursts onto the scene will, Patricia Tull says, “become the reversal we wish to see.” I like to put it this way: we will live into that reversal. We who are surprised by the hope for all people and all things that shows up in our lives will live in a such a way that embraces the people for whom the great reversal brings joy: the left out, the disabled, the poor, the forgotten, the frail elderly, the homeless veterans, the odd, the disenfranchised, the imprisoned, the despairing. And what’s more, we will live in such a way that brings blessing to the ground we walk upon, the air that we breathe, the farmland from which we receive food, the rivers and lakes that we swim in. To be good caretakers of the hope that is our gift is to live in way that embraces the reversal that the hope brings.

And we will do this whether it is popular or not, whether it fits the context or not. I read this past week of Sojourner Truth, an anti-slavery activist, who after she had given an anti-slavery talk in Ohio was approached by a man who said to her: “Old woman, do you think that your talk about slavery does any good? Do you suppose people care what you say? [Or as I would put it: do you think people care about the great reversal that you are talking about?] Why, I don’t care any more for your talk that I do for the bite of a flea!”

Sojourner responded: “Perhaps not, but the Lord willing, I’ll keep you scratching!” Marian Endelman, founder of the Children’s Defense Fund says, “We must be determined and persistent fleas!”

The poetry of hope that comes into our lives unexpected, like a word out of season, surprising in light of the context, is poetry that frees us to live unexpected lives—lives of hope, lives of inclusion, lives of great stewardship, lives of persistence and determination.

Wow, this is some reversal! Maybe even the fleas, and perhaps this is going too far, are a part of the great reversal! Maybe they, too, are included in the good news of God for everything and everybody.