

“Hold Out for Hope”
October 14, 2023
Scripture: Isaiah 25:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

I can't help this week from reading these passages through the lens of what's happening in Israel and Gaza. I've been heartbroken to see the images of atrocities committed by Hamas against families and elderly people and children in Israel and the images of absolute devastation raining down on the Palestinian population in Gaza in response. I know many of you have seen the images, too, so you know how sickening it all is. President Biden called the terrorist attack on the 7th an act of sheer evil, which is true. Part of me wants to contextualize it, but honestly I just can't. There is no justification for what was done.

Yet, that doesn't negate the reality that the Palestinian people have lived under the shadow of oppression for generations. Six years ago when I visited Israel our group had a chance to meet a number of folks who are working hard to create an environment for dialogue and reconciliation. We spent an evening with folks in Bethlehem, in the West Bank, to learn what their circumstances are like. The tension was palpable. There is no doubt that life for Palestinians in Israel is harsh and unforgiving. And resentment has been building over time, anger and hostility have burrowed deep in the soul of the people. And until that reality is changed, until some resolution is found for their grievances, more atrocities will be committed. The cycle of violence will not end.

It feels like a hopeless situation. That's what resonates with me about this passage from Isaiah. This chapter is part of a section, chapters 24 through 27, that seems to be a later addition, an insertion, into the body of the writing. It represents a shift in focus that's abrupt and suddenly very non-specific. We don't know, for instance, what city has fallen into ruin. Is it the capital of Assyria or Babylon? Is it Jerusalem? Or is it some other foreign city that nobody's heard of? And what ruthless nations have attacked Israel? It's all very mysterious, very cryptic. But it speaks to a time when everything seemed lost.

Just prior to this, in chapter 24, the prophet's words begin: “Now the Lord is about to lay waste the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants.” What follows is a word of judgement for the whole earth, no distinctions between peoples, everyone is at fault and everyone will pay the price. “Terror, and the pit, and the snare,” we're told, “are upon you, O inhabitant of the earth!” And there's no escaping it. So, we find the writer plunging into despair. Whoever it is, is trying desperately to square some horrible reality with the God of Israel who's known to be merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. How can that kind of a god bring such horrible judgment on the earth?

I think much of scripture is a recognition that actual circumstances seldom align with the ideal. We fall into hopelessness when the reality around us careens out of control and one horrible thing is followed by more horror and we can't pull ourselves out of that downward spiral. The horror of 9/11, for instance, led us into a 20 year war in Afghanistan and Iraq that led to the rise of Isis and the atrocities committed by them, and now Afghanistan is practically back where it was 20 years ago, as if nothing was accomplished at all. I know that's over-simplifying

some very complex dynamics, but violence only leads to more violence and doesn't solve anything; it certainly doesn't instill hope.

Hope comes from somewhere else. In Isaiah's understanding hope comes by God breaking into the reality of despair and creating a space where everyone is welcomed and fed. "The Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines...and will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations...will swallow up death forever." What's offered is a vision of peace and provision, of an end to violence and the death it brings. When things seem hopeless, God holds out for hope.

You might think: "Ok, God can do that. But what about us?" Can we hold out for hope? And what does that look like? Like I said, I've been reading these passages through the lens of what's happening in the world right now, and I find Jesus' parable helpful. In a lot of ways this parable is disturbing. He depicts the Kingdom of heaven like a king who invites people to a banquet but when they refuse the king destroys them. Are we supposed to imagine that the king is God in this story? If we do then we're left with a God who's more concerned with obedience than compassion. And that doesn't sound like the God Jesus talks about and embodies. So maybe the king is just a king, driven by irrational emotions that make him lash out when he feels slighted. Does the violence do any good? Does it satisfy his desire to hold a party? No. What does is doing something completely unexpected, something radical. Going out and bringing in everyone he can find, good and bad alike, is what brings satisfaction. And all they're expected to do is accept. That's all anyone has to do to be part of God's feast.

The cycle of violence can only be stopped by accepting the invitation and sitting down to the feast God offers. But we do have to mean it. There's that last detail in the story of someone at the party who isn't really convinced, who hasn't truly accepted the invitation. And when they're confronted they have nothing to offer in response. They've given up on hope. The only thing left to them is outer darkness. As Robert Capon says in commenting on this story, "Hell is simply the nowhere that is the only thing left for those who will not accept their acceptance by grace." If we hold onto our desire for retribution when we're attacked, if we give up on any hope for reconciliation and healing, then all we're left with is hell.

This past week I've attended a rally at the JCC supporting Israel, an Abraham Walk from here at North to Masjid Al Noor, the mosque on Heim Road, and a Shabbat service at Congregation Shir Shalom. At each place words of concern and heartbreak and sadness were expressed over the attack in Israel and the bombings in Gaza. The Jewish, Muslim and Christian voices I've heard are united in their sorrow. But no one is giving up on hope. It is amazing to me that a community as diverse as ours can be united in its desire to reach out to one another and support one another through this time of uncertainty and fear. It would be so easy to descend into anger and retribution and accusations. It's always easier to give up on hope and allow ourselves to spiral down into chaos. But the God each of our traditions claims as our guide offers us something more. Our God, the God of Isaiah and Matthew, the God of Moses, Jesus and Mohammad, provides a vision of hope. Our God offers a feast for all peoples, a place where everyone is welcome and no one is turned away. But it's up to us to accept it.

It's up to us to move past our feelings of anger and hatred and fear so we can join God at the table, so we can enter the banquet. There will always be people in this world who want to douse the light of hope. There will always be forces of evil luring us into violence. Violence does not solve our differences or redeem our losses. No amount of violent retaliation can bring back those who are lost or satisfy our need for justice. All it does is drive us further down into hell. Our faith offers us something more. Our faith offers us hope, if we're willing to accept it. We do that best, I think, by reaching out to those around us who are the most immediately affected by the turmoil and offering them support. We may not agree politically with them, but we can acknowledge the reality of their loss and let them know they're loved. I'm deeply torn over the politics in Israel and Palestine; I have many Jewish friends and some Palestinian Muslim and Christian friends, and I may not agree with all their views, but I know they're in pain. For similar relationships in your lives, I encourage you to help them find their way to the table of God's feast. Wipe away their tears and help them hold out for hope.

Right now, that may be all we can offer. But that's much better, I think, than indulging hatred or justifying violence. One of the readings for this week that we didn't use comes from Philippians. Paul is writing to a community that is under constant threat from a hostile society that has actually imprisoned him for what he teaches. Yet, even from prison Paul tells them: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice...whatever is true, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you." Against all odds, in the face of a reality that denies it, this is how we hold out for hope.

Amen