

Sunday December 15, 2019  
Lesson 3: Hope for New Things  
Scripture: Isaiah 42: 1-9

**Context:**

Our next lesson in hope moves back to the Old Testament. The book of Isaiah contains the words of a prophet speaking to a country in turmoil and distress. In today's lesson, we will explore how God surprises us in hopeful ways.

The book of Isaiah is one of the longest books of the prophets. Scholars have divided the book into three different sections to help understand the book better: First Isaiah, Second Isaiah, and Third Isaiah. These three different books provide varying accounts of the collapse of Jerusalem, the exile, and the return from exile. The section today comes in what is known as Second Isaiah and is different than First Isaiah.<sup>1</sup> The context of Second Isaiah points to the city of Jerusalem being destroyed and the exile to Babylon already taken place, whereas First Isaiah is before the fall of the city and the exile.<sup>2</sup> As one reads Second Isaiah, chapters forty through fifty-five, the writer sounds anonymous and the narrative contains a different style than First Isaiah.

The main theme of Second Isaiah is the return to Jerusalem and the homeland from exile in Babylon. The author imagines their return as a ritual procession to Zion led by Yahweh and is a new Exodus.<sup>3</sup> This theme of a new Exodus runs through all the chapters as the people make their way back home. Their return will result in something new, even better than what they could have expected or dreamed.

The chapter examined today identifies the first mention of what is known as “the servant songs” of Isaiah. There are four passages where a mysterious “servant of Yahweh” is identified as the chosen one to whom Yahweh has given his spirit to accomplish God's justice in a nonviolent way.<sup>4</sup> At some point, the “servant” is to be the one who takes all the guilt of the people as a sacrificial lamb.

Scholars have long discussed the identity of the servant songs, including whether the servant is Moses, Hezekiah, or Israel itself. In the Christian tradition, the servant songs are known to be references to Jesus as found in the gospels and the epistles. Jesus, the “suffering servant” is foretold as a fulfillment citation, one who fulfills the prophecies of the prophets.

The passage today describes the servant as the one who will not raise his voice, but who will establish justice throughout the land. The Lord will bring light to the Gentiles and goodness will be spread around. There will be opportunities and the things of old will fade away for something new to come and bring hope.

<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 404.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 405.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 406.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 407.

## **Application**

We cannot imagine the pain that those deported from Jerusalem must have felt when they went to Babylon. Even though we read of stories of the affluence of the Babylonian court and how people like Daniel somehow survived and flourished, there is still the overriding lament that the people are far from home. When one is a state of lament, the possibility of hope seems far away.

However, the scripture reading today is to bring hope in the midst of lamentation. Regardless of whether this passage was written during or after the exile, the intent of the author is to help the people make sense of their story. They may have been through an awful ordeal with wounds that take time to recover, but there is always the hope that God is “doing something new.”

For Christians, we read this passage and know that the servant is Jesus who brings peace in the midst of conflict not with a hateful tongue or with a sword, but with love and justice. He is the one who is something new in a world that thrives on unrest and violence. He is the one who will mend us even when others have sought to break or destroy our spirit.

What better time to read this passage in Isaiah than in the season of Advent. There are many wonderful things that happen in this season. There are parades, Christmas tree lightings, Christmas programs, parties, and festivities everywhere. Yet this season can also be one of the hardest for people.

For some people, this Christmas will not represent the hope of the world. It will be the first without a loved one. For others this season brings up memories of when times are better. And for many people, there is the obligation to see family and friends, some of whom would not be on Santa’s nice list if we had our druthers.

I think sometimes the pageantry of the season is to cover up some of that darkness, which is not in and of itself a bad thing. Traditions and rituals can help with the coping and give us something to cling to when everything seems to be going awry. They help us make meaning to remind us that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.

Perhaps what we can also search for in this season of Advent and from this passage from Isaiah are the ways that God is doing something new. As we heal and recover from things that may be hard in the most wonderful time of the year, we can look around and see that God is at work even in the more painful seasons of our life. It is not to say that God is causing our pain or that we are somehow responsible for predicaments in which we find ourselves. Instead, we are to see that the servant who was foretold to bring hope and peace thousands of years ago to a people in pain still revisits us today.

While it may seem that there is darkness, our God is never finished with us and God is constantly up to something new. It may be that God will bring us new seasons that are more life giving than what we could imagine. Or it could be that God is working within us to stir up ways to live anew in the harshness of the world. As we reflect on this passage in Isaiah, we are reminded that there is one who comes to us to bring good news and to help us see a little better in a world that can be cold and isolating. Jesus is the servant who is full of good news to those who are blind, in prison, and all those who sit in a place of darkness.

How do you deal with both the joy and the despair that comes with the holiday season? If you have trauma and the holiday seasons has triggers for you, how do you take

care of yourself? If you have never had trauma in your life, how do you listen or support those who do experience trauma during the holiday season? Where do you see God doing new things in your life and those around you? How do you see light when there seems to be only darkness?

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