

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent (Year B)

#### Hope!<sup>1</sup>

**Fellowship question:** (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin some discussion and lead into the study):

What is the most recent contract you have agreed to?

Who is your favorite poet?

#### Information

If you think about it, we make contracts nearly every day. Not the “biggies” like signing for a loan or making pre-nuptial agreements. But we are often confronted with volumes of words in a software package’s Terms and Agreements. We scroll to the bottom of the page and check the box that says, “I have read every word of this and I agree to it.” (You did???) When we pay for our groceries, if we are not using cash, we sign a check or a credit card agreement. You may live in a neighborhood or own a timeshare that has an HOA (Home Owner’s Association). Whether you remember it or not, you signed an agreement that you would and would not do certain things with your property

In today’s lesson, the Hebrew people’s contract/covenant with God is broken – and it was the people who broke the deal. The consequences would be dire.

- Have a class member read Micah 3:9-12.

The people did not repent. The prophecy was fulfilled. Because of their rejection of God’s law, the Southern Kingdom (Judea) population had been taken by the Babylonians from Judea into Babylon in 597 and 587 BC. There, they created a community in exile. This was difficult for them, but it also encouraged them to create a clearer sense of identity. Indeed, “Judaism” was born through this process. (Judaism/Jew = people from Judea)

When Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon in 538 BC, he decreed that the Hebrew people could return to Jerusalem. After 50-60 years, many decided to stay in Babylon. Others were determined to return to reestablish their homeland and their religion.

At your age, would you be willing to go back to the “old country” to reestablish a nation and culture? What would tempt you to stay where you are? What would motivate you to leave?

God called out another prophet in the tradition of Isaiah. This “post-exilic” prophet exudes hope. Chapter 61 includes this prophet’s hopeful dream as a servant minister.

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<sup>1</sup> This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc, 2025. More lessons may be found at [greatbibleteachers.com](http://greatbibleteachers.com).

“This section is not a ‘call narrative’ as such.... In some sense it offers a clarification of a call already underway.”<sup>2</sup>

- Have a class member read Isaiah 61:1-3.

Do you recognize this passage? Jesus used it in his hometown sermon. His first sermon was based on a poem. We will look at that story in a few minutes.

This passage is poetry. Ancient Hebrew poetry is different from what we might expect in English poetry. Biblical scholars are still trying to figure out biblical poetry.

“The internal features of the biblical text neither define nor identify poetry. Moreover, no ancient Israelite or ancient Near Eastern treatises on poetry or poetics have been found. Hence, scholars in each time and place, beginning with the Greco-Roman period, have applied to the biblical text definitions of poetry from their own literary tradition.... When we speak of verse, we mean a type of discourse with formal properties, generally quantifiable, such as meter or rhyme, that distinguish it from other types of discourse. The search for such properties in biblical poetry has a long and largely unsuccessful history.”<sup>3</sup>

It is not a rhyming poetry or blank verse, as we might expect in English. There is no defined meter. One technique in Hebrew poetry is *parallelism*, repeating a thought with different words.

“There have been two schools of thought on how to describe the semantic relationship between parallel lines. The first ... emphasizes the sameness of the relationship and the types and degrees of correspondence between the lines.... A major turning point came in the 1980s with the work of Robert Alter and James Kugel.... Kugel rejected the notion of synonymy of parallel lines and substituted the notion of continuity, phrasing his definition of parallelism as ‘A, what’s more, B.’ Alter, moving independently in the same direction, spoke of the ‘consequentiality’ of parallel lines. He saw the relationship between the lines as one of progression or intensification.”<sup>4</sup>

What parallel words or phrases do you find in the first three verses?

What actions does the prophet promise that could give hope to those considering a journey back to Jerusalem?

Look at verse three. Note the images the prophet uses to describe the current situation: *ashes, mourning, faint spirit*.

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 40-66*, The New Interpreters Bible, Vol. 6 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 513.

<sup>3</sup> Adele Berlin, *Introduction to Hebrew Poetry*, The New Interpreters Bible, Vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 301,302.

<sup>4</sup> Berlin, 304f.

What are the images the prophet uses to describe their future if they will return to Jerusalem? It's like a party! Put on your best outfit – your coat and hat and perfume.

But, parties come and go. What other image does the prophet use? Why a field of oak trees?

The prophet sounds very hopeful. Or is he optimistic? What is the difference?

“Optimism and hope are radically different attitudes. Optimism is the expectation that things – the weather, human relationships, the economy, the political situation, and so on – will get better. Hope is the trust that God will fulfill God's promises to us in a way that leads to true freedom. The optimist speaks of concrete changes in the future. The person of hope lives in the moment with the knowledge and trust that all of life is in good hands.”<sup>5</sup>

In the next verses, we will see what the exiles will discover on their return home and how they will be able to rebuild.

- Have a class member read Isaiah 61:4-7.

Have you ever experienced this massive destruction personally (through fire, earthquake, flooding, etc.)? If so, can you tell us your first impressions? Who/what helped you make it through?

Isaiah's prophecy anticipates the first viewing of the violent destruction of the once beautiful city of Jerusalem. Yet, he offers hope that it can be rebuilt and that strangers will even support the rebuilding effort.

Have you been in a time of crisis when a stranger gave you unexpected support? What happened?

- Have a class member read Isaiah 61:8-11.

Verse 10 seems to be a song, a joyous testimony of praise. Who do you think is singing this song? The prophet? The city of Jerusalem? A resident of the new Jerusalem?

This passage is full of hope, as we have hopes for a newly married couple. What are the hopes of the prophet? Of the people? Of God?

“The future of those who have suffered at the hands of this world's tyrants is in the hands of a personal sovereign who not only enacts laws but *loves* justice, who not only decrees punishments for misdeeds but *hates* robbery and wrongdoing. Israel's future does not

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<sup>5</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), January 18.

depend on divine caprice but is guided by God's *faithful* adherence to the covenant relationship."<sup>6</sup>

In verse 11, the prophet uses another agricultural image. God anticipates that the Hebrew people will mature in their spiritual relationship naturally. What nurtures a mature faith in a natural way?

- Have a class member read Luke 4:16-22.

This is the first half of Jesus' first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth. Why do you think Jesus took this passage as his first sermon's text? How does the gospel message of Jesus compare to the message of this post-exilic prophet? (It might be noted that in the second half of this sermon, Jesus said some things that upset the listeners, so much so that they drove him out of town!)

"The deaf, dumb, blind, lame, poor, broken-hearted, captives and downtrodden are simply different ways of referring to the poor and oppressed. It follows that the verbs in each of these sentences are simply different ways of describing the action which God promises to the poor and oppressed.... [These are] different ways of describing *liberation*.... We say it is 'good news' when the news is hopeful and encouraging, when it tends to make people happy. Good news for the poor would then mean news that is hopeful and encouraging for the poor.... [T]he good news of the kingdom of God was news about a future state of affairs *on earth* when the poor would no longer be poor, the hungry would be satisfied and the oppressed would no longer be miserable."<sup>7</sup>

In this lesson, we have spent some time talking about Jewish poetry, particularly parallelism. Look closely at Jesus' reading of the text from Isaiah 61. What is missing? (Isaiah's last line about vengeance.) Why do you think Jesus left that line out?

### **Transformational Exercise**

Isaiah 61:6 says, "You shall be called priests of the LORD." A priest is one who points people to God, who prays to God on behalf of others, and one who physically symbolizes God's presence.

We are to be messengers of hope to those who are walking through ruins. Like the post-exilic prophet, we must be realistic and certainly not flippant in our message of hope. Ruins, whether in relationships or health or natural disasters, are tragedies.

In the next minute of silence, consider, who do you know who is walking through ruins?

[Have a minute of silence.]

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995.), 226.

<sup>7</sup> Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976), 45,46.

As I pray, I will indicate a time for you to call out a person or situation, so that we will be priests, praying for those who need God in this difficult time:

[Close in a prayer something like this:] *God, as we approach Christmas, we approach a time of great joy. But for some, this is a difficult time, because they are walking through ruins. Be with these persons and situations as we call them out to you.*

[Pause for persons to call out names or situations.]

*We bring these prayers to you because we trust that you do have good news for the oppressed, healing for the brokenhearted, and salvation for the captive. Help us to be messengers of hope and joy in this Advent season. Amen.*