

## “Heading Home” – Pr Jim Sprengle – Advent 2 – December 10, 2023

- I. **Isaiah 40:11** – “He will tend His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms; He will carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.”
- II. **A future with no hope.**
  - a. You can probably imagine some people who might believe their future has no hope...
    - i. People in prison serving life sentences or on death row often feel like they are hopeless.
    - ii. Sometimes those who are in the cycle of addiction and alcoholism are in a state of hopelessness that things can get better.
    - iii. Others are facing terminal illnesses and have no hope for the future.
    - iv. Still others look at the world and see war, climate change, disease, and suffering... and they have no hope for what’s ahead.
  - b. Isaiah the prophet is looking into the future and prophesying about a time when God’s people will be in exile.
    - i. Isaiah was looking at a future time when the Babylonian army would come into Jerusalem and take everyone to a foreign land.
    - ii. He was telling whoever would listen that Jerusalem and God’s temple would be destroyed.
    - iii. Even the fields that gave them fruit and grain would be ruined, and whatever comfort they had in their homeland would be gone.
    - iv. In fact, Babylon was more than 1500 miles from Jerusalem... and when they actually did arrive, they were told to get used to it, because they would be there a long time.
    - v. Everything they had ever known would be stripped from them, and nothing could ever be the same.
    - vi. All this means that the broken, sinful people of Israel were nothing more than grass that withers or a flower that fades. (vss 6-7)
      1. The people exiled in a foreign land would die there just as grass and flowers die.
  - c. It’s sad, but all those people in Judah and Jerusalem had been turning away from God for centuries before this prophecy of doom and gloom.
    - i. They repeatedly and consistently rejected God’s Word and refused to walk in His ways.
    - ii. The First Commandment, “You shall have no other Gods”, means that we fear, love, and trust in God above all things... and the people in Isaiah’s time were not trusting in God.
      1. For one thing they sought out worldly alliances with different countries around them to keep them safe from their enemies, when they needed to keep their covenant with God instead.

2. Besides putting their trust in things of the world, they also worshiped other gods from the nations around them...
    - a. The temple went from being only used for God Himself to including idols and altars from other gods as well.
    - b. Can you imagine if we decided to drag a bunch of foreign idols and statues into our sanctuary and begin worshiping them along with the one true God?
  - iii. So yes, the people of Israel had turned their backs on God, and the result was God allowing a foreign power to destroy their homeland and haul them off into captivity.
  - d. Not only were they far away from their homeland, but they probably felt like they were a million miles from God as well.
    - i. All they ever knew was that God's presence dwelt in the temple, and now it was destroyed – so questions began to arise about God's power and why He would allow this destruction... along with where God's presence could be if the temple was gone.
- III. **God's people** turned away from Him, and the future is hopeless without God.
- a. Many times, we don't see the ways that our faith and life mirrors God's people of old... I don't mean in a good way!
  - b. For example, how many times do we reject God's Word as the authority in our lives?
    - i. Either we outright reject it and don't believe what it tells us, or we reject it by never bothering to learn it in the first place.
    - ii. Biblical literacy is dying right in our midst, and we spend all our time scrolling on social media or reading fiction instead of reading His Word of promise and love.
  - c. The Israelites also trusted in the world and its gods... and so do we.
    - i. As they made alliances with foreign powers to save their way of life, they even put their trust in Egypt, the country that had enslaved them!
    - ii. Today we have politics that capture our loyalty... as though a political party and their platform will make everything better for us.
    - iii. And though we cannot imagine bringing idols into our sanctuary and worshiping them alongside the one true God...
      1. Yet, we've all carried our purse or wallet into this place, and some of us put more trust in our finances than God.
      2. Some of us have a phone in our pocket or purse that replaces the relationship we should be having with God!
      3. Others of us have put our families in a place of prominence – so the only thing that matters is our family's happiness – and God takes a back seat to our vacations, sports, and activities.
      4. The list could go on and on when it comes to our idols and divided trust, but many times we don't think about what these idols are.

- d. Isaiah even prophesies the words that would be used in our Gospel reading today – “Prepare the way of the Lord...” (vs 3) – meaning it’s time to come back to God and turn away from sin and idols.
  - i. John the Baptist was out in the desert, crying out for people to repent, because He was sent by God to prepare us for the coming of a Savior... the only hope and comfort for sinners.

IV. **Isaiah’s words begin with a promise of blessing.**

- a. “Comfort, comfort My people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned...”
- b. In other words, God does not exile His people and abandon them, but He redeems, restores, and saves through it all.
- c. Yes, God’s people walked away from Him in ancient times... and yes, we often walk away from God too.
- d. However, the answer is the same... Jesus Christ, the Savior who came to give us a hope for the future... and forgiveness here and now.
  - i. You see, John was calling people back home to God (to repent) in preparation of an even bigger homecoming – the heavenly home that God has in store for His children.
  - ii. In the end, God wants to bring all His children out of the exile we live in – the sinful, broken bodies we live in... along with the broken creation – and He wants to lead us to our heavenly home.
  - iii. The beautiful picture Isaiah paints is a Shepherd tending His flock, gathering up the lambs in His arms and carrying them close... gently leading them...(vs 11).
- e. For all the doom and gloom of Isaiah’s prophecy, and the sins we struggle with right now, it is a source of great hope that God promises to bring us home from all this trouble.
  - i. And all of this hope comes out of a little baby in Bethlehem.
  - ii. Yes, the answer to all our problems, our sin, and our idolatry is found in the one who makes God’s plan of salvation possible.
  - iii. The outcasts, the broken, and the sinners were all welcomed by Jesus with open arms – and forgiveness.
  - iv. Not only that, but Jesus opened His arms wide in death... on the cross of Calvary.
    - 1. By His death, you are healed... by His death, you are forgiven.
- f. God has come to us and brought us back home to Him... which also means that we are forgiven, and nothing can separate us from His love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord.
- g. All our failures to listen to Him are forgiven... all our sins of rejecting His Word are pardoned... all the idols that tempt us have no power over us... and that makes all the difference for us and our future.
- h. Rest assured, when Jesus comes again, He will gather us up in His arms and lead us home... and that is a future with hope. Amen.