

SERMON TITLE: “A Hope Beyond Exile”

TEXT: Isaiah 2:1-5

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

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If you are reading along in Isaiah with us, you have likely come across a whole bunch of harsh sounding judgments and condemnations on people and places that are difficult to pronounce. Perhaps you may wonder what exactly all this is about, and how it relates to your life.

Prophets like Isaiah are a little bit strange (part of the job description). They don't always tell a very pretty story or paint a rosy picture. They speak in vivid metaphors and word-pictures, and sometimes use bizarre and disturbing analogies to make their points:

- Isaiah (ch 20) walks around naked and barefoot as a sign of what will happen to the nation of Egypt and Cush
- Hosea marries a prostitute to symbolize Israel's unfaithfulness to the Lord
- Ezekiel does a whole bunch of crazy things to get his points across
 - o lying on his side for a year with pretend battles scenes carved out of clay
 - o cutting his hair and beard and either burning it or throwing it to the wind in various parts of Jerusalem as symbols of Israel's coming destruction.

The prophets were strange men who spoke in strange ways during very strange times. They likely strike us as bizarre people, who sometimes use inexplicable and foreign ways of communicating.

But the fundamental call of the prophets does not change: return to your God. Be and do what the Lord has called you to be and do.

One of the best ways I can think of to make strange prophets like Isaiah (or any strange part of the Bible) seem more relevant or practical is to tell a story. Actually I'm going to tell three. These three stories may or may not be loosely based on people I have come across in my life, but the names are fictional (have bibles open to ch. 2)

Amy is 19 years old and living in the city for the first time in her life. She's just returned from another evening spent at an experimental spirituality meeting. She's been responding to online ads on a new age website for the last couple of weeks and her nights have been whirlwinds of strange and bizarre experiences. It's all pretty new to her, but she's ready for the adventure.

Amy was raised in a small town several hours from here, and for the early part of her childhood she thoroughly enjoyed the rural community she was a part of. She had a mostly happy family life, plenty of room to explore the outdoors, and a large extended family nearby with whom she spent time regularly at holidays, birthdays, etc. Amy's world was very small—her family, friends, and classmates were also a part of her church and this gave her life a lot of stability, predictability, and safety.

But Amy's church was extremely theologically conservative, and her parents were very strict. As she grew older, Amy began to challenge their authority and to ask questions about the rigid and unthinking understanding of God she had been given. Her own father could be severe and inflexible, and her view of God took on some of these characteristics. By the time she was 17, Amy thoroughly resented her church; she considered them to be a bunch of unthinking dogmatists, who deliberately closed their eyes to the outside world. She wanted no part of this, and as soon as she was 18 she took off for the bright lights of the big city.

Once in the city, Amy was determined to try anything and everything in her attempt to unshackle herself from what she thought to be her repressive upbringing. She partied heavily. She rebelled against the sexual norms of her parents. She spent a lot of money—money she usually didn't have.

Amy also experimented with religion. The city offers no shortage of options, and Amy has explored nearly all of them. She's tried channeling the dead, witchcraft, astrology, paganism, "free thought," and various forms of humanism. She enjoys being able to mix and match according to her own preferences, and she loves the idea that she, not some musty preacher, decides what is important and what is worth pursuing.

Amy is enjoying herself—at least some of the time; but in her quieter moments, she misses the community of her childhood. She misses the stability and safety of her former life. She can't shake the feeling that maybe the point of it all isn't having as many unique experiences as she can possibly have. She can't help but think back to the God her parents, friends, and relatives introduced her to back home. She remembers words like grace, forgiveness, and love. She likes these words. She misses these words.

Amy also feels very alone. After all of the wild parties and the interesting religious experiences, she has this haunting sense that she doesn't belong here. She feels a long ways from home. Even though she has chosen her own path, she feels like a stranger in a strange land. And she is afraid... She doesn't know how she is going to make it home again.

*You have abandoned your people,
the house of Jacob.
They are full of superstitions from the East;
they practice divination like the Philistines
and clasp hands with pagans.*

On the other side of the city, Philip is just getting behind the wheel of his luxury SUV and heading back to his penthouse condominium. He enjoys living downtown because it is relatively close to his office, and he can spend more time at work. He is all too familiar with the long drive out to the suburbs, having spent the earlier part of his career doing the wife/kids/dog/cat/white picket fence thing.

Philip's kids are adults now, and despite the fact that he loves them dearly, he rarely sees them. They were teenagers when he left their mother, and despite the fact that he has always been more than generous with his financial support, they seem to want little to do with him.

The distance had begun to grow between Philip and his family once his wife and kids had started to get more heavily involved in their church and community, and initiatives to help the poor and disenfranchised. Philip had bitterly protested his wife's involvement with social housing initiatives and development protests in the city, and could barely stomach the heavy influence she had on his children in this regard. It wasn't good for Philip's reputation, after all. He was a big-time developer, and it didn't look good that his own family seemed to be at odds with his professional interests.

Philip has no problem with religion—in fact, he is one of the largest donors in his church. But there isn't really anything you can do for “those kinds of people” anyway (didn't Jesus himself say “the poor you would always have with you”)? Besides, there were people who were paid by the government to look after social problems. Let them do it. Why did his family have to get involved?

But he couldn't convince them to see things his way. So he left. If they wanted to be ungrateful for the comfort and security his hard work had provided, that was their problem. He wasn't going to apologize for being resourceful, driven, and wealthy. And he certainly wasn't going to hand over his hard-earned wealth to the bottomless pit of need that his wife had gotten involved in and had dragged his kids into.

“Irreconcilable differences,” was how the divorce proceedings put it, and they really were. To be honest, Philip enjoys his newfound independence and high-life in the city core. Late dinners and drinks with clients, uninterrupted leisure time, the freedom to take in art galleries, museums, the theatre, the ability to travel to warmer locales whenever work gets to be a bit too much. Philip is a big-time player in the business world now, and he enjoys the attention and excitement of living and working in freedom in the heart of the action.

But there are nagging moments where the guilt and the loneliness return. Philip always believed that “money can't buy you happiness” was one of those necessary fictions for those who had none, but now, as he approaches his sixties and realizes that every professional and financial ambition he could ever have dreamed of had come true, there are cracks appearing in the seams of the perfect life he has constructed for himself. He periodically sees pictures of his wife on the evening news and feels pangs of regret. He hears from others about the relief work being done by his children and feels a deep pride that he can't explain—a pride that transcends how “well they are doing,” how much money they are (or, in their case, are *not*) making. He senses that their work comes out of a deep reservoir of faith and hope that he cannot access.

And he, too, feels alone. He is ashamed for walking out on his family. He feels convicted that his resources could be put to better use, and that maybe it isn't really all

about getting more and allowing “success” to be defined by those he works and competes with.

He feels alienated from the life that he wants—a better life, a more compassionate and less selfish life, a life where he can accept and be accepted by those closest to him, a life where he can make a positive contribution to the needs he sees around him.

But that life seems far away now, and unattainable. Too many bad decisions block his access to that life. He feels stuck, immobilized by a lifetime spent moving incrementally further away from what matters most. He is far from home, and doesn’t know how to get back.

*You have abandoned your people,
the house of Jacob.*

*Their land is full of silver and gold;
there is no end to their treasures.
Their land is full of horses;
there is no end to their chariots.*

A few blocks away, Michael is holed up in his cramped apartment spending yet another evening glued to his computer screen, tracking the sale of his products around the world. Michael is a software designer on the cutting edge of online gaming and virtual reality. He designs and sells software and various other gaming products for a hugely successful and wildly popular virtual world.

Ever since he was a teenager, Michael has loved computers and spends a lot of time learning the intricacies of computer technology, software design, and all other things computer-related. Michael studied software design at university and found the transition into the workforce pretty seamless. He has always enjoyed being able to create things on screen, whether it is avatars, backgrounds, profiles, weapons, or anything else associated with the virtual worlds he markets to. Michael’s skill and marketing savvy have not gone unnoticed, and he is widely considered to be at the forefront of the gaming industry.

Michael is also an aspiring writer, in his spare time. He’s in the process of writing graphic novel and has a blog through which he provides regular updates on what he’s working on, market trends, and so that his fans and potential clients can have as much info as they want or need about him and his projects. Michael spends a lot of time reading reviews of his work, scanning online forums and gaming blogs to discover what others are saying about his design and what they might want in the future.

Michael’s entire world consists of the online reality that he has created for himself. People know as much about them as he decides they will know, and he manages his profile very carefully. He makes his living online, he does most of his shopping online, and his friends are mostly online. He communicates via Facebook and other kinds of instant messaging. He spends most of his waking hours in front of the battery of laptops,

desktops, gaming systems, and various other monitors he has assembled at his home office. He rarely leaves his building.

There is a thrill that comes with the instantaneous feedback and connection he receives in his virtual world. And this world has made him very rich. Yet Michael lives in constant fear that all of this will be taken away from him, that the whole online empire he has created will crumble like a house of cards. It seems so tenuous, at times, so unreal. And so he keeps pouring his energy, resources, and time into preserving what he has built for himself.

Michael has never been comfortable in social environments, but at times he longs for the world beyond the four walls in which he spends his days. And despite the financial security his efforts have provided, he has a haunting sense that there is more to life than what he is acknowledging. There are deep questions that he cannot shake—questions about the meaning of life, the goal of human existence. His virtual world seems pathetic and transitory when compared with the scope of eternity, but he has no idea where he would turn to find answers to the big questions he has.

He is afraid of aging, afraid of dying, and he is lonely. He wonders about the possibility that a God might exist, but he is afraid to consider this possibility. If it's true, God might have expectations of him, and Michael has spent his whole life as an island. Nobody tells him what to do or how to spend his time. He has no room for God.

And so Michael retreats into his online fortress. Here he receives affirmation and admiration. *He* is the king of this domain; his ego has grown with his reputation, and the big haunting questions that trouble him can be put to the side when he is back where his need for significance and influence are met. He is proud of what he has accomplished, and nobody is going to take this from him.

*You have abandoned your people,
the house of Jacob.*

*Their land is full of idols;
they bow down to the work of their hands,
to what their fingers have made.*

In each of the stories above, there is a profound sense of alienation and loneliness. And this alienation is mixed in with selfishness, pride, and confusion. Because of this, each person finds themselves in a place they don't want to be—a place that they sense is less than what was intended for them, less than what is best for them.

The biblical word for the situations described in these stories is “exile.”

“Exile” is the threat that we see throughout Isaiah. Exile is when you are forced out of your home, when your nation is taken captive by foreigners, when God's promises of goodness, blessing, and prosperity seem light years away, when there is no more peace,

no more justice, no more hope. Exile is a response to disobedience, pride, injustice, idolatry, and greed. Exile is what happened to Israel.

But as these three stories show, “exile” does not just refer to geographic dislocation. It can refer to spiritual dislocation, emotional dislocation, and relational dislocation as well. Exile is a life lived in contradiction to the intentions of God, with all of the consequences this leads to.

Isaiah 2 was a warning for Israel and it stands as a warning for us too. Where are we focused? To what do we turn to save us? What we have made? Our chariots and horses? Exotic religious experiences? Do we feel invincible because of our technological achievements and abilities? Our self-sufficiency?

The message of Isaiah is, first and foremost, a message to Israel. On this level, it is the story of a specific nation who disobeyed God in very specific ways, and was now having very specific consequences as well as a very specific hope set before them.

But as in all of Scripture, Isaiah tells our story too. We are also a people prone to arrogance and idolatry; we, also, find it easy to trust in our silver and gold, and to bow down to the work of our hands. And so we, too, sometimes need to be brought low and humbled by God.

Isaiah 2:6-22 talks about the *Day of the Lord*—a day of judgment, of humbling the proud, and of the Lord alone being exalted.

But when we return to the opening of chapter two, we see that all of this takes place against the backdrop of the ultimate of hope symbolized by the *Mountain of the Lord*.

Mountains figure prominently in Scripture: Mt. Ararat (Noah), Mt Moriah (Abraham and Isaac), Mt. Sinai (the law), Mt. Zion (the temple), and the Sermon on the Mount (where Jesus shows people the true spirit of the law). Mountains are places where God draws near to speak, where human beings assume their rightful position and listen.

And so it is here in Isaiah, where the wider hope of which Israel and we are a part is described as the Mountain of the Lord. But it is not just any mountain. Listen how Isaiah describes it, and as you listen, I want you to think about the three stories I told earlier, and about your own story:

In the last days

*the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.*

*3 Many peoples will come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,*

*to the house of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths."*

*The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.*

*4 He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.*

“The Mountain of the Lord” describes a hope based on the character of a God whose mercy is wider than even our idolatry and pride. It is a vision of peace, the knowledge of the Lord, and obedience. On this mountain, the Lord alone will be exalted. This mountain symbolizes a final return from exile.

The Mountain of the Lord will be established. This is the message of Isaiah. This is the Christian hope.

Today is Ascension Sunday, the day when we remember Jesus’ ascension into heaven, where he rules at the right hand of God. I don’t know if you thought of it this way before, but as we were celebrating communion earlier this morning, what we were remembering, celebrating, and committing ourselves to was Jesus Christ as God’s final response to our exile as fallen human beings and to our planet which groans as it waits for redemption. Romans 5:6-8:

6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners [while we were still in the exile of our bad decisions, our lack of faith, our false pride], Christ died for us.

The cross of Christ is the answer for the “big exile” represented by sin and evil, but it is also the answer for our individual periods of exile. It is the answer for Amy, for Philip, for Michael, for you and for me. Because of what we celebrated during communion, we know that there is forgiveness for our greed, there is judgment and healing for our idolatry. Because of Jesus, exile is not our ultimate story, and it doesn’t have to be our story while in the present. We can heed Isaiah’s call. We can humble ourselves, we can live lives of gratitude, obedience, and commitment to our Risen King.

There is a hope beyond exile. Thanks be to God.

