

STREAMS IN THE WASTELAND...

Isaiah 43.15–19 (TNIV)

Listen now for God's Word.

"I am the Lord, your Holy One, Israel's Creator, your King." This is what the Lord says— he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

There we were: a group of four Americans sitting in the small, quaint home of a Muslim family in the New Askar Refugee Camp outside of Nablus, in Palestine. We were given the best seats, with the best cushions and treated to *shay bil na'na*: mint tea. We sat listening to the stories and words of an elderly Muslim man who had been forced to leave his land and home in a village outside of Haifa, he knew he would never be allowed to return. We had been hearing stories like this for most of the day: stories of oppression, stories of grief, stories of loss, stories of death. Someone asked him about the hope of the peace process and he replied: "Peace is nonsense. It is our destiny to live like this." I didn't quite understand his response, so I asked, "Is there *anything* in your life that gives you hope: your family, your grandchildren, your friends, your religion, anything at all" He looked at me with a solemn and empty expression. "No. There is no hope."

Two weeks later, I sat in a small office in West Jerusalem with a Zionist who grew up in Rochester, NY and now lives in the largest Jewish settlement, Maale Adumim. She worked for the Association of Americans and Canadians in Israel which is "a voluntary Zionist organization serving approximately 120,000 North Americans living in Israel." The organization helps US and Canadian families who want to make *aliyah*, which basically means becoming an Israeli citizen. We exchanged pleasantries for awhile, but then she realized that I had been living with a Palestinian family in Bethlehem for the summer, and she began to share with me some stories, her feelings and her fears. It became clear that she believed there was little to no hope left for the conflict. Before I left, I asked her what message she hoped I would share with people in the States, and this is what she said: "You must understand what it feels like to feel threatened. When all you want to do is go to work, go home, go out every now and then, raise a family, and to feel that your 'entire existence is threatened'...when that happens, you must do anything that you can to fight for your family, for your land. It's not something that you want to do – but you have to understand –

when you are threatened, you must protect yourself. Israel has the right to protect its citizens when it is threatened, and that is what Israel is doing.”

And Israel *had* been threatened, and conquered. They’ve been in exile for over 30 years when Isaiah speaks to them in today’s passage. Exiled from their land, their temple, their God. Had God followed them? Was God even with them in their exile? And what would happen next? Would they, could they, return to their homes? Would their homes have been destroyed? These are all questions that must have gone through the hearts and minds of those exiled people of God. The future indeed looked very grim. The hope of returning to their homeland was slowly drifting away.

**“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”**

Today, Israelis are struggling with hope, and for good reasons: their cinemas, shopping malls and buses are getting blown up, their land is attacked by terrorists, their homeland is surrounded by hostile countries, their history is overwhelmingly filled with injustice, hatred and genocide.

Palestinians are also giving up hope, and for good reasons: their homes are being demolished, their land is being stolen, their children are being jailed and killed, their freedom to move and travel is being restricted, their cities have been walled in, Bethlehem has become a prison.

And, it is possible that much of the world may be giving up hope in light of recent events in the Middle East. The Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has been in a coma since January 4th. Hamas, *viewed* as a terrorist organization by many, won the Palestinian democratic elections. They refuse to recognize Israel, and go even further and call for the destruction of Israel. The possibility of renewed peace negotiations seems bleak when neither party will fully recognize the Other.

The letters we write to political leaders seem pointless; the wealth of educational opportunities we offer here on Sunday mornings simply give us more knowledge of the immensity of the suffering and the delicate complexities of a seemingly impossible situation. Our checks written to non-profits help to temporarily ease our consciences, but we wonder if the money is really doing any good. We may even travel to the Middle East, perhaps even into the West Bank, and meet with Palestinians and Israelis and promise to educate people when we go home. But we come home, and it’s too hard. How does one convey the injustice of the situation without getting angry. And we question whether we can really do anything at all.

So we find ourselves giving up hope, being those glass-half-empty-kind-of-people. We ask, “What good can come of this?” And we remember when things were better, when the future looked more promising; and with our shoulders slumped, heads bent down, we mourn the hopeless future that appears before us and we become apathetic.

**“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”**

The prophet Isaiah reminded the Israelites that this God who they had put their trust in **once** would still be faithful in protecting them. God had made a way through the sea, God had made a path for them and had led them through the day and through the night. This was an important reminder for the exiled people of God, but Isaiah goes on to encourage them not simply to stay focused on the past, but to be looking forward.

Isaiah encourages the Israelites to open their minds and hearts to imagine ways in the wilderness and the streams in the wasteland. Instead of looking for where God moved in the past, Israel is called to a robust imagination. Israel is called to believe that God might be doing a new thing...to imagine the new reality that God might bring forth...to be ready to perceive the new thing that is right now springing up.

I wish I could tell you what this ‘new thing’ that God is doing actually is. I wish I could tell you that God is going to dramatically move in a significant way in the Middle East peace process soon. This week. Perhaps, already today. But I can’t. I struggle to perceive it. I struggle to imagine what this new thing could be. But I believe I’ve seen glimpses of this new thing. And I believe that some of you have seen traces of God’s work in the Middle East.

Many of you are quite intimately connected to some of the peace work that is happening in the Galilee region of Israel. We currently have a member of our church serving at the Mar Elias Educational Institute in I’billin, working closely with Abuna Elias Chacour, who I was lucky to spend a day with this summer. Abuna Chacour has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize on three separate occasions, currently serves as Priest of the Church of the Sermon on the Mount and works closely with the Arab, Jewish and Druze populations of the Galilee. Through the peace work that is taking place in that region, we are able to see a glimpse of the new ‘thing of God.’

While apathy and hopelessness can be contagious, there are many in this world who are holding out for peace, who are looking around them for the ways in which God might be working. This was clear as I lived and worked in Palestine this summer. There were close to 80 people who came through the program this summer alone: Jews, Christians, Muslims; Americans, Swedes, Israelis; teenagers, young adults and grandparents. All came to the Holy Lands with one hope and one purpose: to look for peace. We dialogued with Palestinian and Israeli peace groups, we protested with locals and Israeli activists – it became very evident that no matter where everyone exactly stood on the issue, we were united by a desire for peace.

Isaiah’s word to the Israelites is a word of hope, and it is a word for us today. God has worked in the past – that much is clear – people throughout history have born witness to the presence and reality of God in the world. The challenge

is to remember that God is **present**, that God is **active**, that God still **hears** our prayers. Isaiah's words urge us to lift up our faces, to open our eyes a bit wider, and to look...to look for the new thing of God that is springing up. Do we perceive it? Maybe not at first, but we must keep looking, we must become attentive. And when we see glimmers of that new thing, it is then that we join in on the work of God – it is in those holy moments when God and humanity come together as co-creators and work to bring about God's kingdom here on earth.

Do not dwell on the past, for God has promised to make a way in the wilderness, and God has promised to make streams in the wasteland.