

## **“There is Always Hope”**

### **Isaiah 56:1-8**

#### **Intro**

There are two prominent themes that come to the fore when you start to delve into Isaiah. The first foretells of the fall and exile of Judah in general and Jerusalem in specific, while the second theme speaks to God’s faithfulness even in the midst of that exile.

However, there is also a third theme, one that doesn’t get near as much play in the Christian church, and that theme speaks to how the people are to live together with one another, and with God, now that they have been returned *from* exile. What we are about to hear marks the beginning of that subject. It is a very clear articulation that the God who was willing to stand with the Israelites even after they turned away from God is also a God who stands for all those who are willing to follow Him, even if they are not Jewish.

You heard that right, God is willing to stand with those who might not be a total follower of the religion that worships that God. How does that line up with the God whom you know? The scripture reads this way.

### **Isaiah 56:1-8**

56 Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. <sup>2</sup> Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast, who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil.

<sup>3</sup> Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people’; and do not let the eunuch say, ‘I am just a dry tree.’ <sup>4</sup> For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, <sup>5</sup> I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

<sup>6</sup> And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant— <sup>7</sup> these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. <sup>8</sup> Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

### **Romans 11:1-2, 29-32**

#### **Intro**

The interesting thing is that the theme of God’s acceptance of those outside of the religion does not end in the Old Testament. What we hear in these words from Paul is a reiteration that the children of the covenant (the Israelites) are still God’s children. That is a thought seems to fly in direct conflict with what we hear Jesus saying in the gospels where he says, ‘no one shall come to the Father, except through me’.

So what do we do? How do these two, seemingly diametrically opposed, viewpoints exist in harmony? Can they? I believe the answer to that question begins with discerning how powerful we actually believe the God whom we have been led to worship really is. The scripture reads this way.

### **Romans 11:1-2, 29-32**

11I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. <sup>2</sup>God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel?

<sup>29</sup>for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. <sup>30</sup>Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, <sup>31</sup>so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. <sup>32</sup>For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

### **“There is Always Hope”**

As many of you know, I am a fan of baseball. I like to play it (you know, in the softball rec-league version of the game that I can still play), I like to watch it, and I like to talk about it. As I grew up, my fandom was focused on the Philadelphia Phillies.

But as my family has settled into this part of New Jersey, the fandom has grown to include our local independent league team, the Somerset Patriots, and my fandom has been shared down through the family tree.

For example, Austin and I were invited to head over to the ballpark this past Thursday night and I was reminded, yet again, that children do ‘learn it by watching you’.

Here’s what I mean: Austin totally gets what’s going on. He’s not getting all the details...but he is absolutely plugged in. Every time it was appropriate for the crowd to get loud, Austin was right there (with his buddies and his dad), cheering and providing rhythmic clapping (he’s a really good clapper). Every time the speakers yelled out ‘Somerset!’, Austin would immediately respond, ‘Patriots!’ If the Patriots needed a strike, he would yell (and I mean yell), ‘strike!!’ and every time they needed a hit, he would holler out, ‘hit it!!’.

The reason that I bring up this example is because if you are a fan, even a realistic fan, there is always hope.

Sometimes that hope is able to be found in single game (we were sitting there in the stands watching the Long Island Ducks beat the Patriots in one of the longest minor league games I’ve ever witnessed and we stayed, yes because there were fireworks, but also because there was that hope that a hit here, a bad pitch there (and there were quite a few of them), and maybe, just maybe.

There is hope.

Other times the hope is directed to the next game (even though the Ducks beat the Patriots at the game we attended, Austin was still saying, ‘they lost, but that’s ok, they will win next time’. There is hope.)

In still other moments its finding those points of positivity (even in the reality of some negative stuff) and thinking, 'well, this year is not going well, but if this, and that, and the other thing take place, then next year...watch out!' (This last one is more about the Phillies mind you!) There is hope.

Sports fans: we do that. Even when we are complaining about all that is wrong, we are still able to dabble (if not dwell!) in hope.

Our passages this morning speak to a reality that many folks struggle to believe actually exists: there is always hope, even for those who appear to be hopeless. To be candid, there are times when this hopelessness is initiated, deepened, or reinforced by other statements in the Scriptures. Take this statement by Jesus for example: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."

When you hear that statement (not to mention the variety of other statements that Jesus identifies himself as the gatekeeper to eternal life, as well as the fact that there will be a clear (and surprising) delineation between those who are welcomed into the eternal presence of God) when you hear that statement of, 'no one comes to the Father but through me', how does that make you feel?

I can tell you that a consistent and wide-ranging group of church goers whom I have known feel about it, especially in regard to their friends and relatives who either profess no faith or out and out reject the foundations of the Christian faith: it makes them feel afraid, or sorrowful that their loved ones will be turned away by the God whom we know to be so real.

But what about you?

How about this: does it cause you to want to head out into the world with an evangelical zeal to proclaim the life that is found in Jesus Christ, because if people do not know who Jesus is then they will be without hope? There are many portions of the greater Christian community that respond to it that way.

Or do you hear these words and go, 'whatever, it's just church stuff that I don't understand. I'll let someone else figure it out.' I'd say that there are a whole lot of people who approach this, and maybe even most scripture, this way (in case you're wondering, that's not a good response, especially considering the message that Jesus is articulating).

Or maybe you are like me, someone who hears these words and tries to wrap my head around how it fits into the greater context of scripture. It's not that I don't believe what Jesus says, I do: the only way to the Father is through Jesus his son. But how does that verse, and the verses like the ones that we have heard this morning that proclaim that there is hope for those who are outside the faith boundaries as we have constructed them, how do they coexist, if not ultimately complement one another?

Because one of the truths that we have been taught, a truth that I very much believe, is that all of Scripture is God breathed, meaning that what we hear is the one God, the Creator of all, is speaking through a multitude of different authors and stories, guiding people to understand who He is, and how much He truly loves us.

Said a different way, all of scripture is coming from a uniform source. There are a variety of filters through which we hear that message, but the message is, at its heart, consistent: it does not contradict itself.

Therefore, 'no one comes to the father except through me' (from John), 'I will gather others to them besides those already gathered' (from Isaiah), and God will be 'merciful to all' (from Romans) all come from the same heart: the heart of God.

So how do we put them together? How do we put them together in a way that is faithful to the God from whom they have all emerged? Is there really hope in all circumstances?

Well, to begin with, we cannot throw our hands up in confusion, ignorance, or lack of caring and say, 'it's too much for me'. The faith that we have been called to directs us to be in relationship with the Divine (through worship and prayer) and study His Word in such a way that even when we come to a place where you are not sure how you put it together, that we put it all in God's hands, faithfully trusting in Him...no matter what.

That means that we need to be plugged into the Word of God so that we might be able to wrestle with what it really means to be a follower of the Triune God.

It is not up to the minister to spoon-feed the worshipping body what they believe.

That is the responsibility of each child of God. The minister is able to guide, direct, and lead, not give you the shoebox within which your beliefs are to be placed.

All of us have got to be intentionally plugged into God; we have to know Christ.

Secondly, it is the mission of the church, as directed by Jesus himself, to 'go into the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them all that [he] has commanded us'. That is the mission of the church, of the church that we have been called to here at Three Bridges.

Therefore, in all that we do, both as individuals and as a community of faith, we are called by the one we have been led to name our Lord and Savior, to proclaim that hope is found in and through Jesus Christ. Come, believe, repent, and be washed clean in the blood of the lamb. To do anything else would be contrary to how God has called us to live.

All of us are called to be tenacious in proclaiming the truth of Jesus Christ; we have to make Christ known.

But does this mean that those whom we perceive to be on the 'outside looking in (or looking elsewhere)' are without hope?

Like sports fans all over the world know in regard to their team, the answer is a clear and definitive '**NO!**'.

For in God, there is always hope, hope for those who do not believe, hope for those who believe something else, maybe even hope for those who believe only in themselves.

We may not understand it at all, let alone in totality, but our God is bigger than any limitation that we try and place upon Him. Our God has declared through His son, that Jesus is the only way to eternal life with the Father.

Therefore it is true.

We have also been taught through the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, that God will be merciful to all.

Therefore it is also true.

How they piece together is a question that God will be able to reveal when those who have been called by name bow before Him in eternity.

Said another way: only God knows who has been called to abide with Him in eternity.

In the meantime, we must intentionally strive to know Him, and to tenaciously make Him known, having faith that the God who loves the creation so much that He would send His innocent son to die a sinner's death, is a God in whom hope should never be lost, for in Him there is always hope. It is in and through this faithful service that the blessings of God are able to flow in ever more abundant ways.

We may not have all the answers, but through our faith we are buoyed in hope until that time when we finally do.

#### **After Sermon Prayer**

Holy God, there are times when we struggle to understand the message that You proclaim. Move in and through us so that through our faith we are reminded that in You, there is always hope. We may not understand it, but we trust in You. In the meantime, embolden us so that we may grow into the servants we need to be: individuals and a community who intentional strive to know You, and tenaciously step forward making You known to the world. Lord, let it be so. Amen.