

THE MESSAGE for July 17, 2011**Isaiah 44:6-8***Isaiah... Leaning Into God's Future***The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller**

Story: There was an old farmer who lived with his wife and son out in the country. His only possession that amounted to anything was a gorgeous Arabian mare. The horse was absolute perfection.

The neighbors would come by and say how good it was to have such a beautiful mare. He said he didn't know whether it was good or bad, he just knew he had a beautiful horse.

One night she broke out of the corral and in the morning the farmer discovered his prize horse was gone. All the neighbors came by and said how bad it was that his horse was gone. He said he didn't know whether it was good or bad, all he knew was that his beautiful mare was gone.

Two weeks later she came back with three wild stallions following her right into the corral. Now all the neighbors came by and said, "How good it was to have his beautiful mare back and three stallions besides." He said, "I don't know whether it's good or bad, all I know is I got my mare back and three stallions with her."

The next day his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses. He was thrown off and broke his leg. The neighbors came by and said, "How bad it was that his son broke his leg." He said, "I don't know whether it's good or bad, I just know my son has a broken leg.

The next day the military officials came through the country side drafting young men for the army. The farmer's son couldn't go because of a broken leg. The neighbors came by and said how good it was for the farmer because his son didn't have to go war. He said, "I don't know whether it's good or bad, I just know my son has a broken leg and didn't have to go to war.

This story could go on and on. Point is – life happens to us and we decide how we will respond.

Author and leadership guru, Steven Covey, tells a powerful story of riding the subway in New York one quiet Sunday morning when a man and his children got on his subway car. The man sat down next to Covey and closed his eyes, while his children immediately began yelling back and forth, throwing things, and even grabbing people's papers.

Although the children were being very disruptive, the father made no attempt to control his children. It appeared that he was oblivious to the situation. Covey grew more irritated by the minute. Clearly everyone else on the subway felt irritated, too. So Covey

finally turned to the man and said, “Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you couldn’t control them a little more.”

The father slowly opened his eyes and said, “I suppose you’re right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don’t know what to think, and I guess they don’t know how to handle it, either.” In that moment, the circumstance suddenly looked different for Covey.

Sometimes we often don’t know what to make of our circumstances. Sometimes things happen and we see our circumstances differently. The prophet Isaiah was called by God to help people see their circumstances differently, and, in doing so, he restored their faith in God.

Isaiah lived in the 8th century B.C. and brought the word of God to the people of God during one of the most challenging times in their history. There was political, social, and military unrest. The nation was split in two – north and south. Assyria to the north had become a world super power and had invaded the northern kingdom of Judah, taking many of God’s people into captivity, threatening to invade the southern kingdom of Israel. The future of God’s people was in serious jeopardy.

In our reading for today Isaiah is speaking to God’s people in exile. It’s hard to imagine their situation and what they have experienced. They lost their homes, possessions, freedom, and loved ones in the conflict leading to their exile. At the same time the people are wrestling with their identity and purpose. In the 8th century when nations engaged in battle, it was believed that their gods engage in battle too. It was assumed that the victorious nation obviously had the more powerful god.

Imagine a people whose identity and purpose was based on a covenant relationship with the God of all creation – Yahweh. And yet the Israelites lost everything – their possessions, their freedom, their identity, their purpose, and now their faith in God. The Assyrian god must be more powerful than their God. Into this situation Isaiah speaks the words of God.

Isaiah points out that there is a lot more going on here. He suggests that God has allowed Assyria to defeat them as a way of disciplining them for their unfaithfulness and injustice towards the weak and poor. It is God, not the Assyrian army, and certainly not the Assyrian gods, who is in charge.

God’s discipline has a purpose. All discipline has a purpose – not to punish but to teach and grow...

When we discipline our children for something they shouldn’t say or do, we often send them into exile to their rooms for a time out. Doing so and we are hoping to teach them what’s appropriate and what isn’t. Inviting them to think about their behavior and apologize and hopefully repent, change their ways. Our job as parents is to help our children grow up.

That's one way of looking at our reading today. God is calling his children, the Israelites, to change their ways and live a life of faithfulness. Isaiah is helping the people to grow up spiritually. He reminds them that God has not abandoned them – God still loves them. The Israelites are in a divine “time out.”

Isaiah says that God will come and rescue them from their bondage, set them free, lead them back to their homeland, and restore their lives. God will do this so that the world will know that there is no god like our God. Isaiah reminds the people – there is no god like our God.

(Read Text)

“Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? Let them proclaim it, let them declare and set it forth before me. Who has announced from of old the things to come? Let them tell us what is yet to be. Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one.”

Imagine hearing these words... imagine thinking that life is over... imagine feeling defeated and abandoned. Isaiah sheds the light of God's word into the darkness of their circumstances. These words offer... hope... and new life.

That's the good news God is still proclaiming into our lives through Jesus? That's the good news we need to hear over and over and over again and again and again, when we feel lost, defeated, confused, hopeless, or at the end of our rope.

I believe we all need to be reminded on a regular basis that no matter how dark our world may seem, no matter how abandoned we may feel, we are never alone. I hope you believe that. There is no darkness that the light of God's love in Jesus Christ cannot overcome. We all need an “Isaiah” in our lives to remind us of God's presence and steadfast love in our lives. We all need an “Isaiah” in our lives to remind us that with God new life is possible.

A few months ago, I was having one of those days. Certain aspects of my life just weren't going the way I had hoped. I was feeling a bit defeated, lost in the darkness of despair. But God sent an “Isaiah” into my life – reminding me of God's love, encouraging me to keep on keeping on, reinforcing the mission God has given me in leading this congregation into the future, giving me hope and a new perspective. My circumstance isn't any different, but I am. My faith is strengthened because of an “Isaiah” in my life

I realize that the world is filled with many people who are lost in darkness, struggling with their identity and purpose, feeling defeated, filled with despair, facing difficult circumstances. You and I are called to be an Isaiah to the people around us, to share the good news of God's steadfast love of God's abiding presence.

Who do you know that needs an “Isaiah,” to help them see life from a different perspective? I encourage you to be an Isaiah to them today. Remind them of God’s steadfast love and abiding presence in their life through you.

Maybe you’re here today and you need an Isaiah. Maybe you are lost in darkness, struggling with your identity and purpose right now, feeling defeated, filled with despair, facing a difficult circumstance. Maybe you need to be reminded of the good news that can change the way you see your circumstances. God’s love is yours. God is with you.

I pray that each one of us will go from here today knowing and believing that we are saved by grace. That you and I are forgiven sinners. That God is with you and God’s love is yours today and every day.

I hope that you will go from here to live in the light of God’s grace... because together we can make this world a brighter place by living the Jesus’ way sharing God’s love, grace, mercy and forgiveness. Amen.