

## **“There is Light” based on Isaiah 43:16-21**

**Delivered by Mallory Brown on April 6, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

As we look back across history and at our current day and time, *hopelessness* is a common theme. *But, so is hopefulness.*

*Hopelessness* – war, famine, racism, pandemics and endemics, slavery, untimely deaths, oppression, suicide, mental illness, murder, economic inequity, gender inequality, pregnancy and infant loss, relentless illness and disease, broken marriages, financial uncertainty, political division, poverty, and hunger.

*But then there's Hopefulness* – justice served, vaccines developed, freedom for the oppressed, deliverance, kind words offered at just the right time, medication, peace negotiations, equal rights, a baby born, a cure, a job found, people doing the right thing and making good trouble for the betterment of all.

We lose hope and we gain hope, over and over again. But it's hard to hold onto hope, especially when you are stressed, mad, or tired? We need a perspective change and, in today's scripture from the prophet Isaiah, God offers that change in perspective that we so desperately need.

Verses 16 and 17 of Isaiah chapter 43 recall the Exodus story, when God's people were delivered from Pharaoh: “Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down; they cannot rise; they are extinguished, quenched like a wick.”

God delivered the Israelites out of bondage by parting the sea and leading them to the Promised Land. This remembering of a story so central to their identity as a people, was surely hope inducing. We, too, have those kinds of stories that are key to our understanding of ourselves as a family, a people group, a culture, a faith community, a nation, and the like. We remember our history and the ways in which we got to where we are today. As people of faith, we can look back with hope and see God's presence at every corner.

But, sometimes looking into the past isn't quite the viewpoint we need to move forward. *We often need a perspective change.* God offers this perspective change to the Israelites.

In verses 18 and 19, God says, “Do *not* remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; how it springs forth; do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”

The Message translation reads, “Forget about what's happened; don't keep going over old history. Be alert, be present. I'm about to do something brand-new. It's bursting out! Don't you see it? There it is! I'm making a road through the desert, rivers in the badlands.” I like those words in that translation – Don't remember the things of old. Forget what's happened. Look forward. Be alert. Be present. Be right here, right now. God is doing something brand new! And if you're looking backwards, you can't see it.

For the Israelites, God was about to deliver them again, through the wilderness and back home. For so long, they had been a community in exile, living far from home and suffering yet again under oppressive rulers. They ached for home and longed for the days of the past when God had delivered them from the Pharaoh in the Exodus story.

We, too, tend to dwell in the past. We remember the good old days, but God calls us to look ahead to something brand new. If we take seriously these words of scripture, we have to keep our eyes

peeled for the unfolding of God's "way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert" right here now and yet to unfold before us in the days ahead. We look forward. God promised an even more glorious deliverance to the Israelites and God promises that for us, too.

*So, how do I see God's unfolding of this promise? What gives me hope?* As many of you know, I have two children, Annie Kate, our four-year-old, and Julian, our two-month-old. When I look into the sweet little eyes of my daughter and my son, I know these are the good old days. Days filled with pumping and washing bottles and changing diapers, searching for four-leaf clovers and drawing with chalk in the driveway, going to the park and rushing to dance class, filling lunchboxes and coloring in coloring books, and lots of time trying to just get them to sleep.

These days are hard and good, and the best is yet to come. I just know it. While my son is still just a sweet, sleepy baby, my daughter has quite the personality. She's a fantastic human. She is joyful, empathetic, kind, super extroverted, intelligent, thoughtful, and a little spicy. I know these traits will carry her in the days ahead. I know my son is just as wonderful, and I can't wait for his little personality to show up in the coming months and years. When I focus on and pour into them, I know the future is bright.

Other things that give me hope are: The fact that one bad day is just one bad day. The sun sets and we get to start over afresh in the morning. Another thing is working with Feeding Kids Cleveland County and seeing the impact that a simple box of food has on a family in need. Another thing is music, and right now, we are big fans of the movie *Trolls: World Tour* in our house. I swear we've watched it 36 times in the past two weeks.

The last song in the movie is called "Just Sing." The chorus goes like this: "Just sing, sing it together, Louder than ever, forget, everything. Just sing like it's what we've been missing and they're gonna listen, listen, forget everything. Just sing." Sometimes you just have to sing and forget everything else in order to get some life back inside of you. It works for me almost every time.

The last thing is springtime. Every year, I love seeing the earth green-up again. When COVID hit five years ago, the literal growing of grass and leaves and flowers helped me hang on to hope. During this season, there is more sunlight to enjoy, and flowering trees and bushes brighten up the once barren landscape. Springtime is a glimpse at God's presence for me - a reminder that renewal is on the horizon all the time.

*So, what gives you hope?* I'll let you think for a minute. Perhaps you can even write it down. A while ago, I took to Facebook and asked this very question. Here's how some folks responded. Someone said, "Our new generation. I love what I see in how they live and the results." "Children." "Even in extreme times, history shows that the pendulum always swings." "For me, hope comes from trusting that life is unfolding as it should. The chaos and order, sadness and joy - it is a beautiful mess and I'm grateful." "Encountering good people. They are out there." "Sunlight!"

"Those moments when we understand deeper, find empathy, and come together to help others. Seeing helpers in different situations renews my hope." "Young people being kind, thoughtful, and generous to those around them...especially the less fortunate!" "Sunrises."

"Hope for me is both believing in the power of your actions to shape your future and accepting that my desired future may not be directly created by my actions. Hope lies in both our efforts and the acceptance of life's unpredictability." "Simple or surprise kindness moments! I still think about a construction worker who gave up his seat on a commuter train so my kids could sit together, dance students who brought in their Halloween candy to share with me/classmates, a nice text from someone out of the blue, etc."

*See? There is hope. Let's hold onto it!*

The last verses from the scripture for today, verses 20 and 21 read, "The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise."

This imagery of the peaceable kingdom where wild animals live in harmony with humanity is present here in these verses, but also in passages like Isaiah 11:6-9: The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child shall lead them," and so on.

This is a foreshadowing of a future peace that God brings to the earth and its people. Does this mean we bide our time until this day is fulfilled? No.

We have to join together now, alongside God, and take part in bringing hope, joy, peace, and love to this world. Now, more than ever, our world is crying out for help, and it is my belief that we can all do something to make a difference. Frederick Buechner said, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

To whom or where are you called? What is your calling? How can you join in God's work and give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert?

Many of us probably have a pretty limited understanding of literal wilderness. You know, the woods and stuff. My understanding is limited to a neatly maintained trail in a state park or a well-kept campsite with showers and such. I don't count myself as a real outdoorsy person. I like to be outside, but not roughing it. One of the three times I have been camping in my 34 years of life, two of those times with Carol Ann, I almost cut the end of my finger off and froze to death. I like to stay dry and warm.

The Israelites, in their exile, definitely had a much different understanding of wilderness. In this passage, they are actually in the wilderness, exiled from their home and waiting for deliverance from God. So, this wilderness imagery was way more than just imagery. It was literally their situation at the time, making these words way more powerful to them than they are to us, a people who live in homes with central heating and air, WiFi, hot showers, and all that stuff.

But, while we may not ever come face to face with literal wilderness with wild animals and such, we certainly have our places and times of *metaphorical* wilderness. Times of barrenness, isolation, a lack of something, an uncertainty, fear. Times where it is hard to hold onto hope. I'm sure something comes to mind for each of you.

For me, that time was college. I went to AppState and excelled academically, but when it came to coping with homesickness, social situations, balancing new responsibilities, and mental health challenges, I did not excel. It was really hard and really lonely. On the outside, you probably wouldn't have known how much I struggled. I didn't tell anyone and didn't know how or who to ask for help.

No one knew how I felt and how badly I was coping. I was just there, performing the best I knew how, but suffering with deep depression, debilitating anxiety, a super strict exercise regimen, and extremely disordered eating. Yet, I did it. My grades were near perfect. I had close friends. I was an active part of a campus ministry. I ran every single day. I worked and volunteered. I graduated on time with honors. *But, still, college was my wilderness and by the end of it, I was so utterly exhausted and bone tired, all I could do was cry out to God.*

And God delivered me out of that. I had to do a lot of hard work to get out of it, but none of it would have been possible without certain people and opportunities, but God delivered me. I know that everyone has something from which God delivered them. Maybe you are in the wilderness right now. I, personally, still struggle with all of the things I struggled with in college, but it's just a little part of my life. I know there will be days ahead of me that will be worse than others. But, I know that God will deliver me out of those days because God did it once and will continue to do it again and again.

A writer I have come to cherish this year is Ross Gay. In his 2019 book, *The Book of Delights*, he writes, "It astonishes me sometimes - no, often - how every person I get to know - everyone, regardless of everything, by which I mean *everything* - lives with some profound personal sorrow. Brother addicted. Mother murdered. Dad died in surgery. Rejected by their family. Cancer came back. Evicted. Fetus not okay. Everyone, regardless, always, of everything. Not to mention the existential sorrow we all might be afflicted with, which is that we, and what we love, will soon be annihilated. Which sounds more dramatic than it might. Let me just say dead. Is this, sorrow, of which our impending being no more might be the foundation, the great wilderness? Is sorrow the true wild? And if it is - and if we join them - your wild to mine - what's that? For joining, too, is a kind of annihilation. What if we joined our sorrows, I'm saying. I'm saying: What if that is joy?"

What if joining our wilderness with your wilderness and my wilderness and their wilderness is how we find hope? I am sure that is what the people in exile from today's scripture did. They were all in the same wilderness together. Didn't that give them hope to press on? That togetherness?

I encourage you to look back on your life or where you are today and consider what your wilderness is. To whom did you join your wilderness? Where is God in that story? How does God's presence then give you hope for an even better story ahead? Don't dwell too much on the past if it gets you down. Just consider it for a bit. Let this reflection move you forward to hope ahead.

*This is the perspective change we need.* God was going to be present in new and more transformative ways for the Israelites, and God continues to be present in new and transformative ways for us. God will surely make rivers in the wasteland, something from what seems like absolutely nothing.

But often, the raw materials with which God has to work look so dismal to me, especially nowadays. We are a tough crowd, y'all. We have so much more in modern times, yet can be so negative, so dismal, so pointed towards the darkness, the bad, the despairing, the repressed in such dead-end ways. But, God says, "Don't lose heart!"

During this season of Lent, with themes of darkness and sadness as we journey to the cross and crucifixion of Jesus, we are faced head-on with the mess we have made of ourselves, our relationships, and the world around us. Therefore, this season is often marked with denial and penitence, not to punish us necessarily, but to call us to reflect upon our shortcomings and give more time to the God who cares for us, loves us, and calls us their children *anyway*. God gave us his only son, Jesus, who died a brutal death but was resurrected. Another return of Christ is yet to come. God will do an even greater thing, restoring and redeeming the whole world. We are called to believe that God hasn't given up on us yet.

We are called to join God by making ourselves, our relationships, and the world around us better. In our realization that we are broken people, full of sorrow, incapable of fixing ourselves, we are called to clothe those without, let others in, feed the hungry, love our neighbors, do justice, be kind, and do small things with great love. We raise kind kids. We teach peace and acceptance. We don't stand for complacency or do nothingness. We get up in the morning and sing! We plant trees and

flowers. We speak up for those who don't have a voice that anyone will listen to. We get connected with a cause that matters to us. We commit ourselves to seeking justice. We read a book and give books to others to read. We have a face-to-face conversation with someone instead of arguing in the Facebook comments section. We get to know someone different than us.

We seek hope in all things.

I'll leave you with this quote from my favorite television show, *Call the Midwife*. It's a BBC show set in the 1950s and 60s in the poverty-stricken East End of London. It's a show that teaches viewers what it means to hold onto hope in some of the worst of times and dire situations. Many of the episodes are like mini-sermons and really powerful.

Nurse Jenny Lee narrates the show, and at the end of one episode, she says, "There is light, there is, look for it. Look for it shining over your shoulder, on the pass. It was light where you went once, it is light where you are now, it will be light where you go again."

Just imagine God saying these words to you on the darkest of days. We *must* look for this hope-light because it's there. Behind us, in front of us, and just around the corner.

This time in history is disorienting. Looking for hope seems like a little pie in the sky or a little like looking through rose-colored glasses. But it's really not. It's just not what our culture pushes for. We are a people of God, a community of faith called to a higher purpose, and we have a promise from the Most High that a better day is here now and will one day be fulfilled to completion. Will you join God on this Way of Hope?

May it be so.

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Dear God,

In the deserted places of our lives—where hope feels distant, and the path seems barren—you remind us that You are near. You are the river in the wilderness, the light in our darkness, the whisper of grace in our weary hearts.

Lord, help us to trust that even in our emptiness, You are working. Renew our strength, restore our hope, and lead us forward with faith. May we leave this place today carrying the assurance that no place is truly deserted when You are with us. Help us believe this.

In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.