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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

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Isaiah 40:21-31

Our Hope

Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning. And good morning to all of you who join us online from your home. We worship in limited forms this morning, but we earnestly await a soon-coming time when normalcy returns. I have heard from some in our midst that they have received their COVID vaccinations, or they are scheduled to receive them soon. Can you feel it? The here, but not yet of this moment. Let us pray: God, creator of this universe, you know each star in the sky by name. Your tender care and love for your creation and your creatures gives us hope. Just as you did not give up on the Israelites even when they had turned to go their own way, we can depend on your steadfast, covenantal love. Even when the brokenness around us overwhelms us and nearly drowns us, we hope in you, in your power to renew and restore this universe and each one of us. Even when it seems like all has been lost and our enemies have broken us down to never rise again, we hope in you. We earnestly wait and hope for the day when your kingdom comes fully on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus's name. Amen

Our text this morning, Isaiah chapter 40 marks a transition and dramatic change from the first 39 chapters of Isaiah. At the end of chapter 39, the prophet Isaiah tells Hezekiah, the king of Judah, the southern kingdom, that the Babylonians will one day take the resources and the people of Jerusalem into exile to the capital of the Babylonian empire. Hezekiah does not seem too bothered by the prophet's words as long as he is able to finish his time as king with peace and security. Many years will pass before Isaiah's words come true though. Hezekiah and his father

Ahaz are kings of Judah in the latter half of the 8th century BCE, so between 750 and 700 BCE. During this same period, the Assyrian empire wipes out the northern kingdom of Israel also called Samaria for its capital. In case you are not sure where we are in the biblical story, we must remember that after King Solomon, the nation of Israel breaks apart. Almost the entire kingdom follows the labor leader Jeroboam, while only the descendants of Judah follow one of the sons of Solomon, Rehoboam. Both Jeroboam and Rehoboam claim to be rightful kings. Jerusalem, where Solomon built the temple and where their great ancestor David reigned as king, becomes the capital of the southern kingdom, called Judah where Rehoboam reigns. The city of Samaria becomes the capital of the much larger northern kingdom, called Israel, where Jeroboam reigns. All of the kings who succeed Jeroboam are described as evil in the sight of the Lord. After Jeroboam establishes his throne at Samaria, he also makes 2 golden calves that the people can worship at the capital. He then blasphemously claims that these golden calves are the gods that brought their ancestors out of Egypt, a slap in the face not only to YHWH, the relational God that called the Israelite people from Egypt but also a slap in the face to the temple in Jerusalem. Jeroboam cannot allow his people to worship in Jerusalem, the capital of their enemies, so he creates a horrible alternative, which haunts the northern kingdom for generations. In the southern kingdom, only a few of the Kings worship God at the temple and do good in the sight of their God. 150 years after the kingdom had split, the Assyrian army enters the story just before Isaiah 40. The Assyrian King comes to conquer the northern kingdom and lead a large group of captives humiliated back to Nineveh in the east. The northern kingdom ends in 722 BCE.

After the northern kingdom falls, the king of Assyria sets his eyes on Jerusalem, but fails to take the city. In contrast to the northern kings' arrogance, King Hezekiah prays to God to save Judah from the Assyrians, and God acts, forcing the Assyrians to return to Nineveh, the capital.

Not much later, Hezekiah becomes sick to the point of almost dying. After Isaiah warns the king that he is going to die, Hezekiah prays to God again and God gives him another 15 years of life. Envoys from Babylon then come to Jerusalem with letters and presents for King Hezekiah. The king of Babylon had heard that Hezekiah was sick, so he had sent along gifts in honor of the king and in hopes that the king would recover. Hezekiah welcomes the gifts from Babylon and foolishly shows the Babylonian envoys all of the resources that have been built up in his storehouses in Jerusalem, an unwise strategic move for any political leader. Not long after the Babylonian messengers leave Jerusalem, Isaiah asks the king what they were doing and why they had come. King Hezekiah tells Isaiah that they had brought gifts to the King in his sickness, and Hezekiah had hospitably shown them all that was in the king's storehouses. Isaiah then warns the king, most likely because these envoys were spies, that these same people will one day take everything that he had shown them.

200 years pass between Isaiah 39 and 40. When we begin our text, the people of Judah have lived in exile for at least forty years. All that Isaiah had predicted in 700 BCE to King Hezekiah had come true. King Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem in 597 BCE, just over 100 years later, and took the first group of captives back to Babylon. Then in 587 BCE, just 10 years later, Nebuchadnezzar destroys the entire city of Jerusalem, taking everything and leaving only enough people to care for the farmland around the city. Everything else is destroyed. Almost 50 years have passed since the people walked to exile in Babylon. Our text begins around 539 BCE. Cyrus, the king of Persia is in the process of taking over the Babylonian Empire.

This new Persian empire under Cyrus the Great is not concerned about the captives of the previous empire, so Cyrus allows for all of his captive people groups to return to their home lands and begin rebuilding their towns, cities, and cultures, a very different kind of leader from

those of Assyria or Babylon. In this transition, a prophet in the tradition of Isaiah begins speaking to the people in exile, creating what becomes the later half of the book of Isaiah. By this time though, many Israelite families in exile have assimilated to the Babylonian culture and religion. This new prophet has the enormous challenge of rekindling hope in the God of Israel and invigorating his people in exile.

We must remember that Israel was confident that their God, or at least the God that they claimed to be in covenant or relationship with, would protect them and fight for them if need be like he had in Egypt, at the Red Sea, in the time of the judges, or even during King Hezekiah's rule. God had intervened for the southern kingdom and had driven Assyria away, but this exile was different. God had allowed them to be defeated and humiliated by the Babylonians. What were they to think of their supposed almighty God now? It seemed as if the gods of the Babylonians were stronger than YHWH, the Lord, the covenantal or relational God that had called them from Egypt so many years ago. Was YHWH even concerned about them anymore, or had the Lord given up on them, left them to rot in the capital of the empire as slaves and servants of the Babylonians. How could they argue with their Babylonian neighbors, who claimed that their god, Marduk, had enabled them as a people to build this great empire and conquer many foreign lands, including the Israelites' supposed promised land? Was the Israelite God really who they had always thought she was, or at least who she had revealed herself to be over the many generations of Israel that had worshipped him? Many Israelites had joined Babylonian society, completely giving up on their culture and its god, joining their neighbors in worshipping the Babylonian gods. These people who left behind their Israelite neighbors and friends made valid points as they left. Either God had given up on them and abandoned them to the will and power of the Babylonian king and his armies, or God was not strong enough to save

them in their moment of deepest need, in their moment of deepest humiliation and despair.

Remember that God had promised them the land and the kingdom forever in the stories of their ancestors David and Abraham, but all of that had come to nothing. Why would anyone want to stay in relationship or covenant with this god? YHWH had fallen victim to divine abandonment or divine impotence. Why could God not act as she did before? How many of us have thought this in the midst of difficult or downright tragic situations?

But this is not where the story ends. A prophet in the tradition of Isaiah hears about the new edicts or laws coming down from Cyrus, the new Persian king. He is allowing people to return to their homelands, to rebuild their cities and cultures. Later in the book of Isaiah in chapter 45, this prophet writes of Cyrus as God's instrument, used by YHWH for Israel's sake so that God's people can return to Jerusalem to rebuild and reclaim it. This prophet must convince the people that God has not abandoned them or given up on them. YHWH, the Lord, is not powerless against the great armies of Babylon or Persia. In fact, Israel's God, the God that we claim to serve and love today, was integrally involved in the events that have led to Israel's exile in Babylon and their soon-coming return to Jerusalem. This message of returning home in YHWH's blessing is the background of our passage this morning.

We have looked at and discussed the context, the larger details and story surrounding Isaiah 40. Now we look directly at the text, starting with verse 21. "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?" Remember! Just like I spoke of in my sermon last week. The prophet and by extension, the God of Israel is calling on her people to remember. You have been through a lot, you have suffered much, you have been carried off to an unfamiliar place, forced to serve other people and their gods. But do you remember what you have heard and seen, the stories that

your ancestors have passed on to you and that you have passed on to your children even in exile? Remember me, your Lord and your God. Your experience tells you to give up, to give in, to worship lifeless idols and serve powerful kings, but remember. Your ancestors' hope was not unfounded, the stories that have shaped your community and gotten you this far are true. Remember! From the beginning to now, from the foundations of the earth to the highest heavens, remember the Lord.

Verses 22-24 read, "It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth." YHWH, the Lord of the universe, the God who is still in covenant relationship with you even though you are in exile, he is the one you are to remember. Your God, who created this universe, is outside of its reality, and yet is intimately involved in its happenings, this God carefully stretched the heavens over the earth, setting up the tent, the habitable space that humans can enjoy and flourish in. Your God is greater than this creation, but this creation should remind you of God's covenant or relationship with and care for you even when life seems so dismal and broken in exile. Those kings and armies and rulers and authorities and weapons and powers around you that have dragged you to a foreign land and stripped you of your identity, they are nothing in comparison to YHWH, the great king of the universe, who blows on them and they wither, die out, and dry up like bean stubble or corn stalks. Those rulers cannot stand against the power of the God of the Israelites. These rulers are fleeting, for few of them ever reach these heights of glory and few of them can maintain it, for once they think that their kingdoms have taken root and begun to sustain themselves, another greater power and violent offender will come, tear them out, and destroy

them, for that is what all earthly kingdoms and powers do to each other. But your God, the God of your ancestors, YHWH is different than these rulers and kings who cling to their power and their authority. The God of Israel is the one true and benevolent King. Our Lord is holy.

God speaks directly to his people for the first time in this passage in verses 25 and the beginning of 26. “To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? Says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these?” Just like God and the prophet Elijah mocked King Ahab’s prophets of Baal in 1 Kings, God asks his people if there is any king or god that compares to YHWH. This situation would also bring back memories of Egypt, how the Lord and his servant Moses showed Pharaoh how powerless he was in the presence of YHWH, the LORD. “Is there any ruler who is my equal?” YHWH asks the people in exile with the inferred response being no. Just to make sure that God has gotten her point across, God commands the people to look up and see, a command that they would have heard whenever Babylonian men of authority would have been present. All people would have been required to pay respect or homage to not only the king of Babylon in all of his glory and riches but also all of the kings’ gods, those who had helped the Babylonian king establish his empire. But YHWH does not call the Israelites to look upon his throne or his great riches or require their submission by violence even; God calls them to look at creation. Look at what I have already done, what I have already made. The stars and the planets and the sun and the moon in their proper place night and day. Could anyone else have created this universe? Can the Babylonian king do this? Of course not. Remember the covenant that I have made with you, a relationship that does not involve violent submission and brutal coercion and manipulation. God’s kingdom, YHWH’s empire is not the same as those who have dominated Israel. Like a close friend in the rest of verses 26 and 27, the prophet reminds the Israelites that just as God has placed each star in the sky and called them by

name, so God has not forgotten or disregarded his covenant people. It is almost as if God is whispering to the people, “I’m still here, and I always have been, even through the destruction of your home and long walk into exile. I did not leave or forsake you.”

Finally, we encounter the familiar part of this passage, in which the prophet calls the people to remember how YHWH has strengthened and empowered them before, and if they follow God’s lead in this moment toward rebuilding their home and their people, God will be there again with them. Those that wait on YHWH will have renewed strength and indomitable stamina for the mission, to which God is calling them. “Have you not known? Have you not heard? YHWH is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for YHWH shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

In the United States, we have great difficulty understanding the plight of the Israelites in exile. Few of us are refugees or know people personally who are refugees. We do not know intimately what it is like to be forced to leave our homes, families, communities, and even countries out of fear of violence or civil war or genocide or any number of other conflicts over power and land. So, when we hear about the struggle of commitment to God in the face of exile for the Israelites, we must consider how difficult, straining, insufferable that these moments must have been. By this time, the people probably had little desire to go back to Jerusalem. They had finally established some sense of a life in Babylon, and now God was calling them to go back. Was there anything left there that they could even salvage? I wonder if some of the prophet’s audience laughed at him, shook their heads, and walked away. How many of us can identify with

those moments when things have seemed hopeless, like God has given up on us, like we have messed up so severely that not even God wants to come alongside us?

Or maybe you noted as I was speaking too that in God's eyes, even the world's greatest kingdoms and the most powerful world leaders are not worth more than anyone else or more significant than all of the others that have gone before. It is humbling to think that even the United State and its 46 presidents are only a small blip in the midst of history, another example of a kingdom and its leaders that cannot compare with our God. Our hope can never be founded on the precarious footing of empire or world power, but it can depend on the steadfast, covenant love that God held with her people Israel. Even more, the passage speaks of how scarce these kinds of great world leaders are in the course of history because each great empire could only have one leader. We do not hear about all of the common people, the ones that were conquered in order to establish an empire, nor the ones who did all of the fighting in order to maintain an empire. We often only hear the names of the one, often male, leader or king, but God reminds us in this passage that those leaders and power-hoarders are merely stubble or chaff, dried up and blown away with the breath or wind of God. Our King, the God of the universe, is different and greater than all of the rest. Our God desires and strives for relationship with each one us, knowing each of us by name and counting the hairs on our heads like she names and counts the stars. We must always be reminded that just as God called the people out of exile because of the covenantal relationship that was established between them, so God calls each one of us by name out of our own personal and communal brokenness to depend on and put our hope in the covenantal love that was revealed to us in the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus, our true King and Lord.

Let us pray, Lord of this world, King and Creator of this creation, give us the strength to remember how you have strengthened the powerless and walked alongside the weak and the suffering. Help us to discern your voice in the midst of our own hopelessness or despair. Give us your spirit, your breath of life so that we can face another day, confident in your love, grace, and peace. We depend on you, and we cling to your promises. In Jesus's name we pray, Amen.

Benediction:

This benediction or sending comes from our new hymnal, *Voices Together*.

Live without fear, your creator has made you holy, has always protected you, and loves you as a mother. Go in peace to follow the good road, and may God's blessing be with you always. Go in peace.