

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
21 November 2021

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Christ the King Sunday

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Good News and Gratitude: The Centerpieces of a Thriving Table”

Final sermon in the 6-week series: *Table of Abundance*

Isaiah 9:1-7

New Revised Standard Version

“But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish,”

(v1). According to Miriam-Webster, anguish is severe and extreme mental or physical pain, distress, or anxiety.¹ You can be grieving – deeply mourning the loss of someone you love – heartbroken that they are gone, but not be anguished. You can be hurting physically – in the hospital with organ failure or broken bones, but not be anguished. You can be angry and infuriated at injustice – wondering how violence has become so acceptable and commonplace in our streets, schools, and courthouses, but not be anguished. You can be anxious and depressed – overwhelmed by people and expectations or wondering what your purpose is, but not be anguished. Anguish is ‘next level’ kind of pain.

Spiritually speaking, anguish seems to come – not because we are hurting or grieving or angry

or depressed – but because we feel that God is absent in the midst of that hurt, grief, anger, or depression. Anguish comes when we cannot find a thread of hope to hold on to, when life seems to have no greater meaning than the pain we are in. Anguish is a deep feeling of absence.

When Isaiah is writing this chapter, the people of Israel are distressed, hungry, walking in ‘darkness’ as the text says, completely devastated by the invasion of Assyria that plundered their lives and livelihood leaving them with nothing. Families were separated. Many were deported to Assyria. Others were left behind, but now lived under Assyrian rule in the homes where they once were free – seeing daily reminders perhaps of what life used to be, compared to what life is now. The ravages of war and a conquering neighbor-state have

¹ Definition from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anguish> (Nov. 21, 2021).

left them depleted. But even more, it has left them with a feeling of desperation – the sense that God has abandoned them; that God is nowhere to be found; that God is not listening; that God is not providing or protecting, guiding or giving. And we know this is the anguish they feel because Isaiah voices it just a few verses earlier in chapter 8, verse 17, “*I am waiting for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob...*” In the theology of their day, the phrase, “the Lord is hiding his face” is biblical speak for “God has given up on us.”

Isaiah is naming the reality that so many of us have experienced in our lives or may even be experiencing today – “*divine silence, and the seemingly interminable [endless] wait for divine action,*”² or intervention.

To suffer is one thing, to suffer without the assurance of God’s presence with you in your suffering – that is anguish. And it is a really painful place to reside.

In verse 2 we read that the people do not just see darkness, they are walking inside of it; they feel it, and are surrounded by it.

“Who are these people walking in darkness? Verse 1 says it’s those in ‘*the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.*’ So here’s a bit of a geography lesson. Israel was hemmed in on the east and west by the sea and the mountains so whenever foreign armies attacked Israel, they went first to Galilee in the north. The nations entered there. [As one scholar put it,] Galileans didn’t just have a tough day, they had a tough life. They knew what it was to suffer. Isaiah is saying hope would come first to those who suffered most. Those who took the brunt of every invasion would be the first to see the light dawning out ahead. [Side note:] where is it that Jesus begins his ministry? Galilee. (Matthew 4:12-17). Those walking in darkness found themselves ushered into the light of Christ first.”³ Which is perhaps a comfort, except that I think I’d rather take a ticket to

² Christopher B. Hays, “Commentary on Isaiah 9:1-7,” *Working Preacher* (Nov. 19, 2017), accessed on Nov. 21, 2021 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/isaiah-a-child-is-born/commentary-on-isaiah-91-7>.

³ David McLemore, “Isaiah 9:1-7 | The Hope of Christmas,” *Things of the Sort* (Dec. 14, 2020), accessed on Nov. 21, 2021 at <https://www.thingsofthesort.com/sermons-2/2020/12/14/isaiah-91-7-the-hope-of-christmas>.

be second or third or fourth in line to receive the Light of Christ if it meant I didn't have to be number one in line to receive anguish.

Yet into the people's anguish, what does Isaiah do? He bursts into song – writing this song of Thanksgiving about “light shining and people rejoicing and justice and righteousness reigning forevermore.” To those people in darkness, these words could easily feel like trite platitudes or cliches.

Similar to someone saying to you in your grief, *“well at least heaven has another angel now”* or someone saying to you in your depression or heartache, *“well if you just count your blessings – that will cheer you up.”*

We usually read this passage during Advent and it gives us warm and fuzzy feelings as we think about the Christ child being born into our world – as a Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Who doesn't love that imagery? But to a people whose world is falling apart, is this kind of “word of hope” helpful or hurtful?

When everything around you is darkness, do you want to hear about the Light that others are celebrating? It reminds me of the cynical retort to the optimism, *“There's always light at the end of the tunnel”* which says, *“The light at the end of the tunnel is just the light of an oncoming train.”*

Isaiah 9 is a beautiful passage to read and sing about when life is going well, but what about when life is going horribly wrong? Or when it is seemingly just the same, stagnating? What do we read then?

Well, maybe we read Isaiah 9, then too. Because remember – Isaiah the prophet is not removed from his people. Unlike Amos who was from the Southern Kingdom, but called to speak into the lives of those in Northern Kingdom, Isaiah is from Jerusalem and is a prophet from and to the Southern Kingdom. And Isaiah's ministry is 40 years long, or more. So he's not an itinerant preacher who just pops in on people he doesn't know to preach a canned sermon that he's rehearsed over and over again. Isaiah is “in the thick of it” with his people. What they are feeling, he is feeling. The experiences the people are

having – the experiences into which he speaks his message – is also the experience he is having. In other words, if the people are in anguish, then so is Isaiah. Remember, he's the one who said the Lord had hidden his face from them!

But – he also said, right after that, “*but I will hope in the Lord,*” (Isaiah 8:17). The Lord which Isaiah feels is nowhere to be found, is the same Lord that Isaiah continues to put his hope in.

How does one do that? How do we hope in a God that we feel is nowhere to be found?

Well, maybe we keep reading and re-reading Isaiah 9.

The people are barely surviving right now and yet Isaiah 9 is a coronation hymn, a song of thanksgiving, about a king that the people are longing for...a king from the Davidic line that will finally live up to what a king is supposed to be. The song paints a picture of Thriving to a people who are barely Surviving.

I know from conversations with a lot of you that many of us feel like we are just surviving right now – hanging on to a faith that

we hope will pay off one day or that God will show up in your life eventually. From dysfunctional governments to unjust systems that oppress and divide to a relentless pandemic, to our own personal griefs and losses and stresses and family difficulties under our own roofs, to fires in our Rocky Mountains and gunfire in our high schools. Many days life can feel like a survival game that stopped being fun to play a long, long time ago. There is no cash reward to be won, no fame to be gained. The survival of the fittest has turned into just trying to fit in to survive – which may mean pretending we're okay when we're not, or trying to be something we're not in order to get somewhere we think we need to be, or just acquiescing to whatever happens because we don't our problems matter that much or that our lives are worthy of redemption.

So maybe you and I can relate to Israelites...and how in their surviving, they *want to be thriving* – but don't know now if that could ever be possible for them again as long as the Assyrians loom large. And sure, it's not the Assyrians for us – but something is looming large in your life, I bet. Something (or a few somethings) have taken

over and made themselves at home in your house or exiled you to a land and a life you do not recognize. And you feel trapped perhaps, and don't know how to find your way out.

If you ever feel that way, then you can read the words of Isaiah 9 with some empathy for the people to whom Isaiah is writing and see why they longed for this perfect king to come and fix everything.

Some scholars think this coronation song was for the Judean King Hezekiah in 727 BCE, whose name means “mighty God” or “one given strength or might by God” – others believe it could have been for King Josiah, who took the throne at age 8 as a child in 640 BCE, and who reigned when the Neo-Assyrian empire was finally falling⁴ – and still others believe this coronation hymn was for a king that was to come far in the future...a *new* descendent of David that would finally walk and rule in a “righteous” way.

Like American presidents perhaps, the Davidic kings never quite lived up to what a king was supposed to be, but

with every new king, there was hope that *this one* would be the IDEAL Davidic king. In many ways, the people held out hope in humanity – that one day a human ruler would come that would be humble like a child, but have the authority of justice and righteousness on his strong shoulders – and be a Wonderful Counselor (a good listener and advice-giver), Mighty God, Everlasting Father (never defeated and always loving), and a Prince of Peace (abolisher of warfare). That's a pretty bold hope for one king (one person), especially given the track record of previous kings. But the people didn't give up on dreaming that the ideal could one day be the reality.

But before painting this picture of an ideal king to come, Isaiah spends a few verses saying how the Lord has brought joy on the people in the past – through bountiful harvests and times when slavery and war had ended – times they enjoyed joy and bounty and plenty. That is the light shining of which Isaiah speaks. The times in the past when God has shown up when the people were walking in darkness. Isaiah is thanking God for being God in the ways that

⁴ Hays, *ibid.*

the people needed God to be God in the past – and then, in the midst of their current anguishing circumstances, he is prophesying into the future about One who is coming who will bring a forever kind of hope, not just a temporary fix.

Do you see how Isaiah is setting the Table? It's *not* with an Abundance of Blessings that they can see in *that* moment. Isaiah's centerpiece is not a cornucopia of all the things the people are grateful for in the present. Nope. He probably knew that if he had set that out, it would be pretty empty – as the people were struggling to conjure up blessings in their current situation.

As the people sit down around Isaiah's table, they are cautious, hoping that the chairs won't be pulled out from under them...that's how skeptical they are. And so for these people who are skeptical and in anguish and who are hungry for hope, Isaiah sets their Table with a two-fold centerpiece of *Gratitude* and *Good News*.

Isaiah sets as *Gratitude* the recollection of events from the past when the people felt like God had been there for them – the joy of a really good harvest

and the relief of the end to war – (he invites them to remember those feelings) – and then he sets as *Good News* – the future hope of a reign that will bring peace, steadfastness, justice, righteousness...the might and strength of a father coupled with the innocence and humility of a child. (And he invites them to imagine what that will feel like.) It's quite the vision. A two-fold centerpiece that serves the purpose of reminding them how they can thrive even in this hard time...they can thrive by being reminded of what is worth keeping at the center of their lives.

The *Gratitude* half of the Centerpiece allows the people to recall God's faithfulness in the past. The *Good News* half of the Centerpiece allows the people to dream about God's faithfulness in the future. And both of those centerpieces – the *Gratitude for the Past* and the *Good News of the Future* – still welcome and acknowledge the people's present reality of anguish and darkness and hopelessness. It doesn't take their present reality away. It just plops down right in the middle of it all and says, "don't forget to look at me from time to time."

This is not one of those huge centerpieces that obscures the vision of those sitting across from one another at the Table. Nor is it a centerpiece to distract from the pretty horrible food they are eating. It is a centerpiece that is there to do what centerpieces do best – draw our attention to a common focal point – something perhaps like a low-lying bowl with floating candles that can hold and reflect the stories of those sitting around the table, rather than, say, a huge floral arrangement that overshadows the people from seeing one another as they are or that forces them to ‘smell the roses’ so to speak.

Let me say this again but in a different way – because it’s really important.

Isaiah doesn’t ask the people to find hope by pulling up a chair to the Table of their past to put on rose-colored glasses and reminisce about how great things were in the past and oh how we wish we could go back to that golden age or time.

Nor does he ask them to find hope by pulling up a chair to Table of their future – saying don’t worry about what you are going through now – you’ll

eventually get through it and life will get better...trust me.

No, in a really profound way, the reason Isaiah can say that “there will be no gloom for those who are in anguish” is because he invites them to find hope by pulling up a chair to the Table of *their Present reality*. Speaking to and naming the current hardships they are facing – and not sugarcoating them or clearing the dirty dishes too fast.

What I love about the vision of Isaiah’s Table here is that he asks them to pull up a chair to the *Table of their present reality* (as messy as it is) – yet sets down in the midst of them a twofold centerpiece to orient them and give them focus – *Gratitude and Good News* – *Gratitude for the past* and *Good News for the future*. Because somehow Isaiah knows, perhaps by personal experience, that no matter what our present reality, IF we can focus on the Gratitude we’ve experienced with God in the past and on the Good News that we hope will come in our future – it *really does allow us* to keep going in our present. To keep showing up at the Table. To keep sharing our story. To keep nourishing ourselves. Without nostalgia about what has been or without naivete

about what will be – but just with acknowledgement that what is – is what it is. And – that what is today – was something different one day in the past and it will be something different one day in the future. We won't always be eating the same dish.

As humans we so easily have myopic vision – which allows us to see things right near us in focus – but everything far away or not directly in front of us is fuzzy. Sometimes we need a vision that is beyond our own experience, not that excludes our own experience, but welcomes it and accepts it and yet also invites us beyond it.

With whatever Table you find yourself sitting out in life right now – one that you want to be at, (a Table full of blessings and joy and love) or one that you feel forced to keep sitting at (a Table of discomfort and hard lessons and unfamiliarity) – *or maybe you're straddling both or having breakfast at one and dinner at the other!* – more often than not, if we can focus on the centerpieces of Gratitude and Good News – it will allow us to keep going in our present. It might, even, allow us to move from anguish to acceptance. Not despairing that God is nowhere

to be found or not showing up at all, but rather perhaps, trusting that God is sitting across the Table from us, or hanging out in the next room, or in the kitchen working up the next meal.

We keep showing up to the Table because God invites us to and welcomes us to...not necessarily because we always see God or feel that God is there. If that were the case – faith would not be needed. Just to keep showing up, is one of the strongest acts of faith there is, I think. It takes enormous courage to keep on keeping on when life is really hard and we have more heartache than hope. And God sees your courage, and celebrates it.

Heather McGhee – economist, social policy advisor, racial justice advocate, and author of *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Us and How We Can Prosper Together* – writes, “*I’m fundamentally a hopeful person, because I know that decisions made the world as it is and that better decisions can change it. Nothing about our situation is inevitable or immutable, but you can’t solve a problem with the consciousness that created it...And everything we believe*

comes from a story we've been told..."⁵

So what stories are you telling?
And what choices are you making?

The STORY we tell as Christians is that Jesus came into the world as an infant to grow up and become the ultimate Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. We tell the story that the ideal Davidic king came in the person of Jesus Christ – forever changing our world. And the CHOICE we make each and every day is to let this vision of Christ reign in our hearts.

Jesus came to transform the world – but he does that by transforming hearts. And so until our hearts are transformed – we won't yet see the transformation of the world. Jesus shines Light on our lives with a flame that will never go out, but he cannot be the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, establishing justice and upholding righteousness from this time on and forevermore – if we do not join him in his reign. If we do not

make a choice to let him in to our lives to breathe a new message of hope into our reality.

Sometimes hope looks like letting go of something we love. Sometimes hope looks like holding on to something that scares us. Sometimes hope looks like standing still where we are – remaining in the discomfort. Sometimes hope looks like stepping forward without knowing where we're going to end up. Sometimes hope means saying we're tired of feeling the way we do and we want to take action to change something about our lives – one thing, one part of our weekly routine. Sometimes hope means just going to sleep trusting that God's mercies will be new in the morning. I don't know what hope looks like for you today – but I know it is within your grasp. Because God holds sets it down in the center of our Table each and every day.

Today, the last day of the liturgical year, or church calendar, is called Christ the King for a reason. It's to remind us that Christ reigns in our hearts and in our worlds – and that his reign – while eternal and everlasting – can only manifest

⁵ Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*, (New

York, NY: One World, Penguin Random House LLC) 2021, xxiii.

here on earth as it is in heaven – if we are putting our faith and hope in him – not just in our past experience of him, or in our future expectation of what we want him to do in our lives, but in our present reality – allowing him to speak into the messiest and hardest parts of our lives.

And when we can't hear him speaking, we just keep listening. And we keep reading scripture to familiarize ourselves with his voice. And we keep serving others and looking to those most oppressed to learn from them in order to familiarize ourselves with his actions and way of being in the world. And we keep loving ourselves and being gentle and kind to ourselves to familiarize ourselves with his way of seeing us and beholding us.

When you can put nothing else on your Table – at least put the two-fold centerpiece of Gratitude and Good News...and be present to what the past reminds you of and what the future draws you toward. And remember that the reign of Christ – the presence of Christ in your life – is always most fully real in the 'here and now', the present moment.

God's presence is as near to us as our very breath. The same

breath that recalls gritudes from our past. The same breath that proclaims the good news of our future. That breath holds a new moment – now, today. And it is guided by our past and leading to our future. We cannot escape hope when it is as near to us as our breath.

As poet Emily Dickinson writes, *“Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul—and sings the tunes without the words—and never stops at all.”*

Hope doesn't need fancy words or perfect faith to land in our lives and sing. It just needs us to keep showing up at the Table...the Table where God has set the centerpieces of Gratitude and Good news – the focal point of our hope – and the reminder to us of how far we have come, how far we have yet to go, and the companions we have on the journey.

Amen.