

Nokesville UMC Sunday Worship [Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany]
February 7, 2021
Rev. YoungMin Kim

See Beyond Reality
Isaiah 40:25-31

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In the movie, “Shawshank Redemption” (1994), Andy, a main character, is sentenced to two consecutive life terms in prison for murder even though he did not commit the crimes; then he is sentenced to the harsh prison, Shawshank. He makes a best friend there—Red—who already spent 20 years at Shawshank. About 20 years passed. One day, Andy and Red had a conversation sitting on the ground against a wall (video). Both Andy and Red are in the same place—Shawshank, physically a prison but metaphorically a hopeless place. There, one still has hope—a life outside of the hopeless place, but the other conforms to a life in despair.

Here is another story. In the place of despair, most people became despondent at their country’s fall and exilic lives in Babylon. Despair, hopelessness, or discouragement might be a natural response in this circumstance. However, one man stood among the people in grief and pronounced a new exodus with consolation, encouragement, and hope. Who are we talking about?

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According to the Lectionary schedule, we read Isaiah 40:25-31. The prophet Isaiah prophesized under four kings of Judah—Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. The reason that God called Isaiah and sent him among the people of Judah was very simple. All the people of Judah and the kings witnessed the fall of their brother country—the kingdom of Israel—by Assyria (722 BC) and their horrible realities caused by their disobedience and unfaithfulness to God. Thus, God wanted His other people—the kingdom of Judah—who covered their eyes and ears and hardened their hearts to return to Him and to prevent another fall. For this, Isaiah was sent.

The Book of Isaiah covers various ranges of time. Chapters 1 through 39 cover God’s judgement of the kingdom of Judah. In spite of the former experience from the kingdom of Israel’s fall, they did not realize their disobedience; and rather than relying on God, they relied on a powerful neighboring country—Egypt—to counterbalance against Assyria. As a result, Isaiah prophesized that the kingdom of Judah would be fallen by Babylon. Chapters 40 through 55 cover God’s new salvation, new creation, and new Exodus for those who suffered from the exile in Babylon. And chapters 56 through the last chapter cover God’s proclamation of the new heaven and new earth for those who returned to Israel from Babylonian exile but fell in despair because of the devastation of Jerusalem, which was once a glory of their age. Because the Book of Isaiah covers times of the Kingdom of Judah (1-39), Babylon (40-55), and Persia (56-66), some scholars, thus, insisted there were three different authors called First Isaiah (or Proto-Isaiah: 1-39), Second Isaiah (or Deutero-Isaiah: 40-55), and Third Isaiah (or Trito-Isaiah: 56-66) who lived and prophesized in each time. And then, the three books were combined sometime later.

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Based on the three divisions of Isaiah, today's passage was written by Second (or Deutero) Isaiah in the Babylonian exile. Second Isaiah was with those who witnessed the fall of the kingdom, became captives to Babylon, and underwent harsh lives on Babylonian soil. And he heard many voices crying out, "My way is hidden from the Lord; my God ignores my predicament" (v. 27b). Instead of answering their cries, Second Isaiah asked a fundamental question. Verse 26 says, "Lift up your eyes on high and see who created these?" And he continued, "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable" (v. 28).

He reminded them of God the Creator. He created the world, and the world included the Jewish exiles in Babylon. God is the One who is everlasting, powerful, and unsearchable. Thus, He is able to give power to the faint, and strength to the powerless. Young people will become tired and weary, and young men will certainly stumble, but "those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength; they will fly up on wings like eagles; they will run and not be tired; they will walk and not be weary" (v. 31). By listening to this proclamation, the Israelite captives might have been reminded of the God of their ancestors who created the world including themselves; who became the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with the promise; and who saved them from the hands of the Egyptians. And in their hearts, which had no hope, a seed of hope sprouted. They might have believed that God never hid their way or ignored their predicament, and that God was with them in the way and bore the predicament with them, and that God was waiting until they returned to Him.

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When we feel we are in any type of predicament, it is a natural response saying, "God, where are You?" "Why do you watch me in silence?" "Why are you waiting in the midst of my pain and agony?" When we feel this way, it is important to ask the fundamental question to ourselves, "Who is God to me?" And then, with a long and deep breath, close our eyes and answer it one by one. In our answers, we will come to find how God has poured out love, grace, and blessings to us; how God has worked within our lives; and how much our God still loves us. And then when we open our eyes, we will find that our predicament still remains. It seems nothing has changed. Don't be discouraged. The situation is not changed, but we are changed. With the confirmation of God's love and grace and the assurance that our God is good and will lead us in the way of righteousness, we come to be strengthened, encouraged, and empowered to face our predicament, to endure it until it passes, and/or to overcome it, just like flying up on wings like eagles.

It is natural that we become despondent when we are in a tough situation. But in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, I want to encourage you to take a step forward in faith, so that you become those who find hope in despair, love in hatred, peace in chaos, and compassion in apathy.