

Barre Congregational Church

November 13, 2022: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost ~

“The Lord is my strength and my salvation”

Our services can be found on our website at www.barrechurch.com

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 12 1-6

I. Introduction:

As people of faith, we truly have the greatest gift of all, and that is the knowledge and faith that in this life nothing happens without God knowing about it. Maybe sometimes we forget about God’s quiet presence in the storm of life, or we are so much in control of our circumstances that we try everything to deal with our stuff, and there is a lot of stuff in our lives to deal with, right? Sometimes life becomes so overwhelming, and then something happens to remind us that we don’t have to struggle so much, and the world does not have to resort to hate and violence and distrust and all kinds of destructive ways of handling conflict, but that God is right here with us to help us... that God is our strength and our salvation.

II. Yahweh’s cries over Jerusalem

The Book of Isaiah is about the suffering and destruction of Jerusalem. Jerusalem becomes the place of disobedience, but also the place of Yahweh’s hopes for its well-being. Isaiah 1 v 21-27 describes Yahweh’s cries over the city’s decline, from being a place of faithfulness, righteousness and justice to a place of carelessness, *“How the faithful city has become a harlot! It was full of justice; righteousness lodged in it, but now murderers. Your silver has become dross, your wine mixed with water. Your princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves; everyone loves bribes, and follows after rewards. They do not defend the fatherless, nor does the cause of the widow come before them. Therefore, the Lord says, The LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel, “Ah, I will rid Myself of My adversaries, and take vengeance on My enemies. I will turn My hand against you, and thoroughly purge away your dross, and take away all your alloy. I will restore your*

judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city." Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and her penitents with righteousness".

The Book of Isaiah covers the period between 760 – 673 BCE during the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian Empire and the Persian Empire. So, it is set within a strong political history with all these surrounding political powers, but it is especially a strong theological book, with its primary theme, as Walter Brueggemann would say, with the predominant and constant character of Yahweh, and also deeply prophetic, describing the purpose of Yahweh in human utterance.

Isaiah's call as prophet is important during this time because he is described as a confidant of Kings, closely involved with the political situation of the day, and deeply associated with the worship and theology of the Temple of Jerusalem. We see his call in Chapter 6 in the Temple, where, after he saw the Lord seated on a throne, and realized he was in a holy place, he declared his sinfulness, and then his lips were cleansed by the seraph with a coal in his hand, and his sins taken away. He heard the words of God asking him, whom shall I send? And who will go for us? And he said, "Here am I. Send me"! His call was not to bring peace, but to talk to the people and make their hearts hardened, and their ears dull, and close their eyes, until their cities lay ruined and without inhabitants and until their houses are left deserted, until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. So, those early chapters in Isaiah speak about the anger of Yahweh over the sins of the people, and Jerusalem, but we also see the mercy of the Lord over the people of God, through the promise of the Branch from Jesse, the One who will come and bring healing and peace. It speaks of the return of the people of Judah from exile, from Assyria, from Elam, from Babylonia.

III. A Doxology of Hope

Those prophetic words from Isaiah, lead us to this passage in Chapter 12, which is divided into two parts, verse 1-3 and 4 – 6. They both start with the words, "In that day you will say...". It is a passage of praise to the God who promises better times for the people of Judah. They may not see and experience it yet, but these promises are certain. Isaiah's

hopeful message to a people devastated by their circumstances is to praise the Lord, the God of goodness and generosity. The God whose wrath came over you, is the same God who will bring mercy over you. The Lord has turned away the anger and is now my salvation. The Lord is my strength and my salvation in their circumstances of devastation.

The second part of our passage is for Judah on that future day to tell the nations what God had done for them, bringing them back from exile and restoring them. These prophetic words from Isaiah come from the certainty and the knowledge that God is with them in their uncertain future as they experience it, and that in faith they must know that their future is determined by their merciful Yahweh whose heart has changed from anger to forgiveness and healing, not by these empires who took them away from their homeland. Again, in Brueggemann's words, "Yahweh's final word is not wrath, but comfort."

IV. Conclusion:

The ebb and flow of life is real, and it affects us in our personal lives, our work life, community life and on larger scale. We have many challenges, such as illness, recovery from illness, financial challenges, family challenges, and lots of uncertainties in our lives. We have the pandemic still showing up in our lives and we have homelessness and numerous social problems our communities are dealing with. The war in Ukraine, and other contexts leave immense destruction and unimaginable physical, emotional, and psychological damage to many. So, the question then is, where is God. Why does this or that happen to me, to us, Lord? Why have all these social, political problems? Why is it that this beautiful world of God still chooses suffering and violence and hate over compassion and care and love and peaceful co-existence? Why is this such a struggle, Lord? Isaiah gives us the answer this morning. The Holy One of Israel is among you. God never left us. But more, The Lord is our strength and our salvation today, tomorrow, and forever. God restores and heals and comforts us. May God's word and God's Holy Spirit remind us of this always and help us to call upon this Living God especially today, and praise God for such an amazing truth and promise and what God can do, and that is to turn anger into peace, suffering into comfort. Amen