

“Starting Over”

Isaiah 65:17-25

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

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What do you say to help someone who is at the lowest point in their life? This was the daunting challenge facing the prophet as he penned these words in the third and final section of Isaiah to the Israelites. Let me tell you why they were struggling.

In 597 BCE, the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem and took control of the land. They did not destroy the Temple or the city, but took three thousand of the best and brightest citizens to Babylon, including the king and queen mother. Regulations and taxes were imposed upon those who remained in Judah, however, the Babylonians allowed Zedekiah to serve as governor and interfered little in their affairs.

In spite of this, the next decade was a period of upheaval in Jerusalem. There was a strong faction of zealots in Jerusalem who wanted to completely throw off the Babylonian cloak, and they convinced Zedekiah to withhold the annual tribute to Babylon in 588 BCE.

Zedekiah was warned by another prophet, Jeremiah, not to do this, but Zedekiah would not listen. The taxes were not sent, for which all the citizens paid a high price.

Nebuchadnezzar sent his army into Jerusalem to destroy the city. Solomon’s magnificent Temple, which had stood for almost 400 years, along with most of the homes and businesses were annihilated, and thousands more citizens were taken into captivity. Life as these displaced and homesick pilgrims had known would never be the same.

Fifty years later, in 537 BCE, the Persians, under the command of Cyrus, overthrew the Babylonians, and they allowed the Israelites to return to Jerusalem. Those who went back home were shocked and dismayed at what they found. Their homes lay in ruins, along with their businesses and their beloved Temple.

Even the second and third generation exiles who returned to Jerusalem found the land decimated. Little progress had been made reclaiming the land and rebuilding the infrastructure.

As you would expect, this led to a level of despair that was similar to what they had known in captivity. Without a doubt, this was one of the lowest points in Israel's history, and their very future hung in the balance.

Was there a word from the Lord in a time like this? There was, and the prophet who wrote the third portion of Isaiah relayed it to them.

What was that word? God was not finished with them. He wanted to help them rebuild their lives and their faith, and to give them another chance to be the covenant people who were called to reflect His heart and nature and restore order to a broken world.

“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem, and delight in my people. No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress,” Isaiah 65:17-19.

This message of assurance and hope could not have come at a better time. It strengthened their faith and inspired them to continue their rebuilding.

Perhaps this is the message you need to hear today. You need to be reminded that no situation is so dismal or dire that it cannot be made better with God's help.

What brought your world crashing down upon you? What happened to change your life in ways you never expected?

Was it the death of a loved one, the death of a marriage, a change in another relationship, the loss of a job, a bad diagnosis, an addiction which got the best of you, an arrest, or a failing grade in school?

Life and plans don't always work out the way we hope they will, do they? Sometimes this is due to mistakes we make, but there are times when we are innocent victims. Either way, the pain can be unbearable, and the challenges to overcome them can be steep. This is because there is nothing more difficult than burying a dream. No one walks away from the cemetery of broken dreams without wounds, scars and grief.

God understands. We are not the first to be held hostage to disappointment, sorrow and despair.

What could I say which would make a difference in your life this morning? Maybe it is this.

There comes a time in all our lives when the old must give way to the new. What you had at one time may have been important to you and even good for you, but it is gone, never to return.

So, what are you to do? Give up? Quit? Live in the past? Wallow in pity and despair? Not according to the prophet who penned these words to our biblical ancestors. Instead, it is time to move in new directions and to seize opportunities which will add value and meaning to your life.

Is it even possible to rebuild a life out of rubble? I'm not sure it is without God's help. I am, however, absolutely certain it can be done with God's help.

God's specialty is creating something new out of chaos and rubble. When others walk away, God rolls up His sleeves.

You know what is most intriguing to me about this text? It is the similarities to the creation story in the first chapters of Genesis, which doesn't surprise me. More than any other prophet, Isaiah magnified Yahweh as Creator. As a matter of fact, the word, create, is used far more in Isaiah than Genesis.

Look at all the words common to the first chapter of Genesis and today's text: create, heavens, earth, tree, fruit, serpent, animals and dust. This is no coincidence.

The same God who created the world out of utter chaos can start where you are and help you create a new life. Where you are now is not where you have to stay. Where you are now is where you must begin to rebuild, though.

So, don't look only at what you have lost, but also look at what you have left. Then offer God what you have left and ask God to help you use it to begin building a new life.

Almost thirty years ago I received wise advice from a dear friend. "If you have lost someone or something very dear and precious to you, and you can get it back, then do it. If you cannot get it back, then move on. Don't live in the past or roll in pity and lose everything else you have."

Who needs to hear these hopeful words today? Is it someone you care deeply about who is ready to give up? Is it you?

Never forget the eyes of faith look in two directions. They look behind us to see how God's hand has led us and provided what we have needed thus far on our journey. They also look ahead to see where the hand of God is leading as we continue.

This morning, God offers to take you by the hand and lead you into a land of new dreams and opportunities.

He wants to help you make wise decisions which will not only be good for you but also everyone around you.

He wants to empower you with confidence and courage so you can rebuild your life and faith.

He wants to bring people into your life who can support you with words of encouragement as you help to carry their heavy load.

He wants to work alongside you to build the kind of world He envisioned when He brought it into existence, a world of peace and justice.

He wants to celebrate your recovery and be as happy for you as He was the ancient Israelites who persevered and overcame their struggles.

I strongly encourage you to take God's hand and let Him help you. It will be the best decision you will ever make.