**Sing, Barren Woman**

December 27, 2020

Isaiah 54:1-10

Key Verse 54:1 “Sing, barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband.”

The book of Isaiah teaches us that the Lord God Almighty is the Sovereign Ruler of history. If we look at the world from a human point of view, there seems to be no purpose or meaning in the world or in history. The world doesn’t make sense. Evil prospers and good is trampled underfoot. With this kind of godless worldview, we cannot but lose heart when the trials of life arise. We are tempted to buy into the devil’s lie that we are victims of fate. But we must look at the world from the Biblical point of view. God is sovereign, God is good and God is love. When we know this and make a decision to listen to God’s commands and believe his promises, we build our lives on a rock that nothing can shake. We know that we do not have to be prisoners of fate or of sin. In 2020, due to Covid-19, many people lived in fear. We feel like a barren woman. As we close out 2020, and begin a new year, we want to think about the great hope which the sovereign, Almighty God has for his people. We want to claim God’s promises and have his vision. Then we can sing and shout for joy.

This chapter is considered one of the more joyful chapters in the Bible; it is about singing, bursting into song and shouting for joy. It comes in response to the previous chapter, the suffering servant. It is Isaiah’s reaction to hearing such wonderfully good news that the Messiah came to die in our place so that we may be healed and be saved; he just can’t contain himself. Look at verse 1. “‘Sing, barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband,’ says the Lord.” This chapter takes place during Israel’s exile to Babylon, and God is actually referring to Israel as the barren woman in verse 1. For all intent and purposes, Israel essentially was like a barren woman because Jerusalem and all Israel had been completely destroyed during the war and the people were put into captivity and carried off as slaves. The people of Israel thought that when they were carried off into exile, God was done with them and the precious covenant that had bound the two together had been broken, null and void. They thought that it was as if God said to them, “You are dead to me,” and he was cutting them off never to speak with them again. Being cut off from God is essentially the definition of hell. Heaven is where God and his people live together, but hell is the absence of God.

But then something amazing happened when they least expected. In their distress, God comforted his people. God came to his people and was going to remember their sins no more. He would not hold their sins against them. In chapter 53, Isaiah had given them the beautiful message about the suffering servant, who would come to save them. Isaiah said, “After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.” (Isa 53:11) Even though this was really good news, still they couldn’t believe that the suffering servant, Jesus, who looked like a root out of dry ground, who was pierced, and crushed, bleeding and crucified, could save them. How could a man of suffering save them when he couldn’t even save himself? The message, although wonderful, was too much for them to believe. However, Isaiah’s response was completely different than theirs. When Isaiah looked at the incredible salvation through the suffering servant, the man of suffering, he responds by saying: “Sing people sing, why are you just sitting there? Burst into song, and shout for joy (1). Get up and celebrate for the great thing God has done!” The Israelites thought that God was done with them but to their surprise he was not. When they broke the relationship, God abandoned them and allowed the Babylonians to carry them off into exile but God still loved them, and he wants to restore their relationship.

Look at verses 2-3. ““Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes. For you will spread out to the right and to the left; your descendants will dispossess nations and settle in their desolate cities.” Isaiah was so excited as he saw God’s salvation; he could not contain his joy; he said, “You are not going to be barren any more, in fact you are going to need to get a bigger tent, get longer cords and bigger stakes, stretch it as wide as you possibly can, because you are going to need the space.” But when the Israelites looked at their situation, they couldn’t do it because they were defeated and still in exile. They did not even have a tent. Before the Israelites were conquered by Babylon, their sin was rebellion against God but after they were conquered, their sin changed to despair. Both are sins and both are equally devastating but God’s remedy for them was different. In exile, they needed God’s comfort and his unfailing love. This was God’s grace. God didn’t stop loving them just because they sinned. God’s love is unstoppable.

Look at verse 2a again. “Enlarge the place of your tent.” It means not only to enlarge our space physically, but also to enlarge our vision. When we struggle only with our problems, we become very narrow-minded. We cannot see beyond our noses. But we should not be near-sighted, but have a long-term vision because of God’s promises. Each of us should have at least 10-year vision. Can you see yourself in 10 years? What you will be; where you will be; what you will be doing with your life; how you will be serving God. When we have this vision, God can use us greatly. “Enlarge the place of your tent” also means widen your heart. God does not want his people to sit around feeling sorry for themselves. God does not want them to be selfish. Jesus summed up God’s commands by saying, “Love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:37-39). God’s people cannot be self-centered or even family-centered. We must open our hearts to the people around us who need Jesus. Jesus calls us to put Jesus first, others next and yourself last. He calls us to love our neighbors, our brothers, and even our enemies. Even if we have many personal problems, we cannot ignore God’s calling. We should not think, “I will serve God and others after making money or after graduating or after getting married.” Each of us must hear God’s command from where we are right now, “Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide.”

In the late 1700’s a shoemaker in Scotland accepted this verse. He put a map of China on the wall of his room and began to pray for the unreached multitudes there. God did not send him to China. But God sent him to India. His name is William Carey. He had many personal problems, including a wife who was a mental patient. But he had God’s vision; he obeyed Jesus’ command and went—with his family—and God used him greatly to plant the gospel in India, and to plant missionary vision in the students of Cambridge University. William Carey inspired John Mott and the Student Volunteer movement. A great missionary movement began that eventually covered the world. Missionary Sarah Barry was called by the Student Volunteer Movement and went to Korea as a missionary in her early 20s and founded UBF together with Dr. Samuel Lee. William Carey said, “Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.”

Look at verses 4-6. “Do not be afraid; you will not be put to shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood. For your Maker is your husband— the Lord Almighty is his name— the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth. The Lord will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit— a wife who married young, only to be rejected,” says your God.” These verses have the allusion to restoring the covenant God made with them at Mt. Sinai. Being in exile, they were fearful of what would happen to them and afraid of God’s judgment. They were also ashamed of being defeated and dominated by the Babylonians. They were ashamed of their guilty sin before God just like a kid who got caught with their hand in the cookie jar. They were afraid and ashamed just like their forefathers who were slaves in Egypt; they were now slaves in Babylon. But God restored their slave forefathers as God’s holy people and they became a holy nation when God brought them out of Egypt. Likewise God is going to restore the people of Israel now and make them a holy nation once again. God said, “Don’t be afraid or shameful because I will redeem you, and you will forget all the shame of your past. I will restore you once again.”

Verse 5 is an array of names for God that describe his character. God wants to remind them of who he is and what he will do for them. God is both their maker and their husband. As their maker and creator, God knows them inside and out. He knows their desires and faults but most of all God knows what they need. In that period of history, a woman who didn’t have a husband was disgraced, with no way to provide for her future, but as their husband, God would restore that disgrace by giving them protection and stability. He would be their provider and love them. God was always faithful, even after they ran after other lovers; he was still there for them. The relationship between a husband and wife is a special one; they have the closest bond where the two become one. These days, people look at God as a white haired old man sitting on his throne in heaven barking out orders telling people what to do. If you have that view of God, there is no way you can have a close relationship with him, in fact you probably want to get as far away as you can. Many people in exile had given up on God, but with God as their husband, that relationship could be renewed and they could draw close to him knowing that he loves them and is faithful to them.

God is the Lord Almighty, which means that no one can defeat him. If God is with you, who can defeat you? The Israelites had been defeated by the Babylonians; they had to unlearn that culture of being defeated and relearn how to conquer again, which meant they would have to trust in God for he is the Lord Almighty. God is the Holy one of Israel. He is to be worshipped. He is worthy. These titles are not just little attributes of a little god, but attributes of the one true God, the Lord Almighty. God is our Redeemer, not condemner, which means that God wants to buy us back. It does not matter what you have done, how much you have sinned. God is there to find a way to bring you back. And lastly, he is called God of all the earth. This implies that God is above all other gods; he is ruler of all. And as God of all the earth, verse 6 tells us that he is going to call Israel back. They were like a deserted wife, distressed in spirit because of his rejection, but the Lord Almighty is going to lift her up and restore Israel once again. No wonder Isaiah could not contain his joy because Israel’s present situation was not permanent; they are not lost because salvation is on its way.

Look at verse 10. “‘Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,’ says the Lord, who has compassion on you.” In this verse, the Greek word for “unfailing love,” is “hesed.” It has a meaning of covenant of peace, but it is even more than just peace; it means a wholesomeness, like you have been made whole, like when Jesus said, “I came to give life to the full.” God wants to restore this wholesomeness to his people.

In these verses, you will notice how God wants to restore every pain Israel experienced, from barrenness to many children, from an abandoned woman to one with a loving husband, from no tent to a large open concept home, from fear to joy, from shame to honor, from disgraced to full of grace, from humiliated to accepted, from rejected to loved, from abandoned to redeemed, so that God’s people would be fully restored and made whole again, where they lack nothing. This is the unfailing love God wanted to show his people. This is God’s desire. God wants his people to have peace, joy, health, and stability.

We need to realize who God is to us. Often we don’t realize who God is and what he is able to do. God is always faithful and will carry out what he says he will do. God will never reject us, if we turn to him. There is no greater healing balm than when we know that someone really and truly has our back, someone who you can trust even though they know all your problems and weaknesses. But when no one has your back, you feel alone, vulnerable, weak, afraid, always looking over your shoulder. God is there for you. When we experience God for who he is and what he has done for us, we can’t help but sing with joy and celebrate, leaving behind our moaning, groaning, sighing, and complaints. I can only thank God for his unfailing love for me that he has poured out upon my life over and over. When we truly taste God’s wonderful grace, we can sing because of God’s unfailing love.

We started 2020 to have 20/20 vision. But due to coronavirus pandemic, we lived in fear and uncertainty. Our vision became very narrow. As we close out 2020, let us enlarge the place of our tent. Let us not hold back because of fear and shame. We believe that our ministry will grow and enlarge our presence at the University of Toronto. Let us live in the hope of God, and his unfailing love.

Big Idea: We can sing for joy because of God’s unfailing love