

'gathering.' And these synagogue gatherings soon became the life blood of the Jewish nation... they were gatherings focused on their God and retuning to Jerusalem. But even though they could gather... and even though they could sing... and even though they could talk about their holy books... they still deeply longed for home. To most Jews, having to live in Babylon was nothing less than tragic... and it was a terrible circumstance that seemed like it would never end. And the chapter we are looking at today, chapter 46 in Isaiah, was written specifically to speak to these downcast, homesick, despairing exiles during the lowest, darkest, and most hopeless days of their exile in Babylon. We do know that the Babylonians were forcing these talented, Jewish captives to perform all sorts of tasks for the Babylonians: Jewish craftsmen were building new buildings for the Babylonians... Jewish musicians were providing entertainment for the Babylonians... Jewish professionals were overseeing Babylonian estates and governmental districts... and all of this seemed like a dreadful dream; to these homesick Jews it was a nightmare with no foreseeable end. And into this darkness burst Isaiah's words... the words that we find in Chapter 46... would you turn to this chapter in your own Bible with me. Now Chapter 46 is actually a part of a longer Hebrew poem that starts in verse 18 of Chapter 45 and then it runs through verse 13 of chapter 46. And a couple of things about this poem: first, this poem is not a prophet speaking for God or about God. No, this poem is literally God speaking for God. And secondly, this entire poem is filled with raw emotion. The Hebrew in this poem gives this away because it is short and it's choppy; it-reads-like-someone-who-is-really-worked-up. In fact, if I could have named this poem, I would have named it something like, 'Hey, Hey, Hey! Wake up, people! I'm talking to you!'

As I said, the poem starts in the second half of Isaiah 45:18... and boy, does it start like a hammer! God says, *"I am the LORD, and there is no other. I publicly proclaim bold promises. I do not whisper obscurities in some dark corner. I would not have told the people of Israel to seek me if I could not be found. I, the LORD, speak only what is true and declare only what is right.* Now, that's a strong beginning, if you ask me! You can look at the rest of this chapter later, but it all reads like this and it's easy to see that God isn't kidding around at all.

Then we read this in verse 1 of Chapter 46. *Bel and Nebo, the gods of Babylon, bow as they are lowered to the ground. They are being hauled away on ox carts. The poor beasts stagger under the weight. Both the idols and their owners are bowed down. The gods cannot protect the people, and the people cannot protect the gods. They go off into captivity together.*

Every New Year's Day the people of Babylon celebrated what we might call a middle eastern Mardi Gras... and the highlight of the party was when a pair of highly decorated carts, pulled by equally highly decorated oxen... carried the 2 idols Bel, who was the chief God of the Babylonians, and Nebo, Bel's son through the streets of Babylon. And so, every New Year's Day the Jews would suffer through seeing the entire city celebrating Bel and Nebo as the most powerful gods in the universe... and after a while it had started to make the Jews wonder if these idol-worshiping Babylonians might not be right about whose god was the most powerful. Bel and Nebo certainly seemed to be winning the 'whose-the-most-powerful-god war! Well, God clearly wasn't having any of this... and so he told his people straight up that Bel and Nebo are nothing and can do nothing; and then God painted a picture of a coming time when these

impotent 'gods' would be carried away into a humiliating captivity of their own. And speaking of being carried, look at what God then says to the Israelites in verses 3 and 4. *Listen to me, descendants of Jacob, all you who remain in Israel. I have cared for you since you were born. Yes, I carried you before you were born. I will be your God throughout your lifetime— until your hair is white with age. I made you, and I will care for you. I will carry you along and save you.* I carried the you when you were infants... that's a time when everyone needs to be carried... and he promises that he will still be willing to carry them when they are old... another vulnerable time when many need help in simply getting around. And the way these verses read assume that God is saying he will carry them in all times between infancy and old age... even in times of exile. And one interesting aside here. In these 2 verses we find God using the word 'I' 10 times. God says, 'I will;' 'I have;' I, I, I! God is making a claim that he, alone, is taking responsibility for his people. By the way, 10 is the Biblical number for perfection and the use of these 10 'I's' in this short passage tells me that God was serious when he said, 'I have been present, I am still present, and I will be present to carry and care for you.'

Then in verses 5-7 God just rails on the foolishness of people, like the Babylonians, who would hire a craftsman to fashion a 'god' so they can carry it around on their shoulders, hoping that this 'god' will answer their prayers. You can feel the contempt in God's voice here. And then He gets to His biggest of points: listen to verses 8-9. God says, *“Do not forget this! Keep it in mind! Remember this, you guilty ones.* (and by 'guilty ones' I believe he is talking about those who were guilty of wondering if their God is as powerful as Bel and Nebo) *Remember the things I have done in the past. For I alone am God! I am God, and there is none like me.* God says, 'Remember the things I have done in the past!' God wanted his people to take the time to think about all of the times God had rescued the Israelites in the past. Picture this with me: a group of Israelites have just heard these words from Isaiah, and they start talking among themselves. Someone says, 'Ok, what has God done for us in the past?' And someone else says, 'Well, he miraculously made us a nation by giving Abraham and Sarah a son when she was 90 years old.' And then someone adds, 'And nobody saw that one coming, did they!' Then another voice adds, 'God saved us from the Egyptians by parting the Red Sea!' And everyone nods their heads... Yes, yes! And then another voice adds, 'And nobody saw that one coming!' Then someone asks, 'Didn't God make the mighty walls of Jericho fall down for us?' And again, 'Yes, yes he did!' And then someone adds, 'And nobody saw that one coming, either! This is the kind of conversation God wanted to hear... and it was a conversation that could have gone on for a long time! But God interrupts this remembering in verse 10 when he says, *Only I can tell you the future before it even happens. Everything I plan will come to pass, for I do whatever I wish.* And then God tells them his plan. *I will call a swift bird of prey from the east— a leader from a distant land to come and do my bidding. I have said what I would do, and I will do it.*

Now, we know from history that the Jews were expecting that if any help was going to come and deliver them, it would come from someplace in the west... someplace back near Jerusalem. The east was the wrong direction in their minds. And so, God saying he was calling a leader that would come from the east to do his bidding was something no one would have seen coming. And we actually know who this bird of prey from the east was. He was Cyrus, the ruler of Persia, or what is now Iran. And the

last person the Jews would have ever expected to deliver them from exile was Cyrus the Persian. The urbane Babylonians, as well as their refined Jewish captives, thought the Persians were just a rag-tag gaggle of unsophisticated nomads... nomads who were just a little better than animals. Plus, the Persians had very odd religious beliefs... they were Zoroastrians... and this was a religion that held that everything in the entire universe was divided into two groups: one good and one evil. And Zoroastrians fully believed that these two groups were on a collision course that would soon end in an apocalyptic battle that would determine whether good or evil would rule everything forever. Cyrus, who considered himself to be the earthly leader of the very good, set out to conquer the entire world in the belief that he could make the world so good that evil wouldn't have a chance when the day of the big battle came. And so, when Cyrus defeated the Babylonians and he discovered that there were thousands of Jews living in Babylon who'd had their temple destroyed and been forced to live in exile, he had a religious reason to immediately send them back home to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple. You see, he believed that if he could make these Jewish exiles feel an obligation to the 'good' Zoroastrians, then when the day of the big battle arrived, they would all stand with him. Now, I'm just saying, 'God saving the Jews from exile by sending a Persian, Zoroastrian nomad on a mission to conquer the world?' No one could have ever seen that coming! And from what it looks like, when some of the Jews heard Isaiah's words about a swift bird coming from the east to save them, they raised their eyebrows as if to say, 'Come on now!' The reason I think there was this reaction to God's promise of a savior from the east is because God's last words in chapter 46 are powerful words of both promise and intent! *I am ready to set things right, not in the distant future, but right now! I am ready to save Jerusalem and show my glory to Israel.* God was letting them know He was still working, even if it wasn't going to be the way the Jews expected. He'd said what he was going to do, and we know now, He did it!

The passage that Barry looked at last week said it and this week's passage says it again: God is still working. These verses tell us that even if we may not sense it right now, His promise to carry us and care for us...to never leave us or forsake us... is still as true today as it has ever been, no matter how dire things might look.

I just returned earlier this week from two weeks in Northern Michigan. Jennifer and I have spent time on Walloon Lake every summer for about 40 years. It is a great place of retreat for us. And while I was away, I had 2 weeks of quiet time to think about this sermon and specifically about God's command that I should, 'Remember the things He has done for me in the past.' I am now at an age where my vision of things is long term... I can see much of my life as a completed whole, or at least I can see the many chapters of my life from their beginning to their end. And I can say with great confidence that God **has** carried me from when I was an infant to these days of greyer hair. This is not the time for me to talk about the details of my life, but I will say that there have been many times when I felt trapped or I was confused or I was lost in hopelessness... and then something would be said to me, or something would be offered to me, or something simply happened to me that I didn't see coming and in those unexpected, unforeseen moments God rescued me, cared for me and carried me and my family into his future. And my bet is that this is true for many of you as well. The problem, at least for me, is that I don't work hard enough at remembering the times when God parted my

Red Sea or knocked down my Jericho walls or brought an unexpected Cyrus into my life... those times when 'Only God could have caused **that one** to happen.'

We are all living through a time of great tension, great division, great fear and great emptiness. I just spent two weeks in one of the most beautiful, peaceful and isolated spaces on earth and yet everyone I talked to up there was either worked up, or nervous, or agitated or fearful or defiant... just like people here... the chaos is everywhere. And yet while we are in the midst of this time that we didn't see coming, I know that God is still working. God's intentions for his world haven't changed nor has this time caught him off guard. And our God is going to keep on working in ways that bring healing to the broken places of his world... Yes, God is still working, and He is asking us to trust in his love for us and join him as he continues to bring peace and light into the dark chaos. Last week I heard these words: 'Hey, Hey, Hey! Listen up, Tim. Remember who is talking to you.' And it gave me hope. And then I heard these words and I am sharing them with you because they are true for everyone... listen to the words of our God: *Listen to me, Listen to me. I have cared for you since you were born. Yes, I carried you before you were born. I will be your God throughout your lifetime—until your hair is white with age. I made you, and I will care for you. I will carry you along and I will save you.*

Pray.