

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson –

The book of Isaiah speaks to Israel over along stretch of history in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. - it encompasses the last days of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and it is full of both scathing words of judgment and comforting words of hope and restoration. This passage is spoken to a defeated and broken people – specifically to those who have been exiled from their homeland and are seeking a return to Jerusalem.

Perhaps some of you have heard that there is a presidential nomination race going on in our country – you may have noticed it in the news occasionally...or 24 hours a day as the case may be! The Republican nominee, John McCain, has already been decided on. The Democratic race is taking a bit longer – Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama continue to vie for the nomination – with the hope of deciding on a nominee before November! The protracted length of the Democratic race is notable in itself – but what is also notable is that regardless of who does win the nomination, there will be a historic result – for the first time for one of the major political parties, there will be either a woman or a black man as a presidential candidate (Barack Obama had a black father and a white mother, but he is referred to as a black man, which is interesting in itself). 230 years into the history of our nation, there will be a first – a woman or black person as a major presidential candidate. With a U.S. population that is over 50% women, and 25% ethnicities other than white, it is statistically highly unlikely that there would just by chance be only white men as nominees and as presidents for 230 years...so there must be some other factors going on – what do you think it could be?

This past week, on Tuesday, I spent the day at the Summit on Racism on the campus of Hope College – along with hundreds of others from Ottawa County and some folks from Hope Church too. There were keynote speakers, and discussion forums, and resource materials available, dealing with issues of government policy, educational strategies, economic development, all focused on the dynamics of race and racism in our community – and all pointing to a general pattern of greater opportunities for white people, and less so for Hispanics and African-Americans – in such a consistent pattern, that on it's own is statistically unlikely – there must be something else going on. There were many opinions and perspectives – too much to take in and retain all of it – but a particular statement by one of the speakers stuck with me. He was an African-American educator in our community, and he said something like this: ‘one of the most important things that you can do to combat racism, is to say that it exists – that racism exists in our

community, our nation, our schools – and that racism exists within you; the only way we can combat something is if we acknowledge that it is there – and that is true for racism.’

The Church Herald arrived this week – and I noticed the “Platform” article (which is an opinion expressed simply by an RCA member who writes in, rather than from the RCA staff – imagine that!) – the Platform was written by Mary Kansfield, a longtime RCA member and leader – and many folks here at Hope Church know her. Mary’s article looked at the leadership positions in the Reformed Church in America – for denominational committees and staff and agencies; although women make up 63% of RCA membership, they hold only 31% of leadership positions. My thought as I was reading the article was that a similar discrepancy would be found in women being represented serving on Consistories as Elders as Deacons and serving as Ministers as well, if not even more so. It is statistically unlikely that this would happen on its own – there must be something else going on... Mary Kansfield wrote: “women have been confined too long to the margins of power and decision-making within the RCA – it’s time to address this discrimination.”

What some people are saying is going on in our country and community – and in us – is that racism is present; some people are saying that there is discrimination present against women going on in our country, and in our church – and in us. Now I am very aware of something as I bring up these issues to you – I am very aware of being a white man: I am not an ethnic minority in this community, and I am not woman – so what right or place do I have talking about such issues? – or preaching about them? – although this may not sound very much like a sermon so far, since we haven’t gotten to the Bible yet...speaking of which – I wasn’t supposed to be preaching today; Lynn Japinga was scheduled to be preaching this Sunday, but because of some travel plans for Lynn to see her son Mark, we decided a few weeks ago to change the schedule – but one of the things Lynn regretted about the change was that she was looking forward to preaching on the texts for this Sunday, particularly because of the reference in Isaiah and the Psalm to a

feminine image of God – God as a mother, a woman. So she told me I had to do a good job with these texts! – and I wondered if it would seem more likely to a congregation that a female preacher would want to focus on those feminine images of God for a sermon, than a man preacher would...?

So, being very much aware in this moment of being a white man, bringing up issues of discrimination connected to gender and race that have favored white men – it seems important to focus on listening; and to find in a shared listening to scripture that these texts speak to these issues that we face today... if you remember the passage from the prophet Isaiah, it is a hopeful message – it speaks of restoration and safety for God's people after a long time of upheaval and exile, violence and suffering; Isaiah speaks of God's faithfulness and the restoration of a community of peace and plenty: 'the LORD has pity on you and guides you to springs of water; the Lord comforts and has compassion on God's people' And the people's reaction to this message? – they don't believe it...after Isaiah's beautiful vision, they still say 'the Lord has forsaken and forgotten me' So, how can Isaiah get through to them – how can he convince them of the truth of this promise for them? – Isaiah uses a new image...'God is a mother, and you are God's child – and not just any child, a little one, nursing at her mother's breast – can such a woman forget or not care for her child? no – and so great is God's care for you.' And although we're not specifically told the people's response to this, apparently the message of promise and hope gets through.

It may seem pleasant to us that there is this feminine expression of God present there in Isaiah – it may seem thought-provoking for there to be that tender and intimate image of a mother nursing her child. But it's also important for us to realize how unusual and even risky this was for Isaiah to express this image – in that cultural setting, most any reference to a feminine description of the divine would usually be connected with other religions – polytheistic religions that the Israelites were to avoid and condemn. And it's also true that women in general in that time, Israel included, were not seen as equal or

important compared to men. But still Isaiah is given this image, this word from God, that draws in the feminine, and it is crucial to Israel understanding something important, central to, who God is and who they are: God's faithfulness to them and their dependence on God. It is an image that not only carries this message – but an image that is itself a message - a different, less-common, expression of who God is that is able to get through to these people of God in a new way; this image enables them to listen to, see, believe God's grace – God's faithful presence – in their lives in ways that they could not before.

And it is that connection to listening that I see this text speaking to us in our context. We make choices about what to listen to in our lives – what we do and don't. And I think that one of the things we find with scripture is that when we listen to the less common things, the more surprising image, the minority report with an alternative viewpoint, that God is waiting there to speak to us in new ways, to reveal a depth of who God is and who we are as God's people. And that the same thing is true about our world – that when we listen for the less common voices, often God is speaking to us there as well. In Isaiah, using this feminine image of God is not only a way of getting through to the people about God's grace, but it is also God connecting God's self, himself, herself, to images, people, realities that would seem to be less powerful, but are in fact a source of revelation and grace – that's often how God's voice is heard, and that is often the unexpected way God's power is seen.

And maybe there's even a different twist on this too - because if God is to speak a promise of restoration and hope for this world today, for our community, for us – some people today might be skeptical about that, just as they were back in Isaiah's time. And the skepticism has its reasons – it often seems that things just continue to be that the powerful are in charge, and that God has forgotten the promise of restoration and wholeness for this world. In that context, what the church is called to do is listen to God through the voices of those not in power – men are called to listen to women; whites are called to listen minorities; a predominately white church is called to listen to a racially

diverse community and world and body of Christ; those with much and even enough, are called to listen to those with little or almost nothing; heterosexuals are called to listen to homosexuals; religious majorities called to listen to religious minorities; those with security are called to listen to those in danger; those at peace called to listen to those at war; those who have not served in the military called to listen to those who have served; those who are in power called to hear the voices of the less powerful. And there in that listening, in that conversation, God's voice, grace, promise can be expressed and affirmed to a skeptical world.

And maybe you wonder, 'and where is the image of God as a mother in all of that?' – well, I think the image does lead us to that idea of listening to the minority voices around us – and what I have also heard, and am trying to listen to, is that within that listening it connects us to this God who cannot forget her children - who will not give up caring for, sustaining, having compassion on the people of this earth. As I listen to this powerless, powerful God, it is the voices of those not in power that become the image and voice of God for me to listen to as well. Each of us will have our own minority voices to listen to – and we will each have many to share – and we will even each be a minority voice for others to hear: we each share in advantage and in exclusion; we each share in prejudice and in understanding; we each share in sin and in restoration - and mostly we each share in God's grace. In listening to the promises of a mother God who will not let us or this world go, we are able to bring all our brokenness and hope into God's bosom – and we are able to listen for God's grace in those powerless, powerful voices speaking today: to confront and nurture and gather us toward a mothering God whose grace feeds us and will not let us go. Amen.