

We are dealing with a post-Christian world, and that poses many challenges, but I want to zoom out and mention three particular issues that we will discuss over the course of the next three weeks: Incoherent Stories of Hope, Spiritual Formation in a Digital Age, Cultural Polarization.

Over the next three weeks, we are going to take each of these in turn and talk about a way the *Ekklesia* exists as an alternative community of God and how we can respond to each of these while moving toward our vision of being a transformed people - transforming the peninsula. Because each of these three challenges offers an opportunity for the church to lean into the long-standing tradition that has answers to these struggles. The first challenge we face in a post-Christian world is incoherent rival forms of hope.

Incoherent Stories of Hope

Humans were created to live in process. We never have and never will "arrive." To be human is to be dynamic, in constant change, maturity, and movement. This movement and change are not random. We are ordered beings who are shaped by a vision of "the good life" that is at the core of our identity. It is this vision of the good life that we are trying to achieve. This vision of the good life sinks into our bones and begins to animate who we are and how we live.

But we are also flawed and broken, rot through. This then creates a gap between what is and what we believe should be. In order to deal with this dissonance and try to close that gap, we are forced to come up with some sort of solution. We place our trust in some form of hope. Again this is happening consciously or subconsciously, but it is happening.

This hope then animates how we live in the present, giving shape and form to who we are and how we live. The problem in our world is that all versions of hope fail to offer a coherent story that holds together the brokenness of the world and our own fragility in it.

Let's use adolescents as an example. As you were navigating those socially challenging years, you desperately wanted to fit in with your friends because the vision of "the good life" was represented by popularity, being in with the cool kids, or impressing the guy or girl. For me, this meant I needed to bleach my hair and wear baggy pants with the bottoms frayed. It was ridiculous, and I'm increasingly glad that I didn't go to middle school in the age of social media.

But notice the progression that took place. I see a vision of the good life - Cool Kids. I experience the gap between who I am and who I think I should be. I place my trust in a vision of hope - Finding the "look of cool." I alter my decisions (clothes, look, hairstyle, etc.) to close the gap between who I am and what I hope for. This is obviously a silly and flat example of what I am talking about. Real issues of hope are incredibly

complex and layered in how we operate from a concept of hope. But this is how we turn things into idols, seeking meaning, identity, and hope from things never meant to carry that weight.

I want to demonstrate three dominant stories of hope that our world offers. And then demonstrate how those are actually incoherent stories that break down in offering what they promise, ultimately leaving us longing for a better story.

Expressive Individualism

The term expressive individualism was first used by Robert Bellah and means that each and every individual has a source of feelings, emotions, and intuitions about how the world operates and their place within it. And if we are to live appropriately, we must live from this individual definition of truth.

Now, a lot of good can come from individualism, rights, justice, etc. But expressive individualism as an identity and vision of hope becomes impossibly frustrated in a pluralist society. This leads to hostility because if all of us are expressive individuals, then who is the arbiter of my truth versus your truth.

In a pluralist world, we will constantly run into competing claims of truth and visions of "the good life." How do we reconcile these if whatever I feel or think is the guiding principle of my life? Not only is this the trajectory of expressive individualism, but we also have to recognize the exhausting weight of this responsibility on the individual. We will eventually collapse under the weight of having to create meaning in every moment.

Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy stated, "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life." How exhausting. The individual is responsible for the meaning of their existence, of the universe, and of all of human life. I don't think that it is a stretch to say that rising levels of depression, anxiety, and mental health struggles are correlated to the immense weight that is placed on individuals.

I don't know about you, but I feel like I have enough pressure from parenting, work, etc., and now I have to explain the meaning to the whole universe?! This gets to the heart of the difference between what Christians think of freedom and liberty and what the biblical view of freedom is.

For the world, freedom and liberty is defined as "freedom from." It is about liberation from any constraint on the individualism that we desperately need to express. It is about the freedom from restraints that hold me back from engaging in every desire I seek. For the Christian, freedom and liberty are defined as "freedom to." It is about being free

to say no to things in order to say yes to something greater, a life with Jesus.

Incoherence of Expressive Individualism: You cannot self-actualize yourself into a place of ultimate meaning. I don't think it is a coincidence that the shifting of meaning and purpose to the individual has also seen a rise of nihilism (The belief that all is meaningless). It is a crippling weight to have to be the one who decides everything about yourself.

Consumerism

Someone once asked John D. Rockefeller at the height of his success, "How much money is enough?" The story goes that he thought about it for a second and finally responded, "just a little bit more." Or another quote I heard this week, "How much is enough? When I have more than you."

It is hard for us to assess the way that digital consumerism and capitalism have transformed the way we view the world. Everything becomes consumable, everything becomes expendable, and we can do it all instantaneously. When you can look around your room and realize that literally, everything has a price tag that you could attach and sell on Facebook Marketplace or eBay, our view of things transforms us.

Consumerism promises the hope of just a little bit more. Industries are built around the idea that if you can just arrive at another level of success, make enough money, buy enough things, then you can overcome the pains, hurts, and insufficiencies you have. You are able to close the gap between your vision of the good life and where you are if you just buy the right things. These industries are built on and exploit our propensity for covetousness and discontent and feed our false hope in things. Idols always over promise and under deliver—always!

Incoherence of Consumerism lies in its inability to understand that we are more than material beings. We are spiritual beings that have needs beyond the material. We are broken, not just at a physical level but a spiritual level as well. And to try and solve spiritual brokenness, we need something beyond the material. If the hope of consumerism really worked, wealth would solve all our problems. But as the wise and veritable Notorious B.I.G. says, "Mo money, mo problems." Or, as Solomon would reflect on the access to wealth, privilege, and power that he was afforded, "*Meaningless! Meaningless!*" says the Teacher. "*Utterly Meaningless! Everything is meaningless*" (Ecc. 1:2).

Politics

As cultural tension has been ratcheted up over the past few election cycles, we are witnessing the political become sacred. More and more, we have seen what was once an important but somewhat low-key area of our society be transformed into a sacred thing. The incoherence of politics is the transformation of something that is a penultimate solution for ultimate problems. Politics can be an effective way to change people's circumstances, and this is good work to engage in, but it does little to change one's mind and heart. Ultimately, we have placed on politics the weight of the sacred. But what was also true about consumerism is also true of politics; you cannot solve deeply spiritual problems solely with man-made solutions.

The idolatry of political ideology is a serious problem inside and outside the church. And to look toward politics as our ultimate hope is an exercise in futility. We reach the limits of politics when we look to the political to solve the internal problems of anger, lust, greed, sin, and evil. There's a chasmic difference between healthy engagement in politics and placing our hope in politics or political figures. The *Ekklesia* of God should never look to politics as the primary means of transforming or bringing about the Kingdom of God. This is an altogether different work of the *Ekklesia* in union with the Spirit.

This is not a new problem for the church. Throughout the Church's history, there has been a thorny and difficult relationship between faith and politics. Israel was constantly seeking a "king like all the other nations." The early church believed the Messiah would come as a war-like political figure. And at every turn, God rebukes them.

These are just a few of the many stories of hope the world is constantly communicating to us all. You could do this same thing with technology, parenting, work, leisure, food, busyness, etc. But each story of hope will leave us wanting. Consider this quote from Augustine. "For wherever the human soul turns itself, other than to you, it is fixed in sorrows, even if it is fixed upon beautiful things."

So, how do we break free from these rival and incoherent stories of hope? What does the narrative of God offer in the way of ultimate and coherent hope? Turn with me to the book of Isaiah chapter 43.

Isaiah 43:14-21 - A New Thing

Let me provide a little context. The prophet Isaiah is a brilliantly complex work that is organized largely in two parts. The first part (Chapters 1-39) is organized around communicating God's judgment on his people for their failure to live up to the covenant commitments they had made with God.

But the second half of the book is written as a prophetic reminder of the hope they have in Yahweh. While the people of God seem to always fall short, the reality is that God never does.

So as we look at this text from Isaiah, I want to point out four particular ways our story of hope is a better and more coherent story than those offered by the world. First, our hope is ultimately in God.

Isaiah 43:14-28 - Our Hope is in God

This is what the Lord says - your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: 'For your sake I will send to Babylon and bring down as fugitives all the Babylonians, in the ships in which they took pride. I am the Lord, your Holy One, Israel's Creator, your King. Isaiah 43:14-15

All I want you to see right here is two things. First, God is meeting them in their exile. He is present with them, recognizing their situation, and not abandoning them. Think of the Psalmist's words in Psalm 34:18. "*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*"

Next, notice the source of hope is not within their own capacity or ability. Right there at the beginning verse, "your Redeemer." The hope

of the exiles was something beyond themselves and beyond their own capabilities. They had to look to God if they were going to be saved.

When we find something beyond ourselves as the barometer of reality, we are able to have a foundation for which we can assess right and wrong, good and bad, moral and immoral, good life and bad life. God is the defining mark and reality of our world. To remove him from that place creates an environment that will ultimately collapse on itself because of a lack of footing. This is why at the core of the gospel, is the declaration that Jesus is Lord. He is the defining principle, person, and king of the universe. Let's read on.

This is what the Lord says—he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.” vv. 16-21

No doubt, the opening lines are drawing on the Exodus narrative. Remember when God rescued his people out of slavery in Egypt and split the Red Sea so they could retreat from their captors. The prophet is invoking the memory of the exiles, calling them to remember that God has moved and will continue to move.

The words of that Lord, the one who created a path when it was seemingly impossible, the words of the Lord who split the Red Sea and led them through the desert, that Lord says,

“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!” God is doing a new exodus, a new thing. Something greater than that which has happened in the past. God is harkening back to the Exodus narrative and telling them, “That was good, but wait until you see what will happen in this new thing.”

Then he closes this section with the beautiful promise that he will provide drink to a parched people; he will continue to form the people that have been called out as his.

Isaiah 43:22-24 - Our Hope Recognizes Brokenness

Yet you have not called on me, Jacob, you have not wearied yourselves for me, Israel. You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings, nor honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with grain offerings nor wearied you with demands for incense. You have not bought any fragrant calamus for me, or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses. vv. 22-24

What sets our story of hope apart from the other visions of hope is that God deals with the source problem of sin and brokenness. The promise is laid out before the people of God, but they must still step into that, turning to God.

The response to God from the people is a response that is all too common for ourselves, apathy and complaint. Two words stand out in this section, burdened (used twice) and wearied (used three times). We should be careful to never forget the effect of our sin on God. It is a fracture of relationship. When we drift to other idolatrous visions of hope, we ultimately cause a burden on God.

The picture of God here is of suffering. He is heavy-laden, broken-hearted as he looks out over his people, looking for a people serious about the covenant relationship, but fails to find them. The effects of sin carry both horizontal and vertical implications. Fracturing our connection to the world, to others, and ultimately to God.

Where the stories of hope become incoherent is they identify the problem outside of the individual in a lack of something to acquire or a solution that must be bought. All worldly solutions can only mask the problem of the human heart. It is “disordered loves,” as Augustine would call it. It is only this that sources our problems. However, our story of hope accepts that we are internally broken. That the source of our problems is within each of us, and therefore need a source of hope that is beyond our own abilities.

Isaiah 43:25-28 - Our Hope Forgives and Restores

I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more. Review the past for me, let us argue the matter together; state the case for your innocence. Your first father sinned; those I sent to teach you rebelled against me. So I disgraced the dignitaries of your temple; I consigned Jacob to destruction and Israel to scorn. vv. 25-28

This is central to the hope; God is the one who blots out our transgressions. Contrary to the rival visions of hope that center around the self and the ability to overcome your own failures. We do not have to be the source of our own salvation, but rather, there is help outside of ourselves that offers the forgiveness of our sins and failures. And while this grace is lavished on us from God is freely given, it has consequences. The result of their sin, although forgiven, did not remove the earthly consequences; this is why they were in exile.

The pain of sin has not only caused division between God and us; it has sent a cascading effect of pain and brokenness across creation. Paul talks about the creation groaning as it waits for healing, and this pain must also be dealt with. History has borne out that every attempted form of hope, outside of God, has never brought about the healing our world needs. Proving yet again that all other narratives of hope are incoherent.

The fracture is deeply individual and deeply structural. The infection of sin is deep, wide, and pervasive. And if any story of hope is going to be able to deal with the rampant issues of sin, it must look both to the

individual and the systemic. The problem is cosmic, and so our hope needs a cosmic solution. And this is just what the story of the gospel offers.

Isaiah 65:17-18 - Our Hope is Cosmic

I want you to flip over a few chapters in Isaiah to chapter 65, where we will finish. Listen to how Isaiah describes this hope.

"See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create..." (Isaiah 65:17-18a). This is "the new thing" that is taking root in creation. This is the hope of Israel. That God is doing a new thing, and that new thing will ultimately be the renewal of all things!

The prophetic hope that lies at the very heart of the story of Israel is that God will ultimately bring about one who would establish the "new creation." This is the ultimate goal of our faith, and this "new creation" is cosmic in its scope. It is about the healing and restoration of all creation, heavens, and earth. All of the cosmic created order will one day be reconciled to Jesus. This is what Paul writes about as well in Colossians, "Christ will reconcile to himself all things." This is what we see at the end of the book of Revelation. The new heavens and the new earth coming down on earth!

Two important words are key for us to understand this "new heavens and new earth." The word create and the word new. The word create carries the connotation of shaping or fashioning out of what is. It can also be understood as forming. The hope is that God is creating, fashioning, and forming out of the earth a new creation that is breaking into our moment here and now.

The second word is the word new. It is the Hebrew word *chadash*, which means to renew, repair, restore, and rebuild. It does not mean new in existence but new in essence. It means new in quality. This is really important. The hope of Israel is not that this earth will be one day be destroyed and abandoned, but it will be renewed and restored. Think of the way we talk about buying a used car. Even though it is not new in essence, we still call it our new car. That is because it is new in quality, not new in existence.

It is poor and can be damaging theology to believe that this earth will be destroyed; rather, God is working to renew and restore this world. There is coming a day, out on the horizon, when God will bring about the Kingdom of God in all its glory. That kingdom has begun, Jesus said so, and it is in that kingdom that we find our identity, our life, and our direction on how to live. It is the organizing principle of the *Ekklesia*.

We are called out of all other stories of hope, finding our only hope in this narrative of God's story. In it, we find purpose, meaning, identity, and reality, and is fundamental to our identity as the *Ekklesia*, the

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

called-out ones. The church of God is a different story of what it means to hope. We exist as an alternative community of God that is animated by a different story of hope.

Practice

These rival stories of hope come to us from all over. They are reified through the bombardment of advertising, stories, social media, and entertainment. Over and over, these stories gain deep traction and find a way to settle into the core of who we are, becoming deeply embedded into the very trust structures that we have constructed to make sense of the world. However, know that the invitation is always before us. The invitation to change in the direction of God. To find hope in the story that actually delivers.

So how do we untangle ourselves from the deeply enmeshed view of the world? How do we live distinctly and called out lives that are faithfully present to God, our world, and our neighbor? We have to begin by imagining the new thing God is doing. This takes meditation, time, and knowledge. We must lean into our identity as followers of Jesus, trusting that we can, in fact, meet the Holy Spirit in the scriptures. As we open our lives up to the work of the Holy Spirit, we will be transformed into people who live from this vision of life.

The fundamental way to decentralize the false narratives of hope is to replace them with a better one, one that the scriptures lay out before us, which is the story of new creation. This gives deep meaning to our daily living. Because as the *Ekklesia* of God, the called-out ones that are committed to finding our hope and life in the Kingdom of God that is available to us now, we seek to live in accordance with this new creation. This is what we see in the life of Jesus. We see the eternal kind of life, perfectly lived in congruence to the Kingdom of God here and now. The new creation made present.

This is our hope. A hope that is from God, a hope that is realistic about our failures, a hope that forgives and restores, and a hope that is cosmic.

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