

Haftarah

'this is like the days of Noah'



*For a brief moment I forsook you;
with abiding love I take you back.
In a moment of flooding anger I hid
My face from you,
but now with love unending I take
you in—says your Redeemer, the
Eternal One.
This is like the days of Noah to Me.
I promised then never again to
cover the earth
with the waters of Noah's days.
So now I promise never again to be
angry with you or rebuke you.*

Isaiah 54:7-9

Connection

- In the Jewish calendar, this haftarah reading (Isaiah 54:1—55:5) accompanies the Torah portion *Noah*: Genesis 6:9-11:32.
- The Great Flood is a story of human sinfulness, divine distress, and eventual reconciliation as God starts afresh with Noah and his descendents. Likewise the haftarah describes the God-Israel relationship as shattered by sin, but now ready to be restored through divine mercy.
- Certain phrases make the connection obvious: e.g., 'flooding anger', 'the waters of Noah', 'Ah, unhappy storm-tossed soul'.

Background

- Our haftarah passage comes from that part of the bible known as 'Second Isaiah' (chapters 40-55). It is attributed to an unknown prophet of the sixth century BCE living among the Israelite people exiled in Babylon. Times are changing... the defeat of Babylon by Cyrus, king of Persia in 539 BCE offers hope of releasing the people from captivity. It is this opportunity for freedom and return to their homeland that the prophet anticipates and describes as evidence of God's mercy.

Themes

The time of redemption is at hand. The people of Israel will be:

- fruitful again: '*Sing O barren woman*' (55:1).
- protected: '*safe from oppression, and unafraid*' (54:14).
- truly satisfied through the availability of God's teachings, here described as *water, bread, wine* (55:1-5).

Poetry

- Enjoy the vivid imagery, the parallelism of the poetry. E.g., 54:2 communicates the same idea in three ways with increasing intensity: '*Enlarge the space of your tent / do not spare the canvass for your dwelling place / do not hold back: lengthen your ropes, drive in your pegs!*' ...and leads to the expansive geographic claim of 54:3: '*For you shall spread out to the right (the south) and the left (the north)...*'

Reflection

- '*Come, all who are thirsty, come for water*' (55:1). Water, once life-threatening from the Noah-view, is now life-sustaining. Ponder this. Is it sometimes difficult to trust and rebuild after devastation, despite words and signs of reassurance?
- The bible speaks of God through the language of human experience (e.g., God speaks, God builds, God loves, God gets angry). Share your thoughts.

Bibliography: Goldstein, ed., *The Women's Haftarah Commentary* (Woodstock, 2004); Harper Collins Study Bible: NRSV (NY, 1993); Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (NY, 1996); Scripture quotations: Plaut.

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Text: Teresa Pirola. Illustration: Sarann Ryan. © The Story Source, 2011. *Haftarah* (from the Hebrew root word; 'to conclude') is the name given to the reading which, in accordance with the Jewish lectionary, is read after the Torah portion of the day, at Shabbat and festival services.