

Resisting Despair

Prophetic hope in times of crisis



By Father Vien V. Nguyen

The fall of Judah in 587 B.C. is a watershed moment in the history of Israel. The holy city was plundered and burned. The Temple was destroyed. The leading people were taken into captivity. The kingdom of Judah came to an end. As foretold by Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the event was self-inflicted due to the people's violations of the covenant with God and their refusal to repent and return to the Lord.

The fall posed a profound existential struggle and a theological crisis in the hearts, minds and spirits of the displaced people: Where is God in all of this? What

will happen to the ancestral homeland and the Davidic monarchy? Does the fall of Judah mean God is powerless and defeated? Who are we in the foreign land? Should we trust God?

Exilic Prophecy

Amid this traumatic reality, prophets were called and commissioned to comfort and offer hope to the defeated and sorrowing people. They attested that God is not powerless (cf. Is 40:12-26), God has not broken the covenant (Is 45:16-17; 54:10), and a homecoming and restoration are imminent (Is 43:14-21; 48:12-22). For the

prophet Isaiah (Part II, Chapters 40-55), God is the creator of the earth and humanity (45:12), who will bring their sufferings to an end (Is 40:1-2). Just as God has used foreign kingdoms and rulers to execute God's judgments against Israel and Judah, God will summon King Cyrus of Persia as God's "anointed" instrument to accomplish the divine plans of redemption (Is 45:1-5; 44:24—45:7).

Ezekiel asserts that God will intervene to protect God's holiness. The result? The dispersed people will be gathered together like dry bones, and God will breathe life into them (cf. Ez 37). The glory of God,



PATRON SAINT OF HOPE

St. Jude Thaddeus is the patron saint of hope. We know that he was one of the Twelve Apostles and shared a close relationship with Jesus. He is often depicted wearing the color green. Why is green symbolic? It symbolizes hope and renewal. The National Shrine of St. Jude website notes, "Just as in spring when foliage and flowers spring up with renewed life, we turn to St. Jude, our patron of hope, in difficult or seemingly hopeless times."

Devotion to St. Jude for his intercession in prayer was inspired by St. Bridget of Sweden. In a vision, Jesus directed St. Bridget to turn to St. Jude with great faith and confidence. Christ told St. Bridget, "In accordance with his surname, Thaddeus, the amiable or loving, he will show himself most willing to give help."

The Prayer to St. Jude for Hope reads: "God the Father, give me hope. Help me to know that your hope is alive in me as I offer kindness, forgiveness and tenderness to others. I seek the calm that comes from trusting in your hope and your healing presence. I trust that your servant St. Jude walks with me in all the blessings and challenges of my life, and intercedes on behalf of my petitions. St. Jude, fill my heart with hope. Amen."

For more visit the National Shrine of St. Jude website, shrineofstjude.org.

which has departed the Temple, will return to the new postexilic Temple (Ez 10:18-19; 11:22-23; 43:1-12).

Postexilic Prophecy

When the Persians defeated the Babylonians, King Cyrus allowed the captive people to return. The people were disappointed when the glorious restoration that was promised them fell short of their expectations. The land lay uncultivated; the

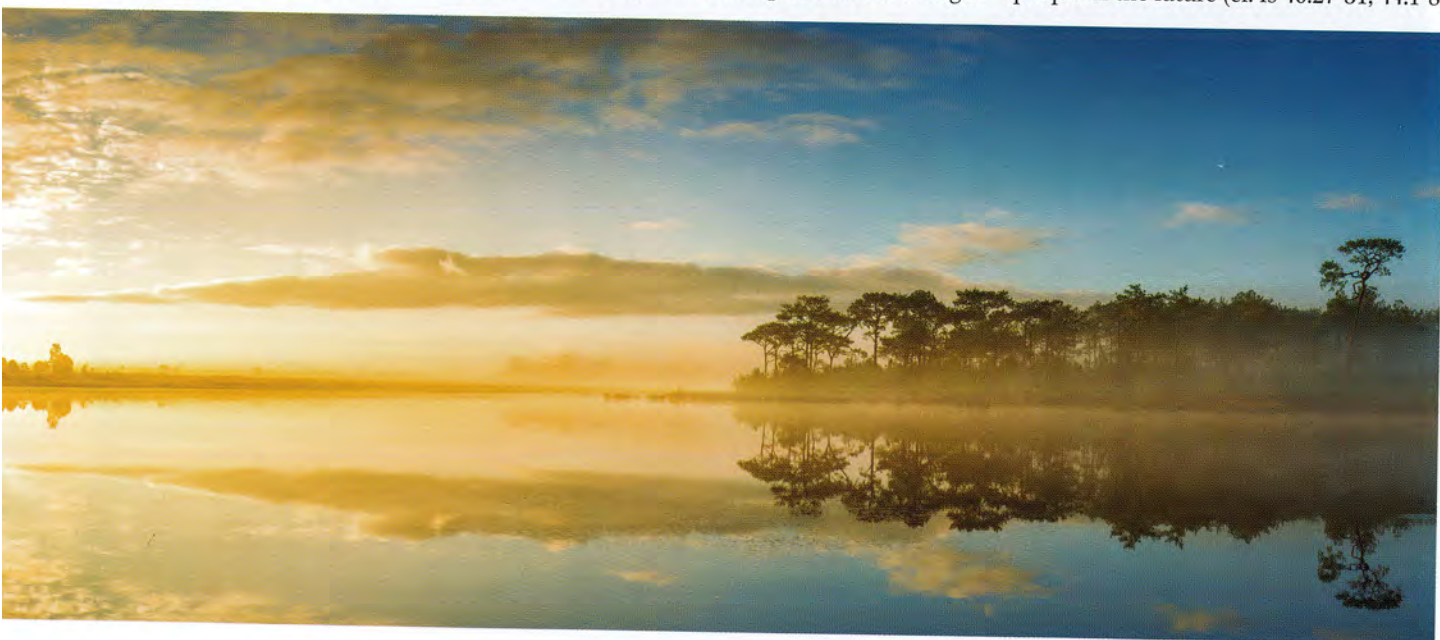
Temple in ruins (cf. Lam 5:1-18). Economic hardship and relational tension among groups on religious and political matters hampered the rebuilding efforts, despite King Cyrus' blessing and Jewish leaders' commitment. Under these miserable conditions, the prophets of the postexilic period instilled hope and roused the people to rebuild the Temple. Haggai, among others, prophesizes that they need to rebuild the Temple so worship of God could begin

again. Like Haggai, the prophet Zechariah advocates for the rebuilding of the Temple. However, for him, the monarchy will be reinstated only when religious and political leaders repent and are cleansed (Zec 12:10—13:6). God will dwell again in the land when moral transformation takes place (Zec 2:12). Prosperity will return, and Jerusalem will be comforted when the Temple is rebuilt (Zec 1:16-17; 8:1-3).

Vitality and Hopefulness

How did the prophets articulate a message of hope for a future redemption of the people and the restoration of the land amid destruction and ruined hopes? What are the grounds for their hope when the world around them was turned upside down? On whom did they base their pastoral vitality and hopefulness?

The prophets' vitality and hopefulness are rooted in their consciousness of and sympathy with divine pathos, the suffering God: "They have forsaken me" (Jer 2:13). Filled with a blazing passion for God, the prophets boldly attest to God's love for Israel, recalling God's redemptive action and everlasting love for the covenant people. If God has provided for the people in the past, they reason, God will continue to provide and fulfill God's promises to the people in the future (cf. Is 40:27-31; 44:1-8,



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21-28). God's intense devotion and love for Israel never vanish. The redemption of Judah is not prompted by the people's repentance but by God's gracious nature and for God's sake (Ez 36:22-32).

Time and again, the prophets stress the sovereignty of God over creation (cf. Is 66:1), other gods and kingdoms of the earth (Jer 10:7; Is 10:5-34; 14:26). Portrayed as the Divine Warrior, God will be protector and defender of the Temple and the people of Jerusalem, overthrowing earthly kingdoms, rebuilding the Temple, reappportioning the land and reinstating the Davidic kingship (Na 1:2-8; Zec 9:1-17; 14:12-15; Is 59:15-19; 63:1-13). God's sovereignty is not limited to the Israelites but is extended to all kingdoms, rulers and peoples (Am 1:3-2:5; Is 2:2-4). All are beneficiaries of God's restoration.

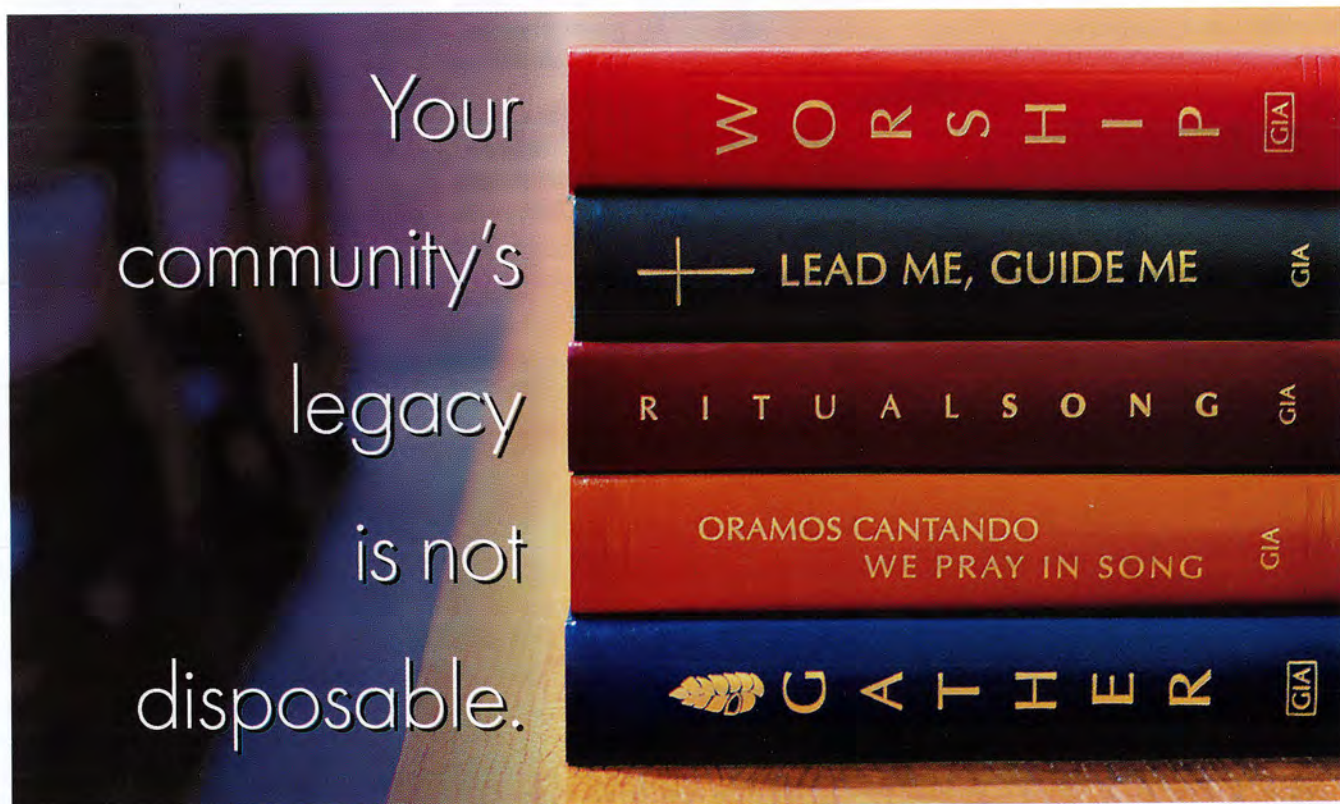
We must conscientiously foster the belief that we are agents of hope with the help of God.

The prophets had a robust view of God's governance of the world and God's power to create newness and possibility. When Jewish kings neglected their moral obligations and failed to fulfill their leadership responsibilities, the prophets envisioned the arrival of a new world order in which God would personally lead the new community: "I myself will search for my sheep and examine them"; "I will deliver them from every place where they were scattered on the day of dark clouds"; "I will bring them back to their own country and pasture them upon the mountains of

Israel"; "I myself will pasture my sheep" (Ez 34:11-16). God will be the king/shepherd, and Davidic princes will help God govern the people (cf. Ez 34:11-16; 34:23-24; 37:25; 46:1-24). With God as the ruler, there will be harmony in nature (Is 65:25; 11:6-7) and inclusivity among peoples (Is 56:1-8).

Hope for the Future

By now we are familiar with news headlines like "The Catholic Church Is Breaking People's Hearts," "The Catholic Church Should Abolish the Priesthood," "Why I Left the Catholic Church." How do we minister to those who have lost hope and trust? How do we find a way forward when the world sees the Church as problematic and our priestly life as counter to the culture and with suspicion? Is there



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hope for the future of the Church?

The prophetic writings and their hopeful imaginations offer us an insight as to how to face our crisis with renewed hope and to articulate and embrace a vision of hope.

The first readings in the season of Advent, chiefly from the book of Isaiah, confirm and express our hope in God's involvement in the future: "He shall judge between the nations, and impose terms on many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks" (Is 2:4; First Sunday of Advent). "A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom" (Is 11:1; Second Sunday). "Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God, he comes with vindication; with divine recompense he comes to save you" (Is 35:4; Third Sunday). "The virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel" (Is 7:14; Fourth Sunday). All point to the coming and the reign of the Messiah and God.

Indeed, the Church is in crisis. However, as long as we recognize God as creator and sovereign ruler, as long as we see God's glorious presence in the world and seriously discern the mystery and transcendence of God, as long as we recognize the fullness of God's solidarity with those who suffer, we have a future.

But we must do our part. We must courageously help people articulate their pain, anguish and helplessness. We must empathically listen to the cries of people and the voices of the faithful. We must persistently tell people the hurt in God's heart and the story of God's redemption embodied in the Incarnate Word. We must conscientiously foster the belief that we are agents of hope with the help of God. **TP**

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