

# Sermon starter/exegesis

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Picture your church's mission impact as a stream. Where does it go? What path does it take as you commission members, resources and the embodied words of the gospel to go out into the world? Whose lives are touched by that stream?

In Isaiah, God says *"I'll make all my mountains into roads, turn them into a superhighway."* How does the mission stream that flows from your congregation shape the landscape as it makes its path through the world?

The people of Israel found themselves exiles in a strange land when Jerusalem was conquered by Babylon. Now, the Babylonians themselves have been conquered by Persia and Cyrus the Great.<sup>1</sup>

The prophet speaks to the people after Babylon has fallen (sometime around 586-539 BCE). On the surface, it is a heavy time of war, poverty and devastation.

But in spite of that devastation, it is also a time of restoration. This new generation of wanderers might be allowed, finally, to return home; to reclaim their land, rebuild their homes, even restore their Temple. All the while, the prophet assures Israel that their covenant with God has never been broken—even as their structures and institutions crumbled, God remained with the people.

One critical part of that covenant is that ***Israel's responsibilities extend beyond its own people***—God has called them to care more widely for the nations of the earth; to show **compassion** and mercy as an expression of covenant living.<sup>2</sup> This was part of their identity as God's people before the exile, and remains true at their core as they move into a season of renewal. Even—maybe especially—in a time of upheaval, they are called to be people who live outside of themselves.

Isaiah 49:10 conveys a powerful vision for creation; it's a vision that will be brought to life by these people of covenant and restoration. To be in covenant means to be "a powerful agent and partner in the practice of loyal solidarity that makes a new future possible."<sup>3</sup> In this moment, God is inviting them to step into their role as a community that will *let love flow* in new and innovative ways.

Folk-country supergroup "The Highwomen" released their album by the same name in fall of 2019. But one of the album's tunes took on new life in the early weeks of the COVID-19 crisis.

"A Crowded Table" emerged as an anthem of the social-distancing era. You may have even seen it on a Campbell's soup commercial! One verse goes:

*If we want a garden, we're gonna have to sow the seed  
Plant a little happiness, let the roots run deep;  
If it's love that we give, then it's love that we reap  
If we want a garden, we're gonna have to sow the seed...<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Hansen, Paul D. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching Isaiah 40-66*. John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1995. Pgs. 1-3

<sup>2</sup> Hansen, Paul D. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching Isaiah 40-66*. John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1995. Pgs. 130-132

<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. *Isaiah (Westminster Bible Companion) (Volume 2, Chapters 40-66)*. Fourth Impression, Westminster John Knox Press, 1998. Pgs. 113-114

<sup>4</sup> McKenna, Lori; Hemby, Natalie Nicole; Carlile, Brandi. "Crowded Table." *The Highwomen*, Elektreka Records, 2019.

That's the same Kingdom kind of vision at the heart of the text; a world in which "everyone's a little broken, but everyone belongs..." as one line of the song's bridge affirms. Covenant people are those who recognize that love is what we reap—but only if we first sow it. Only if we release it from our grasp, sending it out to transform the world around us.

When you give generously through OGHS, you *let love flow*. You empower families and communities around the world to live healthier, safer, more hope-filled lives. And ultimately, you build a world that honors the interconnectedness of all God's people.

In this time when all of life has been touched by the effects of the pandemic, we are called to be people of restoration; releasing love into the world in new and innovative ways that answer the unique needs of this season. As the body of Christ in the world, the Church of today puts flesh on this vision: a world shaped by love's movement from one place to another.

The Body of Christ today transforms everything it touches—much like the body of water at the heart of Isaiah's vision for humankind. So take your congregation on a journey downstream: maybe with pictures; maybe using visualization; maybe even setting up worship stations to explore different expressions of mission life. Dive into questions—maybe even celebrations!—about your collective impact. Start with lives inside your own congregation, then look at your local community. And then—follow that stream all the way to Nicaragua; to Kenya; to Vietnam, and all of the other places where your One Great Hour of Sharing gifts are at work.

You are part of a living stream that changes lives as water reaches all who are thirsty.

If your church is a body of water, where does it go? Who does it touch? How does it carve a path and change the shape of the world it flows through?

Of course, every body of water has one thing in common: a source. That source is not your sanctuary, your fellowship hall, or your charter. It is the love of God, made known in Christ and community. When you unleash that power and *let love flow*, miraculous things happen in the wake of that stream. What stories of new life might be possible when the gifts of your members are set on a course to flow through the world?