

ENLARGE THE PLACE OF YOUR TENT

Isaiah 54:1-5

Key Verse: 54:2

"Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes."

Happy Anniversary! Today we are celebrating the first year of the pioneering work in Oita UBF. It is a joyful and historical day to remember God's blessings and to look forward to the future ministry. From a human point of view, I guess our church still looks a little like the picture -- only a few people in a small tent. But God has great vision to enlarge this tent and make it a house of prayer for all nations!

Today, we're studying a passage from the book of Isaiah. Briefly, Isaiah can be divided into two parts. Chapters 1-39 are mainly the messages of warning and judgment to the people of Israel to repent. Chapters 40-66 are messages of God's comfort and hope. Isaiah chapter 54 is one of the chapters full of God's hope and vision. The whole chapter is quoted as being God's exact words to the prophet Isaiah. Especially, God presents himself as Israel's true husband and promises to bless her and take care of her. When we study this passage, we are greatly comforted and challenged to increase our capacity to welcome God's blessing. May God speak to us and give us personal vision and direction for the next year.

Verse 1 begins "**Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy...**" The barren woman represents Israel. When Isaiah wrote this around the 8th century BC, to be childless was a woman's great shame and disgrace. Families depended on children for survival, especially when the parents became elderly. A woman who couldn't bear children was a disgrace to her husband and was seen as being cursed by God. A woman's basic purpose is to have children. But when this purpose is taken away, a woman can feel useless and depressed. Similarly, God had great hope for Israel to be a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation. Serving God was Israel's life purpose. But Israel forsook God by committing many sins of idolatry. So God decided to punish Israel by sending her into exile around the 6th century BC. It was a dark and shameful period in the history of God's chosen people. God's blessing was taken away and Israel became like a fruitless barren woman.

Still, Isaiah said, "**Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy.**" How could Israel rejoice in such a hard time? Look at verse 1b. "**because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband, says the LORD.**" Israel could rejoice because God still had hope and love for them. Although God had abandoned them for a moment in Babylon, he would have compassion and pour out his blessings upon Israel again. With God's hope in their hearts, even a barren woman could shout for joy.

Look at verse 2. "**Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do**

not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes." God wanted to bless Israel with so many children that they needed to enlarge the place of their tent where they lived. These days Japanese people live in apartments. But back then people lived in tents. They were nomads who travelled around a lot following God's guidance. God didn't specify any limit in making the tent bigger. He said, do not hold back, lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. The Israelites should make their tent as big as possible with faith in God.

Enlarging the place of our tent means to widen our hearts before God. This means we should love God more and love our neighbours more. Humanly speaking the barren woman has no need for a larger tent. She won't have any children and a bigger tent will only mean more cleaning for her. But God's vision included other people, even non-believing Gentiles. To make the bigger tent would mean that she would need to accept God's vision for her life in place of her own. She would need to deny her own dreams and selfishness and use her time and resources to serve the people God wanted to bring into her life.

The Message bible version translates verse 2 like this: "**Clear lots of ground for your tents! Make your tents large. Spread out! Think big!**" God wants us to think big -- that is, to think about things which only God Almighty can do. But usually humans don't like this because they are selfish and like to satisfy themselves with little things such as getting a good job or having a large frying pan to cook in. But God didn't make us to only hope for small things. God made us in his image to reveal his majesty and glory. According to verse 3, Israel would take over many nations and cities. Our vision in God should be at the national and world level.

Our ancestor Abraham is a good example. When God called him he had a dream for a small thing: one son. We guess every night he cried, "God please give me one son! If you do, I won't ask for anything else." So when Ishmael was born he was perfectly happy with his life and enjoyed his new family. He bought Ishmael many toys and read many books to him. But one day God rebuked his complacent life and changed his name from Abram (noble father) to Abraham (father of many nations). He also changed his wife's name from Sarai (princess) to Sarah (mother of nations). God's hope for this family was great. Abraham wanted one child but God wanted to give Abraham descendants which numbered more than the sand on the seashore and the stars in the sky. God wanted Abraham to think big and stretch himself to see what God Almighty could do in his life.

In the late 1700s a shoemaker in Scotland accepted Isaiah 54:2, "**Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back.**" He put a map of China on the wall of his room and began to pray for the unreached people there. God did not send him to China. But God did send him to India. His name was William Carey. He had many problems, including a wife who was a mental patient. But he had God's vision; he obeyed Jesus' world mission command and went -- with his family -- and God used him greatly to plant the gospel in India, and to plant missionary vision in the students of Cambridge University. A great missionary movement began that eventually covered the whole world.

God's vision for each of us is big like this. Of course, each of us has a slightly different calling and role in God's work but ultimately, God's vision and hope for each person is big. If we think about small things or place limits on God's power we won't be happy. But if we think big and expect great things from God, we will be joyful because that's how God created us to be.

Recently there was some good news posted on the web about God's work in China. Through 47 missionaries and 12 native shepherds 22 chapters were pioneered. In the beginning many of these churches were underground because preaching the gospel there was forbidden. However, despite these hard conditions, God's servants held big vision and God did big things for them.

Personally, when I thought about the size of my tent in Oita, I repented. Basically, I thought mostly about my own job and a few students. When we started advertising for free English classes, very quickly five people showed interest. I thought that if we didn't take down the posters soon too many people would contact me and I wouldn't be able to teach all of them. But this kind of thinking was grounded in my selfishness, laziness, and self-imposed human limit. It didn't include God's vision or power. A business professor in America once said that we shouldn't pray for God to bless us according to our capacity. Instead, we should pray for God to give us the capacity to bear the blessings he wants to give us. May God widen my narrow heart to be able to serve and welcome many people every day.

Isaiah said, "**Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.**" If we want to make a bigger tent, we also need to use longer cords and drive our stakes deeper into the ground. Otherwise, when the wind comes our tent will blow away and we'll be left with nothing. Spiritually speaking, lengthening our cords could be a metaphor for lengthening the cords of our prayer. That is, instead of praying only for small personal blessings, we should pray for all the people of our city, nations and things which reach all the corners of the earth. The more we stretch our prayers, the bigger our heart will become. Strengthening our stakes can be a metaphor for studying the bible. If we want to serve many people but only study the bible superficially we will burn out and have no power to have spiritual impact. The bigger our tent, the deeper our stakes need to be. When Jesus gave the disciples the world mission command, it seemed ridiculous to them. Many of them were fishermen with no special education or speaking skills. But when they prayed and held the word of God the Holy Spirit came upon them and they preached the gospel boldly in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Look at verse 4. "**Do not be afraid; you will not suffer shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood.**" When the Jews went to Babylon it seemed like God had abandoned them. They suffered shame, disgrace, and humiliation like a woman without a husband. Similarly, those living on the front lines of world mission can be scared. There are language problems, job problems, money problems, and loneliness

problems. Sometimes it may seem like God isn't working or even abandoned us. But God said "Do not be afraid." God's servants should have no fear because God is with us.

Look at verse 5. **"For your Maker is your husband— the LORD Almighty is his name— the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth."** God isn't some tyrant who takes pleasure in seeing his wife suffer. He's not there to complain about her cooking or make endless demands of her. God gave himself four names so we can know better who God is. God is the "Maker." God made us. He knows everything about us. He loves us and wants to take care of us. God is the "Lord Almighty." God has Almighty power. He can part the Red Sea and raise the dead to life. He can open the door for jobs, raising disciples, and do impossible things through our faith. God is our "Redeemer." God saves us. In the days of slavery, slaves were redeemed from their masters when somebody paid the ransom money for them. In a similar way, we were all slaves of the devil because of our sins but we were purchased by God through the blood of Christ. It is God's amazing one-sided grace to us. God is the "God of all the earth." God is everywhere. It doesn't matter where we go, God is with us. God loves the people of every nation equally and wants to do his mighty work everywhere. When we remember this God who is our Maker, Almighty, Redeemer, and the God of all the earth, we have no reason to fear anything but can serve God boldly, seeking his kingdom first by faith. Even though we are unfaithful, God will never stop being our loving and perfect husband.

Today we learned that God wants to bless us with so many things. When Hikaru and Nobuto started to get more toys we needed to buy more plastic containers to fit them. In the same way, God challenges us to enlarge the tent of our hearts so he can bless us with more things. What is the vision for your life? May God's vision grow in us day by day as we lengthen our prayer time and study the bible more deeply.