

Gabriel Marcel, a French existentialist philosopher of the last century, once observed that, “It is for those without hope that hope is given.” This same observation can justly be considered one of the central themes of salvation history, and no one knew the truth of it more than our Jewish forebears in faith.

We get a taste of this in our First Reading today, a passage from the prophet Haggai involving Darius, the king of Persia toward the end of the 6th c. BCE. There’s actually confusion about just who Darius was. Some scholars think that the reference to Darius is mistaken, and that Haggai’s reference was intended to be to Cyrus the Great. Others identify Darius I (there were several, apparently) as the administrator of one of the three geographical divisions into which Cyrus divided the Persian Empire.

It isn’t who he was that’s important, though, but the role he played in history. It’s important to remember the historical context of our First Reading. The Babylonian Empire conquered Jerusalem and the southern Kingdom of Judah in 587 BCE. (The northern Kingdom of Samaria had already been conquered by Assyria 125 years earlier and fell into Babylonian hands when the Assyrian Empire was itself defeated by Babylon.) When Jerusalem fell, it was destroyed — as was the Temple — and the vast majority of its population, along with their Judean countrymen and -women, were sent into forced exile in Babylon. The Psalmist captures this experience elegiacally:

*By the rivers of Babylon,
There we sat down and wept,
When we remembered Zion.
Upon the willows in the midst of it
We hung our harps.
For there our captors demanded of us songs,
And our tormentors mirth, saying,
‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion.’
How can we sing the Lord’s song
In a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
May my right hand forget her skill.
May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth*

*If I do not remember you,
If I do not exalt Jerusalem
Above my chief joy.¹*

An exiled people, a people without a homeland, a people without joy, a people without hope.

Except for one thing. They still trusted in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They still had confidence that what the Lord proclaimed to Haggai would come to pass in a way they couldn't foresee and at a time they couldn't predict. "Take courage, all you people ... for I am with you," the Lord had said. "One moment yet, a little while, and I will shake the heavens and the earth ... And I will fill this house with glory ... Greater will be the future glory than the former ... And ... I will give you peace."²

"To you, the hopeless — I am your hope," the Lord says in effect. And the hope that we accept from the Lord is never in vain, as the exiles in Babylon would soon discover. For it was Darius who encouraged and supported the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem a few short years later when the Jewish exiles were allowed to return to the Promised Land.

This is the faith that has sustained the Jewish people through centuries of oppression. It is the faith that sustains us, too.

I've seen this faith expressed architecturally in a dramatic way.

Yad Vashem is the memorial in Israel dedicated to those who perished in the Holocaust. It's built into the side of Mt. Herzl, where Israel's equivalent of Arlington National Cemetery is located. One enters Yad Vashem from a broad, sunlit plaza and proceeds through exhibits that depict Jewish life in Germany and elsewhere in Europe chronologically from the late 19th century, through World War I, through the Depression years, and on to the rise of Nazism, the coming of the Third Reich, the Second World War and the murder of millions in

¹ Ps 137:1-6 (NAB)

² Hg 2:4, 6-7, 9 (NAB)

Nazi extermination camps. As you make your way through the memorial, the passageways descend and become darker. They wind and twist and get progressively narrower. There's a sense of being trapped — precisely as the victims of the Holocaust must have felt. Gradually, though, as you approach the end of World War II and pass memorials, too, to the “Righteous Gentiles” who at great personal risk sheltered Jews from the Nazis, and the liberation of the Nazi camps and their few survivors, the passageways get lighter and lighter. They get wider again until you exit the memorial and museum via another broad, sunlit plaza, this one featuring a stunningly beautiful panoramic view of Jerusalem — and the new hope afforded Jews by the founding of a Jewish state in Israel.

“To you, the hopeless — I am your hope,” the Lord says in effect.

Where God is, hope is, though we may not always be able to see it, nor do we always know how or in what manner it'll be given us. In such times, when we're unable to hold on to our hope, we can rest in the assurance that the Lord is holding on to it for us until such time as it's given from His hands to ours.