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Sermon Transcript: Odd Songs of Hope

Well, you've just witnessed two of the worst pep talks in the Bible. The first one came from the Lord to Moses and then Moses passed it on along to the people. In fact, it's not just a lousy pep talk. God says, "Hey, Moses, you know all this stuff I'm telling you about how lousy the people are going to be. I want you to make it into a catchy song and then you can teach that song and they'll just sing it for generations." This isn't such a foreign concept to us. We do this all the time. We take harsh lessons and put it into songs and sometimes we even miss that it's there. Many years ago, there were four young people who came from Liverpool, England. And when they came upon the singing scene, they said, "When I was younger, so much younger than today, I never needed anybody's help in any way. But now these days are gone, and I'm not so self assured. Now I find I've changed my mind, and I've opened up the doors." They go on to say, "And now my life has changed in oh so many ways. My independence seems to vanish in the haze. But every now and then, I feel so insecure. I know that I just need you like I've never done before." And back then, gleefully, everyone sang along, "Help! I need somebody help. Not just anybody. Help. You know, I need someone help." And along we went. It's not a tradition that was just back then. It continued on later. Several years later, three young people, brothers in fact, from Tulsa, Oklahoma, stood before the microphone and gifted us with these prophetic words: "You have so many relationships in this life. Only one or two will last. You go through all the pain and the strife. Then you turn your back and they're gone so fast. So hold on to the ones who really care. In the end, they'll be the only ones there. And when you get old and start losing your hair, can you tell me who will still care?" "MMMBop." That is "MMMBop" by Hanson and we sang that gleefully, that tortured prophetic song of what life's going to be like and how people just disappear. If you've ever wondered what—what is an "MMMBop" anyway, "MMMBop" is evidently a unit of measurement of time, because later in the song they go, "In an mmmmbop they'll all be gone. In an mmmmbop no one will be there." It's evidently the precise unit of time it takes for people to abandon you. Years later, two young folks from Columbus, Ohio, cried out to the world, "I wish I found some chords in an order that is new. I wish I didn't have to rhyme every time I sang. I was told when I get older, all my fears would shrink. But now I'm insecure and I care what people think." They go on: "We used to play pretend and give each other different names. We'd—we'd build a rocket ship and we'd fly far away. Used to dream of outer space, but now they're laughing at our face, saying, 'Wake up. You need to make money.'" "Wish we could turn back time to the good old days when our mama sang us to sleep. But now we're stressed out." Yeah, that's "Stressed Out" by Twenty One Pilots.

That became a summer feel-good hit. You think about it though, this isn't limited just to pop culture. I mean, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" is a song about "I am weak, I am weary, things are not going well." Music is a way of landing in our soul in a way that words don't always. And so the Lord says, "Hey, Moses, these words that I have about the people and how unfaithful I know they're going to be when they get into that promised land, make it into a song. And then they'll remember that song. And when those bad days come, perhaps it will confront them and they'll realize what's happened."

The Context of the Torah's End

I'm going to place where we are in our Bible at this place. We're at the end of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is the last of the five books of the great Torah—the giving of the law to the people right there in the beginning of your Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. Here at the end of Deuteronomy, we're wrapping up. This is all the law has been wrapped up and they're preparing to go into the promised land. And so it says, "Moses, get Joshua, who's going to be the new leader in here. And I'm going to tell you that my great words to you as I send you off with this law into the land is that you're going to be lousy at it. You're going to mess up. You're going to worship other gods."

And yet, Joshua, hear these words when I say it to you: I will be with you. It does say, God, "I will hide from my people in those days when they turn away from me." God is not going to save us from the consequences of our actions. And the problem is we live in a world filled with free will and a bunch of other nincompoops out there who also cause consequences. And then those people get together and create systems and structures and they have consequences that hit our lives and the lives of people around us. And part of our learning process, God knows, is to receive those consequences. And God will let us receive that. And knowing that—knowing that when these situations happen, then we have something to learn in that moment. There's some place there for us to grow. And we know that God will be with us. We know there are words in scripture that say while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Even in the New Testament, this message is coming again and again. I know you will mess up. I know you will break this guidance, this wisdom that I've given to you. But in the midst of those consequences, you also need to remember this which comes to us from Romans chapter 8: that nothing—nothing in this world, nothing that you do, nothing that somebody else out there does, no consequence that comes and lands on your doorstep can separate you from the love of God. Nothing. And so, while consequences are part of a learning for us and God does allow the consequences of our free will to hit our front porch, God is there with us. And that gives us a different perspective in the moment. It gives us an opportunity to trust—to trust that in these teachings, in the way that God has—has—has led us, this is the path through it.

Meeting Brokenness with Faithfulness

The path through the brokenness that you experience is not more brokenness. When unhealthy habits come and—and rest upon your life, either your own or that of someone else's, the answer is never for you to meet it with another unhealthy habit or another piece of brokenness. Responding to such things with anger and malice and hatred and brokenness is not the ultimate answer. The perspective we have is that we understand that when things happen, this is a result of the brokenness that's in the world. And what we're called to do is to respond with faith and faithfulness in what we've been taught.

This is what God is trying to tell the people. You are going to mess up and consequences will come, but return to faithfulness because this guidance that God gives us isn't just to give us a set of rules. It's truly there to help us so that we might know what the good life is. And when we respond to the brokenness and the pain that comes into our lives with just more brokenness, more anger, we're just making it worse. We are the people who are called to trust this God to know that love and grace and mercy and justice and forgiveness are the way. And Jesus did not come here to give us a lesson on how to beat each other up. Jesus came here to give us a lesson to complete this law that began with these five books way back in the Old Testament and is ultimately fulfilled by a great act of sacrifice and love and grace and forgiveness. And so, while this gives us a different perspective through the dark times, it's also a call to action because what we realize is that we're not the only people in the universe. And while we're experiencing brokenness, that person over there may be experiencing brokenness as well. And we take what we have learned and the faith and the trust that we have. And when that person can't well it up, when they can't bring it to bear in that moment, then we come. We come with that mercy and that grace and that love. We become part of the revealing of the character of God such that when someone is crying out, "Help! I need somebody help. Not just anybody, Help! I need someone help," we know that God is there. And our response to their need for help becomes a reminder to them of God's presence and that God is there helping even through the darkest valleys.

When someone is looking around wondering is there anyone who still cares, "MMMBop," God's there. In that moment of brokenness, God is there. And when we show up when people are in that moment of loneliness and needing of someone to care, we become part of the witness. We become part of the reminder that they are not alone. When they desperately need that and someone says, "I wish we could just go back to the good old days, but now I'm just stressed out," we know that God is there. And our response to their stress, our desire to help them, to bring some mercy, some care, it serves as a reminder to them of that presence of God. And it reveals that indeed God is there through your stress as well.

Facing Thursday

There is a moment coming this week on Thursday when Kay, who we've been walking alongside, is going to appear in court. And this is likely to be the big day. After months of being separated from her 18-month-old son, she's going to be put into a—a—a court situation, told that she has followed all the rules that were given to her. And now, here's the judgment as to what's going to happen to you. And after Thursday, she might be on a flight back to Nicaragua, or she might get to go home to her 18-month-old son. And we don't know which way it's going to go. And based on the outcome of what we've seen in other cases, it's not likely to go to a place of light and hope and goodness. And we have to decide who we are going to be in moments of brokenness like that. And maybe this is the thing that will take someone to move into a place of action. Maybe this will be a moment of mercy and grace and there will be good news. I don't know. But here's a couple of things I do know. Whatever the outcome is of that human-made system and that human-made decision, what I know is that God is there. And what I know is that we are called to be there as well. Perhaps just to help someone who's feeling abandoned, who's feeling alone, like maybe no one cares, whose whole family is stressed out. Perhaps there are moments in your life that aren't quite as dramatic and on the political scene as what's going to happen in her life on Thursday. But in the midst of your own trials and tribulations, never doubt this truth that God is there with us. And that the people of God, when they are faithful, when they are attentive to what they have been taught through the law fulfilled in Christ, that the people of God will be there for you. Never doubt the presence or the power of God even in the most broken of places. This is the message that the Lord has for the people even as they are known to break it. This is the message that the Lord has for us as we sit in the midst of brokenness in our lives. And this is yet a message of hope that you get to carry if you will be faithful. May God be glorified by the witness that you make to the eternal covenant that God is ready to stand behind.

Hallelujah. Amen.