

JESUS & ISAIAH

I doubt if most of you need this orientation. But it is difficult to say anything about the prophets if we do not get oriented. The most famous prophets come in what, for many people, is an awkward and confusing period of Jewish history: after the civil war that split Judea in the south from Israel in the north. Too many names of too many kings. And as you know, history bunches up. It is not precise, and things go in cycles. So a quick review.

Abraham is the Father. Put Abraham at 2000 B.C. Some argue it might have been closer to 1800, but if we want to talk about four thousand years ago, are we comfortable with precision? Besides, 2000 is easier to remember. Abraham is 2000 B.C. King David and the Golden Age of Israel is 1000 B.C. Another thousand years brings us to Jesus.

What happens in 1000 A.D., the turn of the first millennium *after* Jesus? Nothing. Nothing any of us easily know or remember. A lot of people expected the end of the world, but no such luck!

Thousand-year increments can help us to get oriented. What about increments of five hundred years? What happens *between* Abraham and David? Speaking broadly, about five hundred years after Abraham, we get Moses: Joseph; slavery in Egypt; Passover; Torah; Covenant on the mountain. Religion does assign meaning to life. "Creator" *means* intelligent design, just for openers. By the way, without religion, there is no meaning or purpose to life. No Creator – no design or purpose. It's just here; in the long run, it doesn't matter or mean anything.

Our story – our religion and history and tradition – starts with Abraham. But then the whole affair falls into this huge black pit: slavery in Egypt. All is lost. Finally God bails us out, dusts us off, renews the PLAN – reinstates the Promise and the Covenant – makes it even clearer than before. At 1000 B.C. we behold the United Kingdom of Israel: King David. The plan and destiny are finally working and in place. We are confident and successful at last.

What happens five hundred years *after* Jesus? Christianity has taken over the Western World; the Emperor Constantine has converted; churches are everywhere; it's all coming up roses. But halfway between Jesus and the first millennium (roughly), it all falls apart. The Roman

Empire folds and goes under. Augustine gives Christendom a different vision just in the nick of time, or it is difficult to imagine that our story could have survived the mayhem. Actually, Augustine returns us to a former vision, THE CITY OF GOD: *“My Kingdom is not of this world.”*

What else happens between Jesus and the first millennium? Muhammad is born. The descendants of Ishmael come back with a vengeance. Islam soon owns most of the lands of Christendom. Except for Charlemagne, it would have owned them all. Gregory the Great, the greatest of the popes, is contemporary with Muhammad.

What happens between then and now? Another five hundred years brings us to the 1500s, give or take a hundred years. It is one of the most dramatic periods in our history. The church is corrupt and rotten, and most everybody knows it. We have fallen into another kind of black pit. For a while, like with every black pit, it looks like all is lost – God has abandoned us; we are through; it’s over. Then all hell breaks loose: Reformation, Counter-Reformation, renewal. Luther, Calvin, Ignatius Loyola, Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross. By the way, Michelangelo is a contemporary of Luther. Columbus, and a new world, is also part of the mix. Luther and Muhammad have the same birthday, by the way – November 10th – except one thousand years apart. Muhammad is five hundred years after Jesus; Luther is fifteen hundred years after Jesus. Anyway, fifteen hundred years after Jesus, we get this dramatic upheaval and renewal – giant players on the board – and the repercussions impact everything. They are still playing themselves out today.

Jumping back up, what happened about fifteen hundred years after Abraham – that is, about halfway between David and Jesus? It is one of the most dramatic periods in religious history: Buddha, Lao Tsu, Confucius, Socrates, Zoroaster, and the great Hebrew prophets (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah). Somebody must have put something in the water! When do we always get such amazing religious leaders? When the religious institutions are corrupt and rotten; when the hope is dead or dying; when we have fallen into a black pit and God realizes that we are not going to get out on our own. At least that’s the way it looks to some of us. In any case, the period of the great Hebrew prophets is about halfway between King David and Jesus.

The Hebrew prophets do not try to predict the future; they try to turn people back to the plans and purposes of God. They call the people to renewal and commitment, and speak the word of repentance and

reform: Get back on track. Get back to the plan. Get back to who you really are, and what you are supposed to be about. They remind people of God's will and purpose, and insist that God's will and purpose are still viable and that the Promise is still waiting for fulfillment. They mention all the ways in which people have abandoned God and the Covenant. They insist that our trouble is not because God has stopped loving the people, but because the people have stopped loving God.

The prophets are unpopular in their own time. That should be obvious, but lots of people forget what it would have been like to be one. None of the prophets are famous or honored or listened to until after they are dead. They stand apart from the political structures, however deeply concerned they are about them. They risk life and limb to carry their message, and are frequently persecuted, punished, tortured, and killed. They are dramatic, frequently acting out their messages as well as speaking them.

Hosea, for instance, married a prostitute (named Gomer) on purpose, to demonstrate what God was going through "in his faithless marriage with Israel." Does God hate divorce? The Jewish answer was, "We better hope so, or we're all dead!" Gomer kept running off, and Hosea kept forgiving her and taking her back, sermonizing all the while about the parallel between his marriage with Gomer and God's marriage with Israel. Gomer had children, and Hosea gave them interesting names, like *Lo Ammi*, which means "I don't know where this one came from, but it's no child of mine." In prophetic language, that means "You are not producing legitimate fruit. Stop screwing around with all the idols and false gods, and come home to Yahweh."

One thing Jesus learned from the prophets is that you don't just talk about it, you do it – you act it out. Isaiah, for instance, walked around Jerusalem barefoot and stark naked for three years to dramatize his message of the coming judgment and destruction at the hands of Assyria. Isaiah's father, Amoz, was the brother of King Amaziah of Judah. In short, Isaiah came from the aristocracy. He had land and wealth. He had it made. All he had to do was keep away from his prayers and keep his mouth shut, and he could have lived a pleasant and successful life, honored by his family and respected by his people. But in 740 B.C., the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah was stricken with a powerful theophany. He realized the unspeakable contrast: the difference between a dead human king and the ever-living "heavenly king." Isaiah transferred his allegiance to the heavenly king, and his life was never the

same again. In the midst of that awakening, Isaiah realized how far he and his people had strayed from their identity and purpose – from their Covenant with God. It staggered him to the core of his being. *“Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.”*

Isaiah was not talking about swearing or cussing. The Word of the Lord was no longer what the Chosen People lived for, carried, learned, or taught. They no longer “meditated on the Torah – on what God wanted of them – day and night,” as they had been instructed to do, and as they had promised to do. So the burning coal from the altar touched his lips – the cleansing, the forgiveness, the conversion – and Isaiah spent the next forty years being the mouthpiece of God. The pay was poor and the fringe benefits were terrible. Finally, the evil king Manasseh had Isaiah sawed in two because he didn’t like his sermons. It keeps me from feeling so sorry for myself when people don’t like my sermons.

I have often pondered what it would be like in the church today if we had taken our initiation rite from Isaiah instead of from John the Baptist – if instead of water on the head, we joined the church with a burning coal touched to our lips. And we would each promise to no longer be a people of unclean lips. We would only speak things in honor of God; we would only say things to build up the church, to encourage people to a true and better life. I wonder how many of us would still be willing to join the Christian cause. “Well, I’m almost ready to join, but I still have just a couple more questions about Christology before I actually take the final step.” I have heard that plenty of times even with the water. If joining the church meant getting kissed by a burning coal, would it mean a lot fewer members?

Isaiah spent his entire ministry telling people that despite the prosperity they were enjoying at the moment; despite the confidence they had in a rosy political future; despite their assumptions about God’s favor, and their refusal to take seriously their own faithlessness – it was all going to come crashing down around them. Yet Isaiah also said that although the tree would be cut down, the stump would remain – a remnant shall remain. And the overriding message of Isaiah (the very meaning of his name) was that God is salvation – and that only God can save. Humans have no such power, whether they are good or evil. Humans cannot save themselves or each other. Humans can wait and pray and be ready to cooperate, but God is salvation and the bringer of salvation. Earthly kings and kingdoms come and go; pin your hopes on

the heavenly King, and the heavenly Kingdom. Stay faithful. Be willing to sacrifice and to suffer any fate that comes – but live for the heavenly King, and the heavenly Kingdom.

Such themes and expectations are huge in Jesus' life and ministry. For instance, I think it comes from Isaiah (6:10) that Jesus learns not to be surprised when people reject His teaching and preaching – where He learns not to place any confidence on what is happening at any given moment in this world. (Matthew 13:14-15) And “*An everlasting kingdom,*” says Isaiah 9:7. “*My kingdom is not of this world,*” says Jesus. (John 8:23; 18:36) It is a perspective Jesus has absorbed so deeply, we can barely follow it sometimes. And “the remnant,” the disciple band of faithful followers – the leaven that keeps changing the world, not because it has overt power in this world, but precisely because it remains faithful to a Kingdom not of this world – Jesus develops that theme even far beyond Isaiah. When Jesus trusts His own life to God and goes to the Cross, He also trusts His mission to “the remnant” – to the tiny band of friends who know and love Him. God is behind it – God is salvation. But “the remnant” is still the method God uses – at least the part of it we see. That is the only reason *we* are here. The only way the whole thing gets carried from then until now – and from them to us – is by this remnant band of faithful friends. The disciples – the disciple bands – both then and now.

Is that what you think is important too? Do you have confidence in the denominational structures, in the mega-churches, in the fact that so many people are writing books or leading seminars? Do you think Christendom is authentic and will survive because we have so many members worldwide, because we have so much money, because our programs are so effective, because we sing the right songs? It is wonderful when things seem to be working right. Earthly success is more pleasant than earthly failure. But is that where any of our trust or confidence lies? The band of friends who love Jesus and share Him and stay loyal to Him – obedient and receptive to His Holy Spirit – *that* is what keeps us alive. That is what the real church rests on and depends upon. It always has. And if that ever goes, everything else will go with it. If you are not in a disciple band, get into one. If you are not in such a band, you only know the head-trip side of Christianity – the theory part without the heart or soul.

Back to Isaiah. Many of us suspect that “Immanuel” was the name of his third son. For forty years, Isaiah carried a message of doom, but

its context and purpose always carried a great hope within it: a remnant shall remain; God will save us; a shoot from the stump of Jesse; an everlasting kingdom; God with us – *Immanuel*. These themes Jesus carries on.

At the fortieth chapter of the Book of Isaiah, the writing shifts to a different message and a different historical context. We suspect it is a Second Isaiah, one hundred and fifty years later – a prophet during the Babylonian Exile; a spiritual leader in the midst of the disaster that Isaiah of Jerusalem had warned was coming. Second Isaiah is often considered to be the most profound writer in the Old Testament. From him come images of Israel as a suffering servant, and to the exiles he speaks of comfort, of healing and restoration, and of a great hope. That message of hope was, of course, nearly as unpopular with the exiles who were discouraged and feeling sorry for themselves, as the earlier message of judgment and doom had been to those feeling confident and cocky about their earthly success. As we all know, Jesus takes the theme of Isaiah 61:1-2 as the hallmark and design of His own ministry. “*The spirit of the Lord is upon me*” (Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus also takes the suffering servant motif of chapter 53 and carries it many dimensions beyond. For Christians, Isaiah 53 is the most famous passage in Isaiah’s book. “*He was despised and rejected Yet it was our afflictions he was bearing, our pain he endured He was pierced for our transgressions ... by his wounds we are healed.*” There is no way we can read the 53rd chapter of Isaiah without being reminded of the crucifixion of Jesus.

There is no mandate for us to try to untangle it all today. The context makes it clear that Isaiah is not trying to predict the coming Messiah. He is not speaking of a future person or event, but of something that has already happened. Furthermore, nobody thought this was a picture of the Messiah until after the death of Jesus. Messiah was supposed to be a new type of King David – a powerful and successful military and political leader. The fact that Jesus’ life ended up looking so much like this picture in Isaiah 53 is in large measure the reason Judaism cannot imagine that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus does not match any Jewish expectation or hope.

So we have another mystery. We do know that Jesus was very familiar with the Book of Isaiah. Did Jesus ponder, pray, and meditate on this “suffering servant” passage until it became the pattern He chose

and believed in for the New Covenant? If so, then why has it not become the core pattern for all of Jesus' followers to ponder, pray, and meditate on, and choose in some fashion for their own lives? That is much too big a question to pretend to solve, or even to deal with in a sermon. I suspect it still crosses the minds of most Christians from time to time. And sooner or later, in one way or another, we all answer it.

Meanwhile, you are not forgetting, I hope, the main reason I started preaching this series of sermons: Jesus and His friends, Jesus and His heroes, Jesus and His role models. We cannot comprehend Jesus apart from His heritage and tradition. He did not come out of nowhere. He did not design it from scratch. Jesus profoundly ingested, pondered, prayed, contemplated, and absorbed the life and experience of Judaism and its greatest leaders. *He is more* than a composite of Abraham, Joseph, Samuel, the prophets, and all the rest. But *He is not less!* You can feel Isaiah and Jeremiah and Elijah and Moses and their profound influence within Him – unless you know nothing of their stories. It is not vague or accidental. Jesus honors them, loves them, knows them, quotes them, thinks through everything they did and said ... and beyond.

Isaiah lived during the reigns of four kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Hezekiah was a very good king in a very hard time. He and Isaiah became one of the great prophet/king teams of Israel. During Hezekiah's reign, Assyria did indeed march to conquer Egypt, but Israel was along the way. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed (722 B.C., Shalmanesser V). A few years later (21), Sennacherib renewed the campaign against Egypt. The Southern Kingdom of Judah, Hezekiah's domain, was conquered – except for the city of Jerusalem, which, though under siege, never actually fell. It was Isaiah the prophet who told Hezekiah the king not to surrender. When all seemed lost, Isaiah declared that God would defend and deliver Jerusalem. This deliverance (II Kings 19:35) is often considered to be one of the greatest miracles in the Old Testament, almost like a second Passover. Sennacherib still claimed to have taken more than two hundred thousand slaves back to Assyria from Judah (in 701 B.C.). But instead of the certain victory, suddenly the armies departed – and Jerusalem was saved.

Time to summarize: Isaiah lived in Jerusalem in 740 B.C. There had been a civil war nearly two hundred years earlier. It had been more than a political squabble; it had been a terrible blow to faith: How could you go from David to Solomon to civil war? If you were God's Chosen People – God's Holy Nation – how could you split? The Promise was going

backward; something must be dreadfully wrong. If it was God's plan to make Israel a Holy Nation, a Light to the World – the hub and focus from which all the nations would come to God and learn to keep his Ways – how could you split? Half the world was supposed to go to Jerusalem, and the other half to Samaria? Half the world would be inspired by the temple in Jerusalem, and the other half by the temple on Mount Gerazim? Naturally, most everybody assumed God would bring Israel and Judah back together, though few agreed on which half would join the other or how that might happen.

Isaiah was one of a tiny handful of people who came to realize that Israel and Judah were not coming back together. Civil war was only the beginning of decline, and it would get far worse. While everybody had assumed God's Promise meant political and earthly prominence and success, that *was not* and *would not be* the case. It is the world's most classic faith crisis – then and now: If God will not give us what we want him to give us, then what good is God? Why should we worship God? For that matter, why should we pay any attention to God whatsoever?

Isaiah saw the Lord “high and lifted up.” He realized that the world's views about God and what God was really trying to accomplish were miniscule and pathetic. All the kingdoms of the earth were too low and slow to matter, in comparison to the glory of God, the blessing of his presence, and the future that really was in store. So Isaiah spent the rest of his life saying, “You are tuned to the wrong channel. Only God can save us. Only an everlasting kingdom matters. This whole place is going up in smoke anyway. Get back to your own faithfulness. Being close with God is everything – *Immanuel* is our only hope. And no matter what you see destroyed, the remnant will remain. It is not what we expected, but the Promise is still good, still at work, still unfolding – only deeper and more profoundly than anything we imagined. But you have to stop counting on the false pictures, or you cannot see the real one.”

Not many people listened to Isaiah in his time. But years later, a young man from Nazareth was listening. Oh my, how He was listening! God had never intended to call the whole world to be loyal or faithful to an earthly regime, an earthly king, an earthly nation. God had always been calling people *to himself* – all of them. Isaiah got a glimpse of it: the Lord high and lifted up. It changed everything. The man from Nazareth got it too, only even clearer. And now, because of Him, it's our turn.