

28 May 2017

The Liberal
Isaiah 61:1-4; Luke 4:14-21

We don't know every Hebrew prophet's name, but that doesn't change the power of God behind their words. Hear this message from an anonymous prophet from the time of Babylonian exile. We read Isaiah 61, verses 1-4:

61 *The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
4 They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.*

When Jesus began his ministry, he returned to his home synagogue in Nazareth, where he picked up the scroll of Isaiah and read from this passage. We read Luke 4:14-21:

*14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. 16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:
18 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'
20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all*

in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

A bit of background teaching to start with. The Book of Isaiah is 66 chapters of confusing. One of the puzzling things about it is the way that it changes suddenly in the middle. The first 35 or so chapters are clearly the work of the prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem, who prophesied there during the time when the Assyrian Empire was threatening Israel and Judah. How do we know that? Because Isaiah names names. He prophesies directly to the Judean kings of that time – Ahaz and Hezekiah – and refers by name to the kings of Israel, Syria, and Assyria. He's very historically specific, so it's not hard to place those writings chronologically.

(Isaiah's message to those kings, by the way, is to stop trying to save Judah by practical, human methods – bigger walls, alliances with Egypt, and so on – but instead to trust God to remember the covenant with Israel. "In quietness and rest shall you be saved," Isaiah says. That would actually be a great message for today's fearful, diminishing church: maybe we could stop trying to save ourselves by the latest management technique or denominational program and instead try to remember that God loves the church and won't abandon it. Just a thought. Nobody listened to Isaiah, either.)

Anyway, that's the first half of Isaiah. In chapter 40, though, things change dramatically. Suddenly, the book no longer names any of the figures of Isaiah's time. In fact, the only person identified by name in the last half of the book is Cyrus, the Persian emperor, who lived 200 years *after* Isaiah. Which is odd. Moreover, the book just changes tone. The first half of Isaiah is dark and harsh; starting in chapter 40, all is hope and grace. God will restore Judah and Jerusalem. Her ruins will be rebuilt and the land will again be inhabited. That's a little odd, too, actually. When Isaiah of Jerusalem lived, Jerusalem was not destroyed and the land was full of inhabitants. Jerusalem didn't need rebuilding and repopulating until a century or more later. The simplest explanation for these oddities is that the second half of the book was written by a different prophet, who lived during the Persian period, and who attached his work to the end of Isaiah as the conclusion and fulfillment of those prophecies.

This hypothetical prophet is the man (I assume a man, but who knows?) whom I want to talk about today, because he's amazing. Whoever he was, he thought generations beyond his time. He would have been was a faithful Jew who had the center of his faith – the temple – destroyed by enemies and who had been taken away into exile, a slave. Now the Ancient Near Eastern mind understood a nation's defeat as being also the defeat of that nation's God. In other words, Jerusalem's fall meant that Yahweh had been conquered by Bel and Nebo, the gods of Babylon. But this Prophet of the Exile said, "No. We don't worship a tribal deity in competition with other gods. We worship the God who created the heavens and the earth." What that meant was that the God of Israel was just as much God in Babylon. There *is* no other God. *You are my witnesses, says the LORD . . . Understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior* (43:10-12). This is new. We speak of Judaism as the first great monotheistic faith, which is true, but for most of the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites weren't monotheists. They weren't supposed to worship any other gods, but that didn't mean there weren't any. But suddenly, this prophet changed everything. *I am the LORD, and there is no other; besides me, there is no God . . . Know, from the rising of*

the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other (45:5-6).

I can't overstate how original this was for its time, and how radically it changed everything. For instance, the Prophet of the Exile has a completely new attitude to idols. Israel had always been forbidden to have idols, and they were regarded as abominations, because they represented other gods. But, remember, this prophet doesn't believe that there *are* other gods, so to him, idols are no longer abominations. They're ridiculous. "People, it's a block of wood. The other half of that god is stovewood that you're baking bread over. Why do you want a god that you have to carry around, when you have a God who is willing to carry you?" But the implications of his monotheism get more radical than that. If there is only one God, and that God created all the earth, and all people, then that God is no longer Israel's exclusive possession. If there is only one God, and if that God is, as we say, a God of covenant love and justice, then we can no longer defend the idea that God loves only us. Yes, Israel was chosen by God. But they hadn't been chosen to be special, but rather to be God's representative to the rest of the world that God loved. *It is too small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach the end of the earth (49:6).*

Most striking of all, the God of Israel – who is also the God of all the earth – is no longer seen as a legalistic God, meting out punishments for infractions of the law and rewards for good behavior. To the Prophet of the Exile, salvation does not stem from our obedience but from God's eagerness to love. God forgives sins not because the people have completed the required steps but simply *Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you (43:4).* The Prophet of the Exile has to use find metaphors to express God's love for the people. Much of the Hebrew Bible describes God as a loving father, but that's not good enough for this prophet: *Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands (49:15-16).* God isn't just our father, God is our mother, and more. It's no wonder that this prophet keeps saying things like, *Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not see it? (43:18-19)* He is a radical, a dreamer, an amazing prophet of an amazing God.

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If you were here last week, you heard me talk about Ezra and Nehemiah, who lived and worked in Jerusalem during the Persian period. In other words, during the same era as the Prophet of the Exile. But you may have noticed some differences between last week's biblical figures and today's. Ezra and Nehemiah were all about remembering the former things. They worked to rebuild Jerusalem and re-affirm and enforce the Law of Moses, and above all they sought to do this by keeping the Jews pure, undefiled by foreigners and their wicked abominations. Their concern was to recover the pure faith of the past (which may or may not have been as pure as they remembered, but that didn't matter) and to do so they built walls – both figurative and literal –against outsiders.

The Prophet of the Exile saw things differently. The last eleven chapters of Isaiah appear to be written after the Jerusalem temple had been rebuilt, and the prophet rejoices in that using these words: *And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants . . . these will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer, their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples* (56:6-7). This prophetic visionary imagines a time when the temple of the one and only God would be opened for everyone. In fact, in chapter 66, he suggests that God would make some of those foreigners “priests and Levites.” He imagined a time when faith in the one God was separate from race or language or ethnicity or ritual purity, but was for anyone who joined themselves to God.

Apparently, that was going too far, and there’s no sign that any of this ever took place in reality. The new temple was built and reserved exclusively for Jews in good standing. The vision of the Prophet of the Exile must have felt to those embattled, isolated Jewish settlers like the air dreams of a raving liberal lunatic, wholly divorced from reality. (“Imagine all the people . . . worshipping as one . . . wo-ho, wo-o-o.”) And those struggling settlers might even have had a point. Ezra and Nehemiah did hold the people together and give them identity, and I do actually have trouble imagining any practical way to implement the Prophet of the Exile’s vision during his own lifetime. Institutions just don’t change that radically, that quickly.

But the people needed the vision, and we still do. I closed last week’s story about Ezra and Nehemiah by reminding you that, whether you like them or not, their books are part of our Bible and can’t just be written off as the stories of two compassion-impaired legalistic fundamentalists. Well, I need to close today’s story by reminding you that, practical or not, the Prophet of the Exile’s air dreams are in our Bible, too. And maybe they still aren’t entirely practical, but they can still inspire. And for what it’s worth, does anyone want to guess how many times Jesus of Nazareth quoted Ezra and Nehemiah? That’s right: zero. But he was always quoting this guy, this visionary Prophet of the Exile.

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A final word: “My house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples” said the Prophet of the Exile. And when Jesus kicked the money-changers out of the temple, that’s the line he quoted. So, just for us to think about, who is excluded from our churches today? Why is that?