

## JESUS & ISAIAH

It is difficult to say anything about the prophets if we do not get oriented. As you know, history bunches up. It is not precise, but things go in cycles. Abraham is the Father. Put Abraham at 2000 B.C. Maybe it was closer to 1800, but if you want to talk about four thousand years ago, are you 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. When you become a biblical scholar, you can get more precise.

What about increments of five hundred years? What happens *between* Abraham and David? 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.

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. 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 how would the story 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. Ishmael is back with a vengeance. Islam soon owns most of the lands of Christendom. (But 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 is 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, are 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? Another 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.

The Hebrew prophets do not actually predict the future; they reveal the plan and purpose 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, as you can imagine. None of them 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 (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 with God and 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 your 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 at the hands of Assyria. Isaiah had two sons. One he called *Shear-Jashub*: a remnant shall remain (return). The second he called *Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz*: the spoil speeds – the prey hastens.

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 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 – 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. An evil king, Manasseh, had Isaiah sawn in two because he did not like his sermons. It keeps me from feeling too sorry for myself when people don't like what I preach.

I have often wondered 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. I wonder how many of us would still be here. “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.” A lot fewer members, I suspect, and a lot more “friends of the church.”

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 of God's favor, and their refusal to take seriously their own faithlessness – it was all going to come crashing down around them. Yet he 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. 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. I think it is mostly 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) “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 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 – then and now.

Is that what you think is important too? Do you think that it’s the sign out front, or the charming colonial design? Do you have confidence in the denominational structures, or the fact that so many people are writing books? Do you think Christendom is authentic and will survive because we have so many members worldwide, or because we have so much money, or because our programs are so effective, or because we sing the right songs? It is wonderful when things work 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 it alive. That is what it rests on and depends on. It always has. And if that ever goes, it’s gone! If you are not in such a 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*.

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. (Well, in general.) 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 suffering servant motif and carries it many dimensions beyond. He 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)

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. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed (722 B.C. – Shalmanesser V). Twenty-one years later, 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 who told Hezekiah not to surrender. When all seemed lost, Isaiah declared that God would defend and deliver the city. 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 (701 B.C.). But from certain victory, suddenly the armies were gone 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 minuscule 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 coming – only deeper and more profoundly than anything we imagined. But you have to stop counting on the false picture, 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 a lot clearer. Now, because of Him, it is our turn.

## PRAYER

Lord God, it is hard to get used to the idea that it is our fault that we do not know You better, or feel closer, or understand Your will and WAY more clearly. Sometimes You seem so vague and hypothetical ... compared to our kind of reality: making money, driving cars, eating food, getting sick, accomplishing things, seeking our various kinds of pleasure.

If we have eyes that do not see beyond such things, how are we expected to behold You? If we have ears that do not hear beyond the din of earthly celebrations, how are we to hear what comes on the wings of the Spirit? When all of our memories and experiences have been limited by the finite, how are we to perceive and trust the Infinite?

Yet even in this very moment, we know we are not saying it all – not telling it like it really is. For we dream dreams that make no earthly sense – feel longings that cannot be contained by what we touch and see. We think thoughts that come from some vast place beyond us. We even do deeds that mock the rules of finite space and time.

Even as we pray unto You, O God – knowing we neither see nor understand – often we know that we are heard and understood. We are like little children who understand more than they let on, yet dare not let on that they know – even to themselves.

Forgive us for pretending we do not sense Your presence. It is only because we are afraid – afraid that the soul within us is really there, and that the sleeping power within our souls might awaken. What if You need another prophet, and we forget to pretend that we are asleep? What then?!

We shudder to imagine – though You only smile and wait. Perhaps if we trusted You more, we would fear our own souls less. Thou who art the Lord of History: Lord of the Past ... Lord of the Future ... Lord of what is going on now – all of it – teach us how to TRUST YOU.

Whatever sorrow we each carry in our lives at this moment – whether it be for some hurt or broken friend, or for the sin of the whole vast world – we remember in this moment that it was Your sorrow before we ever felt it. And it will go on being Your sorrow even if we turn away from it. We know that. Teach us to trust it.

Whatever hope and joy we carry in our lives at this moment – whether it be for a little flower in our garden, or because we are truly awakening to Your presence and Your Kingdom – we remember in this moment that it came from You ... that You created all things ... that You made it all possible long before we ever felt or knew it. We know this is true – that there is no other source of life or love. Teach us to trust it.

We also know that the heart of conversion and the heart of vocation are the same thing – that one comes with the other ... that each leads to the other. Both are a special kind of reply, to a special kind of question. “Whom shall I send, and who will go for me?”

We want very much to trust You here also, Lord. But we have to get past the drama, past the malarkey, past the images of other lives and situations that really are not our own. We know You never pass up a chance to team up with a willing servant. Help us to trust You, so that we also may be sent to where You really want us to be, and that we may know the joy of doing what You really want us to do.

We consecrate ourselves anew, Lord, as we pray in Your name. Amen.