

ISAIAH'S CALL TO RENEWAL

I “Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord . . . And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, . . . and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” Words from the prophet Isaiah proclaiming the dawning of a new Creation, which, for the Hebrew people, meant their deliverance from Exile and their return to Zion. For Christians, the new Creation means Christmas, the birth of the Messiah.

Good morning and a very Happy Christmas to you all. I love hearing at this time of year readings from the book of Isaiah, the great Messianic prophet. I love the power of Isaiah’s oratory and the virtuosic beauty of his poetry. So many of his phrases are embedded in our Christmas culture: What memories are stirred by such words as: “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.” . . . “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” . . . Or . . . “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings.” Listening to Isaiah is like listening to the oratory of a modern Isaiah, a man who said, “I have a dream that . . . the sons of . . . slaves and the sons of . . . slave owners will . . . sit down together at the table of brotherhood.” So today I would like to take a closer look at the Isaiah of the Hebrew Bible. Who was this powerful voice? What was his theology? And what help do his words offer us for living out our daily lives?

II On looking into the writings of Isaiah, one quickly discovers that there are not just one, but actually three different Isaiahs, all writing at different periods in Israel’s history, but all sharing a common school of theology based on the twin themes of judgment and salvation. First Isaiah, chapters 1-39, are thought to have been written by the actual prophet himself, living in the Kingdom of Judah. You will recall that the United Monarchy, under Kings Saul, David, and Solomon in the 10th Century BCE, fell apart after Solomon’s death. Wars of succession led to Israel breaking up into two different nation-states, each with its own long list of kings. The ten northern tribes became the Kingdom of Israel, which lasted about 200 years before it fell to the Assyrians in 722 BCE. The people of the Northern Kingdom simply vanished, apparently assimilated into Assyrian culture, and have become known as the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. The two southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin, meanwhile, became the Kingdom of Judah. This is where First Isaiah lived, during the 8th Century. His writings are full of warning and rebuke about the evils of society and about God’s approaching judgment. The Kingdom of Judah, whose capital was Jerusalem, lasted some 330 years, until it was destroyed in the 6th Century, and the people were taken into exile in Babylonia. The exile lasted about 50 years, at the end of which the collection of writings known as Second Isaiah, chapters 40 through 55, were written to predict that the exile would soon end. This is the Isaiah that we all know and love. Second Isaiah’s writings are about themes of pardon, deliverance, and restoration. Sure enough, Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered the Babylonian Empire in the year 539 and allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their nation and their Temple. Third Isaiah, chapters 56 through 66, was written

during the post-exile period, to offer encouragement to those pioneering Jews who chose to return to their native land in their ones and twos, only to experience terrible hardships in the barren rubble of Jerusalem.

III Throughout these collections of writings there run several important theological themes, which I would like to present to you this morning for reflection, to see how they might apply to our own lives.

First, however, I want to recognize that we must be cautious about interpreting Isaiah through the lens of our 21st Century Christian perspective. The Isaiahs of 8th and 6th Century BC Jewish Palestine had very different cultural and world views from our own, and, then again, the early Christians, living in the Roman era, had their own world view for interpreting Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies. While an interpretive-hermeneutical approach to Isaiah is legitimate for us, we must observe the spirit of post-modern warnings about the dangers of assuming our cultural superiority, being careful to recognize our bias of living in a capitalist-consumerist society, which powerfully influences our beliefs and responses to Scripture. The themes I am drawing from Isaiah must therefore be seen through the screen of our 21st Century consciousness, so that we do not presume to put our culturally-mediated words and customs into Isaiah's mouth. Isaiah was not a Handel or a Santa Claus bringing Christmas Greetings to those in exile. Rather, he was an ancient Jew interested in Israel's historical Covenant with Yahweh.

Having said that, let us now proceed. In chapter 6, First Isaiah gives us the theme of Calling. He describes how he had a vision of standing in the court of Heaven, listening to the seraphim proclaim, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts." When Isaiah complains that he is too unclean to be witnessing such a heavenly scene, one of the seraphim touches his lips with a burning coal to purify him. Then God says, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" and Isaiah answers, "Here am I, Lord, send me." Isaiah's theme of Calling runs very deep through Presbyterian and Reformed theology, stemming from John Calvin. Calvin believed that we each have a calling from God and that it is our duty to embrace a vigorous work ethic to respond to our commission from God, whatever that may be, in order to promote God's will and to bring social order and stability into the world. So, in the spirit of this New Year's season, when we make personal resolutions about living a better life, let us consider Isaiah's question from a Presbyterian perspective. How might God be calling you at this present time in your life? How are you responding to God's call? What does God want from you? Looking into our hearts, have we worked through our resistance to God's call, enough so that we can truthfully say, Here am I, Lord, send me! Perhaps we are called to ministry. Or perhaps we are called to repentance and to live a better life. Perhaps we are called to forgiveness – a tough one indeed! Or perhaps we are called, in Maslow's famous words, to self-actualization, that is, to work on fulfilling our dreams of becoming and of personal

fulfillment. Both Isaiah and Calvin remind us that in each of our lives, we must identify and answer to a Calling in order to become more fully and deeply human.

Second Isaiah, writing at the end of the exile period, proclaims that the Babylonian sojourn will soon be over. Yahweh, like a conquering King, will lead His people out of Babylon in a Second Exodus to restore the nation of Israel. Second Isaiah has two important themes. First, that Yahweh is the Creator-Redeemer, that is, One who restores and delivers from exile. This is the theme of the New Creation, the New Exodus, whereby God acts in history, not only to redeem Israel, but also to provide salvation for all the nations of the world. Let us look closely at this theme of deliverance from exile. Many of us have had times in our lives when we have felt abandoned by God, when we have felt that we were somehow in exile from the love and comfort of God. This has certainly happened to me, and, as you know, my being here at Noe Valley Ministry this year represents a return from an exile of trust in God and a recovery of my calling to be a minister-priest. For some, a deliverance from exile might mean a recovery from psychological exile, that is, from depression or other mental health aggravation, and a return to living on the positive and trusting side of life. For some, deliverance might mean restoration of jobs and income, or a return to physical health. For our country, it certainly feels like we are about to return from a long political exile, as we are guided by the leadership of our new President and our new government officials in a return to focusing on the concept of the Public Good and the restoring of New Deal principles. Second Isaiah's exhortations to Awake and to Arise can help to revitalize our personal Covenant with God, on our deepest existential level, to provide us with a bridge out of the loneliness of our individual exiles as humans and into community with each other, where the love of God becomes available to restore us and sustain us. The question from Second Isaiah to ask yourself, then, is this: Am I in exile somewhere in my life? This year, do I need to make a 'leap of faith' in order to return to health in my daily existence? The message offered by Third Isaiah, writing after the return from exile, gives us assurance that God will indeed sustain us on whatever long and painful journey back from personal exile that we may face.

The second major theme in Second Isaiah is that of the Suffering Servant. In four different poems, the prophet talks about the coming of a mysterious figure he calls "the servant of Yahweh . . . a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." Among Bible scholars there has been a long debate about the identity of the Suffering Servant. For ancient Jews, the Servant is the nation of Israel, taken into captivity, made to suffer and be cleansed of its sins, and finally rescued from exile by Yahweh. The Jews saw themselves as elected by God to be a Suffering Servant for the enlightenment and redemption of the whole world. For Jesus' disciples, the Servant imagery points to the coming of an individual Messiah, the "Anointed-One." Jesus is identified as the Suffering Servant, the Son of God, who, anointed as the New King of Israel, vicariously offers Himself as a sacrifice to redeem the whole world.

The question is, how does Isaiah's call to sacrifice and servanthood apply to us as Christians living in the 21st Century? On a broader scale, let us ask, what servanthood role should Christianity play in the workings of modern society? At our worst, as Christians we are prone to promoting dogmatic and exclusive regimes that are every bit as authoritarian and dictatorial as the secular markets we seek to replace.

At our best, however, Christians can act as a positive and righteous reaction to the exploitation and spiritual alienation resulting from the excesses of unrestrained capitalist profiteering. As mainstream and progressive Christians, whether Protestant or Catholic, we can act in concert with Mormons and Jews and Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists. In the spirit of Isaiah, our message to the world today ought to be that our whole world will become a better place only as we are able to cooperate as a world community in harnessing the energy of our many aggressive impulses, including the energy of capitalism and including our many religious and cultural differences, to serve the Common Good of all humanity as our First Principle, as opposed to competing among each other for individual political or economic or spiritual dominance.

Scrooge says to the ghost of Marley, "But you were always a good man of business, Jacob." Marley screams back at him, "Business! . . . Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were all my business." And this is where Isaiah's notion of sacrifice and servanthood becomes important to us. Barack Obama stated in a recent news conference [12-11-08, as reported in the NY Times] that there are two opposing views of politics, one involving sacrifice and public service and one involving politics as wheeling and dealing business. And it is clear that Isaiah calls our allegiance to the former – to lives of private and public service in promoting the old-fashioned notion of the Common Good – as we as Christians each look toward shaping our individual resolutions for the New Year and as we each participate in and seek to influence the great dialogue about what is best for our society.

IV Well, . . . today I have attempted to reenlist your curiosity about the prophet Isaiah, from his poetry and oratory, to his many influences in the history of Israel, and finally, to his themes of calling, restoration from exile, and self-sacrificing servanthood. I hope you might be enthused to learn more about Isaiah on your own and to rethink the legacy of his teachings for our time. And, again, I wish you a very Happy Christmastide and best wishes for a Joyful New Year. May the teachings of the prophet Isaiah remain in our ears and in our hearts as we each seek to live renewed lives of righteousness throughout the coming year. Amen.

by Tim Greene, M.Div., Psy.D.