

Book of Isaiah, Part 3
By Pastor Leah Rosso
Isaiah 61:1-11

So here we are at the end of the Book of Isaiah, and in most books we would expect that the would come to a beautiful conclusion; or have some satisfactory ending. The people had turned away from God at the beginning; they are overtaken by the Babylonians and exiled from the Promised Land in the gap between 1st & 2nd Isaiah; and then God comforts them and calls them back in 2nd Isaiah. By this time, in 3rd Isaiah, it'd be nice to report that the people return and all is well! Instead 3rd Isaiah is full of conflicting ideas. The people are trying to make meaning out of what has happened and God's role in it, and the voices of the prophets at the end of Isaiah don't all agree—which is probably a blessing in many ways; their voices aren't silenced to make it pretty. Instead, it shows us the hard work of following God in real time.

Author and poet, Ross Gay, has written several books on delight. Not just one, but many. Ross is not a stranger to struggle and to the complexity of life. And yet he chooses daily to find some delight and write about it. And I found his words helpful for us not only to understand the time of Isaiah but also ourselves. He says, "I often think the gap in our speaking about and for justice or working for justice is that we forget to advocate for what we love, for what we find beautiful and necessary. We are good at fighting. But imagining and holding in one's imagination what is wonderful and to be adored and preserved and exalted, that's harder for us."

God invites the people at the end of the Book of Isaiah to use their imaginations and to live into what matters to them, hoping it will be God and God's dream of beloved community. And the people have very different ideas of what that looks like. To illustrate this, I'd like to use a modern example of the variety of worldviews we hold as humans. I'm not a reader of fantasy fiction, so those of you who are can come correct my understanding later, but I personally have found these distinctions really helpful.

So here goes: There are three sub-genres of fantasy fiction that I'm going to talk about today. The first is Grimdark. In the theology world, we might call this strain Calvinistic. Grimdark is total depravity. Everyone is bad; everyone is out for themselves; the world is a highly competitive place where there are few people to root for—and you just have to look out for yourself. There is some of this in the book of Isaiah. Even God seems to kind of question how it is that the people can be so focused on themselves and their own greed. But for the most part, the Bible rejects this idea—sometimes it's God who reminds the people that this isn't true and definitely isn't how God wants them to live; sometimes it's the people that have to tell God it isn't true. But it is a constant question that keeps coming up, even in the book of Isaiah.

Then there's the sub-genre called Noblebright. Noblebright seems like it could be the opposite of Grimdark. It's the idea that everything will work out; that evil can be destroyed; that there are people we are waiting for; and the focus is that if we can just get rid of all the evil people, we will be saved. I think this is how people often view Christianity, and especially post-World War II there was an emphasis on this. We've defeated evil and now everything will get better. We see

this in scripture as well- the idea that evil can be directly overcome and then everything will be okay, except it doesn't ever really work out that way.

But there's a third sub-genre that is helpful not only as we read Isaiah, but I think in our Trauma Responsive work as well. This is the sub-genre named Hopepunk by author Alexandra Rowland. She coined the phrase, naming it as the true opposite of Grimdark, in 2017.

Hopepunk is different from Noblebright in that it doesn't gloss over the complexities of life. It doesn't expect that everything will always be getting better, but it also doesn't despair. It uses beauty and kindness and honesty to be clear about what it's working for, and embraces ways of enduring that shape the future. When asked what Hopepunk is really about, Rowland says it makes us face important questions like:

How do we care about each other in a world which so aggressively doesn't care about so many of the people in our communities?

Who do we consider community, and is that definition too narrow?

How do we fight back against the people who want to make us sit down and [be quiet]?"

So if we look at the Book of Isaiah through these three lenses, we can see glimpses of all of them. The Grimdark really came into play at the beginning of Isaiah, when God is frustrated at the people and how they're just living for themselves and both God and Isaiah are looking for evidence that the people can be God's people living in beloved community. With 39 chapters of God's frustration, it can be easy to start despairing! But even in those first 39 chapters, God's goodness remains. God commits to being in conversation with the people despite their behavior, talks of a new day coming, and doesn't give up hope. Then in 2nd Isaiah, the people have been exiled by the Babylonians and everything is destroyed. Chapter 40 begins with words of comfort, with a path being made in the wilderness, and there is some sense of Noblebright — God is coming down the highway to rescue God's people. But as we move into 3rd Isaiah, roughly thirty to fifty years later, the people are rebuilding and it is hard. They are trying to figure out how to deal with the past, both with their unfaithfulness and the brutal violence of the Babylonians. They are trying to figure out how to be one community even though there are those who are coming back from Babylon and those who never left and both have had vastly different experiences. And so we see that there are some promises of a brand new day; there are some promises of vindication; and there is a lot of scrappy hope in the midst of adversity as we hear the words of the prophet proclaim this morning,

God's spirit is upon me and God has anointed me...to bring good news to the poor; to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release for captives, and liberation for prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Here is what God is doing — God is once again calling God's people, anointing God's people; later in verse 6 it says God is making ministers of God's people — and what are they supposed to be doing? Bringing good news to the poor; binding up the brokenhearted; proclaiming release for the captives and liberation to the prisoners. They are proclaiming the year of Jubilee— when

everything is turned upside-down and the economy is distributed and the poor are fed and debt is forgiven.

This is an example of Hopepunk: where kindness is an act of rebellion and people can both mourn what they have lost while also living into hope that God is still with them. It is a movement fueled by courage and morality and an emphasis on community over competition.

And if it sounds familiar to you and you don't know why, you can go looking for these same words coming out of the mouth of Jesus in Luke 4. This proclamation of Isaiah is used by Jesus when he begins his ministry and people ask him what he is about. "Who are you?" The people wonder, and this is his response. This is the work Jesus says that he is about. And then he went on to live into these words so that the vision, for those who knew him, came true in their presence.

Today is Christ the King Sunday, a Sunday established in 1925 by Pope Pius XI as a direct rebuke to the rise of nationalism, fascism, and the worship of political power. The intent of the day was to redirect people; to widen the narrow nationalism that was terrorizing countries; and to proclaim that God is who we need to be following, rather than our earthly leaders. This is the same message needed in Isaiah's world and in the Roman world Jesus lived in. To name Jesus, or Christ, as King is to recognize the reversal that Jesus was living into in his own day as he was a contrast to Caesar, the Roman ruler. Jesus chose servanthood instead of domination; kindness instead of mockery; mercy instead of cruelty; courage instead of fearmongering and a life of generosity instead of wealth. Which might mean that we would expect Jesus to be celebrated when he quotes this passage from Isaiah at the start of his ministry, but if you look it up, you'll find he is run out of town. Why? Because Jesus doesn't finish the quote from Isaiah — he doesn't call for vindication, for God to punish their enemies (available as options in both Grimdark and Noblebright.) Instead, Jesus goes off script not only leaving out the vindication, but actually sharing examples of people outside of Israel who were faithful — he pushes the bounds of liberation and jubilee even further than Isaiah. He claims Hopepunk as God's strategy to love everyone and then he lives it out in very real and tangible ways — healing the sick, feeding the hungry, empowering those who feel powerless with beauty and hope and kindness.

So how do we stay focused on what Jesus loved? We absolutely work as a church to change the systems of oppression in our time. And we focus on the change we can make right in front of us.

Gregory Ellison, a professor at Emory University, suggests the "Three Feet Practice." If you look him up on youtube, you can watch the video. In it, he tells the story of being six years old and asking his aunt how he could change the world. A six year old. And she looked at him, and she said, "I don't know how you can change the world, but you for sure can change the three feet around you." Ellison, now more than fifty years later, says that he has kept that piece of wisdom with him throughout his life. And when he isn't sure what to do with all of the problems of the world, he remembers to look at the person right in front of him; to pay attention to the people who he interacts with everyday; and to make sure that he treats everyone with dignity and respect.

Jesus did this well, and he calls us into ministry with him— to take our three feet of world and to bind up the brokenhearted; to proclaim the year of Jubilee; to act locally in making sure no one goes hungry. One scholar I read said that the year of Jubilee wasn't meant to be a one-time thing; it was meant as a recurring practice because God knew we would need it! And it was meant for us to look ahead and begin the practice of reducing harm so that none are oppressed; of creating systems of care so that none are imprisoned; of living into the beloved community so that we aren't always responding to trauma, we can actually focus efforts on preventing it in the first place.

With all of us walking around in our three feet of influence, I imagine our bubbles bumping up against each other; rolling out into places that need a bit of hope; bringing us together to be bearers of peace. Three feet doesn't sound too big — it's a place we can start as we proclaim good news to the poor, which means making sure there is good news to share; and creating community in a world of adversity. It means we'll need to make sure we're walking in places that make us uncomfortable; that we need each other but not only each other. May we partner with God to work towards jubilee — a time of delight and joy and justice for all people.

Sources Used:

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