

“The Book of Isaiah, Part 1”

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Isaiah 6: 1-8; 9: 2-7

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Are you wondering if we got the wrong season because our scripture from Isaiah just now sounds like Christmas? Did you think for a moment that we skipped November and jumped straight to December advent readings? I wouldn't blame you if you did. I've got a cd at home with all songs from the book of Isaiah and it is a Christmas album. These passages, commonly known by musicians as being the lyrics of Handel's Messiah, are the scriptures that we often read all through Advent leading up to Christmas. So I wanted to do something different. We're going to take the next three weeks in November to explore the book of Isaiah; and I'm hoping that by the time we get to Advent, we may be able to appreciate these scriptures even more.

Some people call the book of Isaiah the 5th Gospel or the 5th Evangelist because it has so much to tell us about God. It has so much good news! Over the years a few of you (and I won't make you name who you are) have told me that you don't like the Old Testament. And I don't blame you— what is found there is not always Christlike. But let me tell you this: without the Old Testament, or what is also called the Hebrew Scripture, we wouldn't know and understand Jesus at all. Jesus was a Jew. The Hebrew scriptures are Jesus' scriptures. The Hebrew God is his God. And we know this not only because of his practices of going to the Temple and celebrating the Jewish festivals; we also know this because he quotes the Hebrew scripture all of the time. (Look in the footnotes of your Bible and you'll begin to see this!) The three main books that Jesus quotes from are Deuteronomy, the Psalms, and the book of Isaiah. Most likely these three scrolls were the ones readily available in his community. They didn't have a bound book of the Bible like we do; they had a scroll for each book, or more likely, several scrolls for each book. And the only story we have of Jesus directly reading from a scroll, is in his home congregation and he from the book of Isaiah. Isaiah was a big influence on Jesus. Which means we can't understand Jesus without Isaiah.

So today we're going to jump into the beginning of the book, which unfortunately is a really difficult place to start. If this was a movie, we would open to a scene of despair and anguish; of violence and hunger; of homes destroyed and children wondering where they belong. We are told from the beginning that the cities are on fire; people are dying. And in the midst of that scene, we hear God accusing the people of not knowing who their God is. This city, says God, was once a place of justice; it was a safe space for orphans; you used to be a community that took care of your widows and lived lives of integrity and honesty. But now, now it is a place of murderers and thieves and people bent on violence. It is a community full of pride and greed, with leaders who will take bribes just to get richer. And there is an enormous question hanging in the air, a question of whether

the people even want what God wants; whether the people really are God's people anymore. Your rituals, says God, the sacrifices that are meant to please me just make me angry because your actions show who you really are and this beautiful city has been ruined because of your unfaithfulness. The rich keep getting richer and the poor keep getting poorer.

A few weeks ago I went to the cities to hear Colby Martin, the author of the book *Unclobbered* that we read as a congregation several years ago. Martin talked about how there are certain identities in our lives that are directly attached to specific behaviors, and then there are others that aren't. For example, many of you consider yourselves Vikings fans. But if I start questioning you as to how often you watch the games, how many you've actually been to, how long you've been cheering them on; how often you wear purple, and how many players you know not only their names but the stats of where they came from and how they are doing, some of you would be proud of your answers, and others of you would tell me to get off your back. Any of us can say we're a Vikings fan, but that identity doesn't necessarily tell someone much about us at all.

But then there are identities that are tied directly to behavior. If you tell me that you're a woodworker, but when I ask to see something you've made, you admit you've never actually worked with wood, I wouldn't hire you to make me a bookshelf. Or if I tell you I'm a gourmet chef, but when I invite you over for a meal I serve you a peanut butter sandwich and a bag of chips, you probably would begin to doubt whether I am what I say I am.

In the book of Isaiah, the people who have made a covenant with God, the people who have received the promises of God, keep going to the temple and offering God sacrifices, but when they leave the Temple, they also leave their faith behind— and when I say faith, I don't mean just beliefs; I mean the practices that could identify them as God's people. And God calls them on it. How can they call themselves God's people and not live lives of justice? How can they say they worship God and not take care of the poor in their city? How can they keep identifying as God's people and refuse to exercise compassion on those who are vulnerable? God is angry and frustrated. And do you know why God is angry and frustrated? It's not a vindictive anger; or a retributive anger. God is angry because the leaders of the community are making decisions that are creating suffering for the poor. Those in power are ignoring the cries of those who are victims of violence. The ones who have so little to begin with in the community are the ones who are suffering the greatest because their leaders are not practicing a life of compassion and care for all. Their identity as God's people and their behavior do not match up.

This is the world that the book of Isaiah opens to, a historical time in the life of the Hebrew people around 700BCE; and it is the time and place that Isaiah lives in. But then something changes in Isaiah's life. Isaiah has an experience of God's presence; and he

knows that his people have been unfaithful, and maybe he has too. We don't know. We don't have a backstory for Isaiah. But we do know this— that Isaiah recognizes what is wrong; he says, “Woe is me for my people are unclean” and Isaiah is humble about his actions and the actions of his community, and when he opens his heart to receive God's grace and forgiveness, it is then that Isaiah is able to hear God's voice.

Howard Thurman, a theologian and black contemplative preacher, was intrigued by how people hear what he called “the sound of the genuine” within themselves. He said that the searching question is, “What am I doing to drown out the sound of the genuine in myself?” In Isaiah's age, the people were consumed with greed, with power, with the desire for the world to bend to their own will, and that drowned out any chance of them hearing the sound of the genuine in themselves; it drowned out God's voice in their lives; it drowned out their integrity; and for awhile it even drowned out Isaiah's ability to listen until he recognizes it for what it is, and in receiving God's grace, is finally able to hear God say, “Whom shall I send?” And Isaiah replies, surprising even himself, “Here I am. Send me.”

What a courageous response in a world turned upside down.

Remember, Isaiah's just a guy. He's not known as a great prophet. He doesn't feel worthy to be in God's presence, let alone share God's Word. And then, when he does have the courage to finally hear that he is called to respond to his day and age, God tells him that the people aren't even going to hear him! We didn't read that far. But that's the response Isaiah gets. That after he's volunteered so courageously, God tells him, you're going to fail at this; not because of who you are, but because of who they are. They're never going to listen. But do you know what Isaiah's response is? It's not, “What's the point then God?” Instead, Isaiah asks God a simple question, “How long, God?” How long will I do this, and how long will they not listen? The implication of Isaiah's question, is that it can't go on forever. You see a relationship is forming between Isaiah and God, a relationship that plays out in much the same way that God's relationship with Abraham and Sarah; Moses and Miriam; and many others in the Bible. So often in Scripture God's relationship with people is to remind the people of their role in partnering with God to create God's kingdom on earth; and of the people reminding God of God's role in being merciful and slow to anger and compassionate. As Daniel Erlander in *Manna & Mercy* calls it, we are constantly being called by God to be God's partner people. This is not a God who's going to swoop in and save the day completely separate from our actions. This is a God who picked a specific people to share God's love with and who doesn't give up working with humanity. In the same way Jesus did not come in and fix the disciples' lives; he did not swoop in and become the hero of the day that they wanted him to be. He called a people; he trained those people through living with them and eating with them and loving them; and then Jesus empowered those disciples to do the work they had been doing together before he died, partnering with them again after his resurrection. We worship a

God who is constantly calling us time and again to partner with God's self; to live a life of justice, compassion, and mercy; to be liberated so that we can be a partner people in God's beloved community.

So as God's partner people, what are our practices?

What are we doing to drown out the sound of the genuine in ourselves and others?

How do we continue to partner with God to share God's good news, even if it falls on deaf ears?

David LaMotte, a singer/song writer, author, and activist from North Carolina tells the story of how his neighborhood came together years ago to put a sidewalk on the road that goes by their houses. It's a busy road, and so before the sidewalk was built, people couldn't walk for fear of getting hit. They petitioned the city; they told stories of how life could be different; they cast a vision for the neighborhood as they imagined it once they got a sidewalk. And eventually, they got it. And it was exactly as they had imagined. People began to walk their dogs and greet one another; they ran along the road for exercise, greeting each other as they passed by; they stopped on weekends and talked at neighbors' yards. And then the lead up to the election happened, and David felt that it was as though that sidewalk disappeared. People began to stop to talk far less; neighbors stopped waving and nodding at one another; people became scared to find out what they didn't want to know about their neighbor. And one night, as he was sitting with his family at their dining room table, David heard himself say out loud, "I wish I could just put up a huge sign on the road saying, 'We are neighbors! If you need a tire changed or some food to eat or your yard raked, I'll be glad to help. I am your neighbor.'"

Have you ever had the experience of hearing words come out of your mouth and realizing that there is a calling right in front of you? David said of course there are big callings and vocations that we may choose to follow that lead to careers and families and movement in our lives. But there are also small ones— actions that make us who we are— and in that moment he realized that this was a calling he needed to follow. Remember, he lives on a busy road, right? And in that moment David realized he was in the perfect position to do something. So with his family, David figured out what they wanted the sign to say and created a 3'x 8' sign and put it in their front yard:

YOU are our neighbors. No matter who you vote for, your skin color, where you are from, your faith, or who you love, we will try to be here for you. That's what community means. Let's be neighbors.

And remarkably, something happened. The sign was so long, people had to stop in order to read it! Then people stopped to take pictures of the sign. Neighbors dropped by to ask questions about it. Others asked if they could replicate the sign. People began to talk to one another again. The sign reminded everyone that we are indeed neighbors, called to

live out our faith with kindness and justice for all. David writes, “It’s not naive to think you can change the world. It’s naive to think you could possibly be in the world and not change it.”

Think about that. We each live in this world and in this community. We are a part of this church. Who are we to think we could possibly be in this world and not change it?

Isaiah hears the sound of God’s voice at a time when he may prefer not to hear it; or maybe he has been despairing at how the people around him can call themselves God’s people and do the things they do! And so Isaiah responds to God, reminding God that there will be a time when the people will listen, and holding on to the deep hope that the community will change. And it is here that we see the true definition of a prophet— not someone who can predict the future, but rather someone who dares to believe in God’s promises of a day when swords will be turned into ploughshares and peace will return to the earth. That there will be a day when....

A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be vast authority and endless peace for David’s throne and for his kingdom, establishing and sustaining it with justice and righteousness now and forever. The zeal of the Lord of heavenly forces will do this.

Was Isaiah talking about Jesus? It’s hardly likely that Isaiah had in mind a child that would be born 700 years after Isaiah died; hundreds of years after Israel as they knew it. But did the people of Jesus’ day recognize who Jesus was because they had read Isaiah? That is highly likely. They saw a man who brought good news in the face of great oppression, and they thought of Isaiah. They experienced a man who spoke truth to power and called on the greedy and power hungry of his time to care for the poor, and they thought of Isaiah. They heard his words of peace and blessing and love and they recognized this Wonderful Counselor that they had been promised in the book of Isaiah.

How will we recognize Jesus today? Do we trust that God’s promises can still come true in us? How are hearing the sound of the genuine, the sound of God’s voice and responding. And, because I don’t believe Isaiah acted completely alone, it is important to also ask, who will go with us? How can we say, “Here I am Lord?”