

The Book of Isaiah, Part 2 by Pastor Leah Rosso  
Isaiah 40:1-11; 55:1-8  
November 16, 2025

Have you ever read a letter or a story you discovered that what wasn't mentioned is perhaps the most important part of the story? Or you noticed in conversation as you asked someone whether they liked your cooking and they replied "well at least it's not too salty" that there may be more information they didn't say? Or you asked a friend about their day and they say, "Well, it got better after lunch," and then you know to ask them about what happened before lunch. Or with history, it is often just as important to notice whose stories don't get told as it is to listen to those who are speaking. Sometimes silence says more than the words we use.

Last week we started by looking at the context of the Book of Isaiah and listening to the prophet Isaiah's call by God to speak to God's people. The book begins with God's lament that while the leaders of the Hebrew people are hoarding wealth; taking bribes; and ignoring the cries of the vulnerable, real people are suffering. Those who are most vulnerable— widows and orphans and immigrants— are going hungry; people are homeless; children are left alone. And God says, I see you come and make sacrifices in the Temple; I see you pay lip service to the rituals of following me; and yet you have forgotten what's truly important, to care for one another. This is the context that Isaiah is called into into, to speak to the people on God's behalf. And in that moment of being called, as God tells Isaiah that the people won't hear him, Isaiah asks, "How long God?" How long will this go on? And in today's reading, we get the answer.

You see the Book of Isaiah spans a significant portion of the history of the Hebrew people; and it's clear that this book is actually a compilation of story and prophecy that starts with a man named Isaiah, but actually goes on to have three parts that Biblical scholars creatively call First Isaiah, Second Isaiah, and Third Isaiah. First Isaiah, which we focused on last week, goes on for 39 chapters of God and the people trying to find their footing with each other, and the people not wanting to follow God's lead. *And then there's silence.* You won't see it in your Bible if you open it up, but they really should have left a large blank gap between chapter 39 and chapter 40. Because at the end of 39 the people are still turning away from God and putting their trust in the Assyrian army to save them from the Babylonians instead of doing what God is asking them to do. But by chapter 40, something has dramatically changed. The worst has already happened — the people have been completely exiled from the promised land. They have been devastated by the Babylonians. Jerusalem is gone. The Temple is destroyed. And God is speaking comfort. And that silence? The gap between First Isaiah in the first 39 chapters and Second Isaiah in chapters 40-55? It's a gap from 700 BC to 540 BC: a gap of 160 years.

And I've been thinking about that gap all week.

In the 20th Century there was a Quaker Peace Activist by the name of Elise Boulding who was concerned about how short term our memories and our future planning is. She wrote and talked about what she called the "200 year present" that we all live in. Boulding encouraged each one of us to think back to the youngest age we can remember, and who was the oldest person we knew at the time. In my family I remember my Great Grandmother who was born in 1900. And then, she suggests, that we think forward to the youngest person we know now — which might be Jahan or Beau or Cooper — thinking of those recently baptized — and imagine what decade they might live to—2100 would be close to the age expectancy, and we can see clearly that there are exactly 200 years between 1900 and 2100, spanning of people from those who influenced us directly to those who will be influenced by us directly. And when we see ourselves in the middle of history, instead of at the beginning or end, we are able to make wiser decisions and tell our stories differently, being grateful for what generations before us did to get us here today, and also to ensure that future generations can see we are planning for them to thrive. It's the same concept as the Iroquois Nation has in their *7 Generations Principle*, which dates back to at least the 12th Century. And it's not just about planning for the future; it's about living out the values today that we want to pass on to future generations as well.

Which brings me back to the gap in our text that you can't see between chapter 39:8 and chapter 40:1, but is very much present. That 160 year gap represents the time when the Hebrew people are not able to meaningfully write down what is happening because their lives are in danger; or if they did write it down, it got lost to the ravages of war as they had to leave their homes; as they were driven out of the city; as their customs and religion became against the law. Their world was turned upside-down.

What scholars, who have studied the Book of Isaiah in its original Hebrew language, think is that while the 3 different books were written in 3 different times by 3 different authors, the Hebrew people wanted to keep them together to show that God's faithfulness does not waiver throughout generations. They wanted to keep them together to show that the decisions of the grandparents affect the grandchildren. As a church that has been studying trauma, we know now that trauma in past generations affects future generations. That pain not healed in the past, will continue into the present until it finds a place of healing. And what is also true is that healing and hope and story and love will also find its way into the future, even if it has to be like a dormant seed waiting to flower.

We don't have the names of the people, other than Isaiah, who kept the stories alive of God's justice and care and forgiveness and love — but we do have chapter 40 to

show us that someone remembered. Someone, or more likely a group of someones, a community, held on to God's Word through seven generations; through almost 200 years of war; and they are able to pick up in a new place, hearing God speak words of comfort. "Comfort, comfort my people" says God. Make the way straight. Level the mountains so that we can meet one another. I want to reconnect with my people.

The promise of God is not over. Through the "200 year present," even when the people have lost their entire identity as God's people, someone remembers. Even when they no longer live in the promised land, someone is listening. Even when they long ago gave up the practices of caring for the vulnerable and sharing their manna as God had commanded them, people like Isaiah were there to tell the stories and continue the language and name that God has not left them. They may not know who they are anymore, but God knows who they are and God doesn't give up on them. God calls out to them words of comfort; God calls out to them that they should return home. God calls out to them that they are wanted and that they have a purpose. God calls out and once again compares what God has to offer them — which is life and love and hope and abundance and justice as compared to what Babylon is offering them - oppression, and a place to hide, and goods that are high in cost.

"All of you who are thirsty, come to the water! Whoever has no money, come, buy food and eat! Without money, at no cost, buy wine and milk! Why spend money for what isn't food, and your earnings for what doesn't satisfy?"

It's quite an invitation, isn't it? This 2nd book of Isaiah that begins with comfort and wraps up with a vision of what God is offering— and this invitation is wide open! God is extending an invitation to all who have been exiled, but even more than that, God is extending the invitation to anyone and everyone. There's only one hitch - they can't see any of it yet. It's a beautiful vision now 2700 years later, but that's not what it looked like to the people! There was nothing left of Judah. There was nothing left of the Temple. It is only by faith that anyone would choose to return at this point to a land that has been leveled by war. So the question in the 2nd Book of Isaiah, really, is will the people trust in God's promises? After 160 years, will they have the courage to live as God's people? And this is when it's important to remember what the promise was. If we go back and read the promise God gave Abraham and Sarah, it is a promise that they will be a blessing to the world. If we go back to the time of Moses and see what God calls the people out of slavery into being, we will see a community where people care for one another; where they find rest as a gift; where systems of injustice and oppression are broken every fifty years. You see throughout the Old Testament, the people often try to twist God's promises into something that only benefits them. They demand a King even though God says you don't need a king. They demand armies even though God tells them you don't need vast armies. It is the people who keep trying to twist God's promises into their own power and might.

God's invitation in the 2nd Book of Isaiah is, come and eat. Stop putting your worth and your money into things that don't last. Come experience the goodness and abundance of God. Come be God's partner people in order to bless the entire world.

"A voice is crying out: 'Clear the Lord's way in the desert! Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God!'" 500 years later, these are the same words used in the Gospels to refer to John the Baptist. Here again we see the crossover of Jesus' community knowing the scroll of Isaiah so intimately, that they use it to describe what is happening in their own time. They reach across generations to see how God's promises keep showing up. They find comfort in the fact that John seems to know God; that when they are in his presence, they begin to recognize God too. And so, in the same way that God calls out comfort to the people in exile in 500BC, the people hear God calling to them in the 1st Century, at another time when they feel lost and alone. The people in Jesus' day recognize that John the Baptist is making a way for God's Word to be known and then they meet Jesus and see God's Word in the flesh in a way they had never dreamed or imagined.

I wonder this morning if we, now two thousand years later, have enough imagination to see ourselves in the middle of this story. Do we have enough imagination to see that God is still calling out to us — both in comfort and for us to have courage? Interestingly enough, this congregation is just over 165 years old — as old as that gap in time. And gratefully our 165 years is recorded. But do we have enough imagination to look back and be grateful for what has come before us and recognize the mistakes of those before us; and look forward 165 or 200 years for those who will come after us? God's promises aren't just for us now; they are for all those coming after us. This isn't just about what God is promising us in this moment. God is calling us into a much bigger vision of working towards a world where all know the blessings of God; where no one goes hungry; where generational trauma is healed; where our children and grandchildren and great grandchildren and great great grandchildren have lives of joy and abundance. Can we hear that call? We heard it in the scripture this morning — God's ways are not our ways. Can we live not just for ourselves, but for all those who come after us? God has not given up on God's dream. May we have the courage to join God in dreaming and in living out the beloved community.