

Year in Review Through the Eyes of Isaiah

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"The Adoration of the Magi" by Sir Edward Coley Burne Jones

Scriptures: from the Book of Isaiah

Isaiah 7:14

¹⁴"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel."

Isaiah 58:6-7

⁶"Is not this the fast I have chosen: to loose the bonds of injustice... to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide shelter for the wanderer?"

Isaiah 40:1, 8, 30-31

¹ "Comfort, O comfort, my people, says your God. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades; but the Word of our God will stand forever. ³⁰ Even youths will faint and be weary... ; ³¹ but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall rise up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

Isaiah 42:3

The servant of the Lord ...³⁾a bruised reed he will not break, a dimly burning wick he will not snuff out; he will faithfully bring forth justice."

Isaiah 25:6-7

⁶⁾"On this mountain the Lord of hosts will... ⁷⁾destroy the shroud that is cast over all people ... he will swallow up death forever."

Isaiah 65:17, 25

I the Lord ... ¹⁷⁾ "I will create new heavens and a new earth; the former things will not be remembered, or come to mind. ²⁵⁾ The wolf and the lamb will feed together, the lion will eat straw like the ox. Dust will be the serpent's food and they will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the Lord."

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Year in Review Through the Eyes of Isaiah

Do you remember 2019? Specifically, do you remember the end of 2019. What I recall is that social media was blowing up with all manner of means that said something like "I cannot wait for 2019 to be over. This is the worst year. I can't wait for 2020 to come." Well, be careful what you ask for because 2020 has come and it is the year of all years. As some have said, it is like 1918 and 1929 and 1968 and 1973 all wrapped up into one. Wow.

Over the past week we have seen a lot of year in review articles. Some of them have focused on politics, some of them on sports, some on entertainment. What I'd like us to do this morning is look at the year in review through the eyes of the Prophet Isaiah. The year began in political turmoil as the eyes of the nation were on Washington, DC where the Senate was conducting the trial of President Trump who had been impeached, allegedly for foreign entanglements with the Ukraine. And whether you are on one side of the aisle or the other, the premise of those proceedings and the premise of our anxiety as a nation was the power of princes and presidents to create wellness for us. And certainly princes and presidents do have an impact on our lives. But the Prophet Isaiah would have offered a critique to us, the same critique he offered to his own writing in the 8th century BCE when the rise of the Assyrian Empire was occurring. Assyria was the great empire of the north, the marauders of the north, and the issue for the King of Judah was with whom was he going to have a political alliance, a foreign entanglement if you will. Would it be with Rezin and Pekah, the kings of Syria and Israel respectively? Or would he have a foreign entanglement with Assyria itself and become a vassal state of Assyria?

Into this political intrigue, Isaiah the Prophet wrote a critique, and he said, this is not a social problem, this is not a military problem, this is a spiritual problem. Are you going to believe that God is with you Israel and Judah? Are you going to believe that the Lord God will be our protector? And so in Isaiah 7, we have those wonderful words that foreshadow, that speak of the promise and the

hope that a young maiden shall be with child, a virgin shall be with child, and she will call him Immanuel—which literally in Hebrew means “the with us God.”

Isaiah 7:14

14)“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”

Do we believe that God is with us, and if so, perhaps we should be less concerned about princes and presidents, and more concerned with being the people of God. And in Isaiah 5, we learn about what we are called to be as the people of God. God says that we are the Lord’s vineyard, to grow the grapes, to be the blessing, to offer the hope. And Isaiah critiques the land of Israel in Chapter 5 by saying: “... you who join house to house... until there is room for no one else and you are left alone.”

It is a critique as germane to Israel in the 8th century as the US in the 21st century. Are we so concerned with accumulating things, that we forget our purpose as God’s people.

March saw the rise of COVID-19 in this country. We were so concerned about what to do and how to do it, and we wondered for ourselves, our families, our congregations, what’s the responsible thing? And for many of us we wondered if we should worship or not. And so many of us backed off. We stopped meeting together in public settings. Do you remember wondering if you would be able to get back together in May? I remember trying to plan the Cristo de Presbytery meeting on April 25th. That seems like a lifetime ago. And for many of us, our focus for our jobs changed. For our pastors, the focus from how to write a good manuscript and do voice projection and inflection to camera angles and lighting—and what is this new technology we call “Zoom?”

For Isaiah, who was writing in the time after the Judeans returned from exile, he saw a people focused on worship, focused on what to do and how you do it well. And he reminded them that worship must be paired with work. That our praise must flow from the work of justice for the people.

Isaiah said this in Chapter 58.

Isaiah 58:6-7

6)“Is not this the fast I have chosen: to loose the bonds of injustice... to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? 7)Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide shelter for the wanderer?”

And so with our concern for worship, and whether or not to gather, we also needed to care for one another, and many of our churches began to have food drives to support local food banks in southern and northern Arizona, and the Valley Church in Paradise Valley, and then other churches all around Grand Canyon Presbytery then de Cristo Presbytery, began to focus on the devastation that was occurring economically and also physically on our Native American reservations, particularly the Navajo Nation. And we began to have a food and water drive for the Nation and for other of our indigenous brothers and sisters. And why did we do this? Because we had heard Isaiah’s call for justice, to pair our worship with our work, to allow our praise to be an expression of our knowledge that we are God’s people. And we are blessed. But we are blessed to be a blessing.

In May we were rocked as a nation and reminded that God's plumbline is justice. Like the old school contractors who would hold a line up and allow a weight to show the 90 degree angle of a wall. They call that a plumb line, and God's plumbline of what is straight, what is right, is justice. And we needed to be reminded of this because a Police officer knelt on George Floyd's neck for 8 1/2 minutes. Imagine 8 1/2 minutes with a grown man calling out for his mama, and we are reminded that yes, police officers have a dangerous job and they are worthy of respect, and yes also, there is need for institutional reform and the way we train our police officers so they see themselves not as warriors out against the public but as guardians who protect the public. Even more, we as a nation need to understand that for those of us of white background, we are like the fish swimming in the sea who do not realize we are wet. We don't realize just how pervasive our assumptions are and that they are the default assumptions for an entire culture. And so we cannot see what we cannot see, but those who are African American or Native American, or Hispanic, Hispanic American, they see the assumptions that privilege white culture, and it is a part of our conversation today and probably in the days to come, in the years to come, that we get a handle on this because justice demands it.

Social protests erupted in our city streets in the aftermath of George Floyd's death. And there was outrage at the injustice of this man who had committed no crime, who had been killed by someone who had sworn to uphold the law. And I notice the division in our church. It's not in every church but in many of our churches. And the division was your standard division between left and right, between donkeys and elephants, and it was sometimes a division between generations and sometimes a division between people who are higher or lower on the economic scale. But mostly what I noted is that there was muddled conversation, that our arguments really weren't dialogues, they were more dropping bombs on the other side, especially in social media—which folks, that is always a bad way to have an ethical debate. I also noticed that there was a lack of clarity in what really are we talking about.

And the Prophet Isaiah, Jesus' mentor, provides that clarity. Actually, Isaiah provides two words of clarity. In Hebrew, there are two words for "justice." One is "mishpat" which Isaiah used 29 times and in all the other Prophets, it is only used only 28 times. Mishpat is "fairness of process," so what we would call equality before the law. We need to have mishpat as a society, not just for wealthy citizens, but for all citizens. And not just for white citizens, but for all citizens. Where is our mishpat, our equality before the law?

The second word for "justice" in Hebrew is "tzedakah" which Isaiah uses 36 times and in all the other Prophets, it is only used 32 times. Tzedakah is "equity of result." Not that there needs to be exact similarity and exact equality, but there needs to be a general sense of fairness. One of our Presidents said "nations are judged by how they treat the poorest of the poor." And so, is there equity of result in the way our society is structured? Those are conversations that I think we can have as a church. I don't know that we have had those conversations as a church. We have lobbed bombs at one another about that, but can we have a conversation about how to create mishpat, fairness of legal process, equality before the law? Can we have a conversation about what does tzedakah look like? How can we care for the poorest of our poor? Care for our well elderly, care for those who cannot care for themselves. And is there equity of result in our society.

As summer progressed, COVID began to surge once again and we were left to wonder, how long will this last? And as the desert heat wearied our souls, so we longed to hear a word of comfort, a word

of encouragement. And it comes to us from Isaiah chapter 40 which begins the second portion of Isaiah, written by the school of the Isaiah prophets in the 6th century BCE when the Judeans had been taken into exile in Babylon. And whereas we had been sheltering in place for week, we had been off of our regular routine for months, they had been in exile for decades. And what is the Lord's word to a people whose souls are so weary that they had been in exile for decades.

Isaiah 40:1, 8, 30-31

1) "Comfort, O comfort, my people, says your God. 8) The grass withers, the flower fades; but the Word of our God will stand forever. 30) Even youths will faint and be weary... ; 31) but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall rise up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

These are words spoken to a people who had been tired for decades. It is a word that we needed to hear after mere weeks and months, but it was indeed a word of comfort. Our "with us" God would be with us throughout this long year of all years.

Fall saw our quadrennial season of political blather. And it me just be frank here. It is not my favorite liturgical season. Not hating, just saying. In this season's political blather seemed to be more cataclysmic. In fact, one of the campaigns called it "a fight for the soul of our nation." But it begs the question, what is the soul of our nation? What should be the soul of our nation. I'm not sure about the soul of our nation, but I do know what the soul of the church should be. Isaiah writing to the exiles in Assyria (this is first Isaiah), said that the Lord himself would bring the people back and would show them the holy way, the way that they are to be. In second Isaiah, writing to the exiles in Babylon, suggested that the soul of the church, the soul of the people of God, should follow the servant of the Lord.

Isaiah 42:3 says:

The servant of the Lord ...³⁾a bruised reed he will not break, a dimly burning wick he will not snuff out; he will faithfully bring forth justice."

Mishpat and tzedakah. Fairness of legal process, equity of result. That may never be the soul of our nation, but it should be the soul of our church.

In November, we moved beyond the election, but we also confronted the dual reality of the world—the dual reality of sorrow and hope, and in our own nation 320,000 dead and a vaccine on the way.

For those who have died and for those whose families remain, there are no words that can provide an appropriate and adequate balm for the soul, for the grieving that you experience. But we do point, as people of faith, to the words in the Gospels which are preceded by the words of Isaiah 25 who wrote:

Isaiah 25:6-7

6)"On this mountain the Lord of hosts will... 7)destroy the shroud that is cast over all people ... he will swallow up death forever."

In our sorrow, may that be a word of hope.

The Book of Isaiah ends where our year is ending as a nation, with a bit of hope. As a nation, our hope rests on the vaccine and maybe it will help us turn around our economy, and certainly it will help our healthcare system.

We also have a modicum of hope that maybe all of that political blather, all of the social protests, all of the back and forth, has taught us this:

We as a nation need to learn how to get along with one another. We need to learn how to talk about things with respect and kindness toward one another—both as a nation in our communities, but also in our congregations. But for Isaiah, Isaiah's hope is a little bit different than the hope for our nation. We are focused again on princes and presidents and policies. Isaiah's hope is firmly planted on the Lord and the Lord's desire for justice and call to God's people for justice.

And so, Isaiah 65, those wonderful words:

I the Lord ... ¹⁷⁾ "I will create new heavens and a new earth; the former things will not be remembered, or come to mind. ²⁵⁾ The wolf and the lamb will feed together, the lion will eat straw like the ox. Dust will be the serpent's food and they will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the Lord."

We end where we began. Our hope is not in presidents and princes and policies. Our problems are not military problems or even social problems. Our problems are spiritual problems. Will we trust God enough to allow mishpat (fairness of process) to flow like a river, tzedakah (equity of result) like a never ending stream.

Are you ready for 2021? Most of us will respond with a resounding: Yes, and how! But are we? Are we ready to do justice, to ensure both, fairness of legal process and equity of result? Are we ready to make justice our plumbline for how we treat one another. Not just our friends but also our neighbors, strangers, and even those who oppose us across the political aisle. Are we willing to protect the bruised reeds and smoldering wicks that are among us. In 2021, can we loose the chains of injustice, feed the hungry, and provide shelter for the wanderer?

The question before us is not what will happen in 2021, but who shall we be and who shall we become?

Amen.

Sermon Art: "The Adoration of the Magi" tapestry (wool and silk on cotton warp), designed by Sir Edward Coley Burne Jones (1833-1898) in 1888, woven in 1894, "public domain" (Wikimedia Foundation).

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