

Prophets Series #8
Isaiah 5:1-7; 9:1-7

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First Isaiah

[Isaiah, like his contemporaries Amos and Micah, announces God's displeasure with his people when their worship is not accompanied by doing deeds of justice and mercy for the poor. In this first passage, Isaiah describes the people of Judah as being like a vineyard which has not borne the expected fruit.]

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard:

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?

And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

[In this second passage, Isaiah begins by listing territories in the Northern Kingdom of Israel that had been conquered by Assyria in 733 B.C. He foretells the birth of a new king who will reverse this situation and restore the kingdom. In his immediate context, Isaiah was speaking of the birth of the good king, Hezekiah, but as the centuries passed people saw in these words a description of a new messiah.]

In the former time the LORD brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Imagine that you are in a high school American History class 100 years from now. It's 2107 and you are taking a test about the presidents of the United States. The question is asked, "Who was the president in 1991 who put together a coalition of countries to attack Iraq to force it to withdraw from Kuwait?" And because your great-grandfather had served in the Marines during the First Gulf War, you know the answer is "George Bush." But when you get your test back, the teacher only gives you half-credit. When you ask why, she replies, "You only get half credit because you didn't clearly indicate which George Bush -- the father or the son."

When we talk about the prophet Isaiah, we face a similar situation of needing to be precise about which Isaiah we are referring to. The past two Sundays we have looked at the prophets Amos and Hosea. They are often referred to as "minor" prophets, while Isaiah is referred to as a "major" prophet. This doesn't mean that Isaiah is more important than Amos and Hosea. It is a reference solely to the length of the books. Hosea has 14 chapters and Amos only 11, while Isaiah has 66 chapters. The length of the book is the only reason Isaiah is called a "major" prophet.

But the book of Isaiah is not the work of a single prophet. It is generally recognized that there are three Isaiahs who wrote over a period of 200 years. The first Isaiah, often referred to as Isaiah of Jerusalem, wrote most of chapters 1-39. At the same time Amos and Hosea were speaking their message to the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the late 8th century B.C., Isaiah of Jerusalem was a few miles to the south, speaking to the leaders of the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

One of the great Old Testament scholars of the past generation, Gerhard von Rad, says that "the preaching of Isaiah represents the theological high water mark of the whole Old Testament." That's quite a claim. To understand why von Rad makes that claim, we have to understand a bit of what was going on in Israel and Judah during Isaiah's 40-year ministry.

There's an old African proverb that says, "When two elephants fight, the grass suffers." Israel and Judah were the grass between the two elephants of that era, Assyria to the north and Egypt to the south. Assyria was the more aggressive empire, and starting in 745 B.C. it began an effort to annex the countries of Aram, Israel, and Judah. Aram and Israel were first in its path, so when they came under attack they appealed to the Southern Kingdom of Judah to help them fight Assyria. When King Ahaz of Judah refused to help them, they attacked Judah, hoping the people of Jerusalem would replace Ahaz with someone more willing to work with them. Ahaz responded by asking the big bully Assyria, to help him. Assyria did, but Ahaz paid a steep price: Judah became a vassal state of Assyria and had to pay a hefty tribute every year.

By 733, Assyria had already conquered the northern parts of Israel known as Zebulun and Naphtali, a conquest Isaiah refers to in our second reading. By 722, Assyria had conquered the capital city of Samaria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel was wiped off the map. Now only Judah was left, and it maintained its independence only by paying tribute to Assyria. Ahaz was succeeded by his son, Hezekiah. When the Assyrian king died in 705, Hezekiah thought that the Assyrians might be so involved with the change in administration that they might not bother with his small country. He stopped paying tribute and tried to enlist the southern elephant, Egypt, to fight on his side. The Egyptians let Hezekiah down and the Assyrian army came knocking at the gates of Jerusalem, demanding more tribute. Hezekiah ended up back in the same situation, once again paying tribute, only now he had less money. On the positive side, Jerusalem avoided destruction – at least for another 114 years until another empire, the Babylonians, came and stomped on it.

While all of this was going on, Isaiah was speaking the word of the LORD in Jerusalem. He must have been a fairly prominent individual, for he had access to both King Ahaz and King Hezekiah. In some ways, Isaiah's message was similar to that of Amos – a strong denunciation of the wealthy and affluent who outwardly did all the right things in worshiping the LORD God – that is, they kept the sabbath and worshiped in the temple and gave their offerings every week. However, Isaiah perceived that their religious faith was only skin deep – it didn't pervade their whole lives. They showed little or no concern for doing justice, providing for the poor and powerless among them. They would be dishonest in their business practices during the week, but put on their pious faces when coming to worship so that all would think highly of them.

In the first chapter, Isaiah speaks this word of the LORD to the people of Jerusalem: "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. Your sabbath worship and festivals my soul hates. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

It might be tempting to understand Isaiah to mean that we should not bother with erecting church buildings and gathering each Sunday to sing beautiful hymns accompanied by a pipe organ. We shouldn't bother with giving offerings or saying prayers. All God wants us to do is work towards making a just society where no one has too little and no one has too much, where everyone can count on receiving the basics of food, shelter, and medical care. It might be tempting to understand Isaiah in this way, but that's not what Isaiah is saying. He is using overstatement to shock his hearers into realizing that while the LORD God expects to receive our worship and praise, that's not all God expects. Fundamental to true worship is living a life that seeks justice for all. 750 years after Isaiah, Jesus would say the same thing when asked what the great commandment of the law is. Jesus responded by saying the Great Commandment has two parts: love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength AND love your neighbor as you love yourself. For both Isaiah and Jesus, one can't truly fulfill one commandment while disregarding the other.

Isaiah warned the people that there would be grave consequences for disregarding God's concern for justice. In his parable of the vineyard, Isaiah describes how God expects his people to bear good fruit and do good deeds, but instead they have borne wild, bitter-tasting fruit. Because of their disobedience, Isaiah warns that God will bring judgment on the vineyard.

This concern for social justice is one important theme of Isaiah's preaching, but Amos had already been saying that. What is it about Isaiah that causes Gerhard von Rad to say that the preaching of Isaiah represents the theological high water mark of the Old Testament? That has to do with his words about a descendent of David who is yet to come.

250 years before the time of Isaiah, King David had received a promise from the LORD God through the prophet Nathan that the LORD was going to build David a "house," a dynasty, and there would always be a descendant of David sitting on the throne on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. King Ahaz and King Hezekiah were part of that dynasty. It was assumed in Isaiah's day, maybe even by Isaiah himself, that God's promise to David meant that Jerusalem would never be conquered. In fact, in those two wars I spoke of earlier, the first where Ahaz sought help from Assyria and the second where Hezekiah sought help from Egypt, both times Isaiah counseled them against doing that. The reason Isaiah gave for not entering these alliances was that it showed a lack of trust in the LORD God. Isaiah believed that the LORD God would protect Jerusalem from being conquered, not alliances with other kingdoms.

Isaiah was wrong about that, but he was very right in making an important shift in thinking about David's dynasty. And it's this shift that prompts von Rad to give his glowing statement about Isaiah's preaching. Up to this point, the faith of the people of Judah was based on the God-given institutions of the Jerusalem temple and David's dynasty. Their faith was based on God's past choice of Jerusalem and David. Isaiah turns this upside down and begins looking to God's acting in the future. There will be a new messiah, a new David, and it is here, in this future event, that the salvation of God's people lies.

In generations to come, after the temple was destroyed and the dynasty had come to an end and the people of Jerusalem were carted off into exile in Babylon, this hope for a future messiah took on a deeper meaning. People would listen to Isaiah's words in chapter 9, originally spoken about the birth of Hezekiah, and find in them another layer of meaning giving voice to their longing for a new messiah: "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore."

In the Christian community, we read those words every Christmas, because we believe that in the birth of Jesus the messiah, Isaiah's future has become our present.