

Prophets Series #10
Isaiah 40:1-11; 42:1-9

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Second Isaiah

In 587 B.C., the Babylonians destroyed the city of Jerusalem and forced most of its population to go into exile in Babylon. After experiencing the despair of exile for over forty years, a new prophet brings the people a word of hope.

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

In four separate poems, the prophet speaks of an unidentified "servant of the Lord" who is to bring justice to all the nations. This is the first Servant Song.

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

The kingdom of Judah, sometimes referred to as the Southern Kingdom, had come into existence after the death of King Solomon in 922 B.C. when the northern tribes split off to form the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Judah was a small country, about sixty miles square, with its capital in Jerusalem. Israel only existed 200 years before being conquered by the Assyrian Empire, but Judah lasted 335 years, which is a hundred years longer than the United States has been a nation. Archaeologists estimate that Judah had a population of about 250,000 in the year 600. Then the Babylonian army under King Nebuchadnezzar arrived in 597 and over the next decade Judah experienced a devastation that is hard to overstate.

The Babylonians initially did not destroy Jerusalem. They simply forced a surrender, installed a puppet king, and forced about 12,000 of the citizens of Jerusalem to move to Babylon. Ten years later, after a rebellion broke out, Nebuchadnezzar returned and made sure there would be no more rebellions. He completely destroyed Jerusalem, breaking down its defense walls and razing the temple Solomon had built 350 years earlier. Archaeological evidence shows that the destruction was not limited to Jerusalem. Every fortified city in the heartland of Judah was razed to the ground at this time. Another 4,000 were deported to Babylon, but the number of people who died during the siege or simply fled to Egypt or other areas as refugees was so great that perhaps only 20,000 people remained in Judah – less than one tenth its peak population. Imagine our country having its infrastructure destroyed, its religious and political institutions removed, and 90% of the population dead or living as refugees in other countries. That was Judah's reality.

The book of Lamentations, written at this time, begins: *How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her...Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude; she lives now among the nations, and finds no resting place.*

Psalm 137 was written by someone who had been deported to Babylon: *By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!...O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!*

It is difficult to exaggerate the enormity of this crisis for the people of Judah. They were God's chosen people, the descendants of Abraham, the people to whom God had given the Law through Moses. Their faith was based on a 3-legged stool -- the Law given by Moses, the temple in Jerusalem, and the dynasty of King David. Now there was no more king, there was no more temple, and many were even questioning if there was a God. The stool had no more legs. If one had to choose one word to describe the state of mind of the exiles, it would be "despair".

After about forty years of exile, a new prophet arose among the exiles in Babylon. Many have claimed, and I would concur, that this prophet is the greatest and most influential of all the prophets. Ironically, we don't know his name. Unlike the other prophets we've looked at in this series, we know no details about his personal life. Someone, perhaps he himself, saw his message to be an extension of the themes of Isaiah of Jerusalem who had lived 175 years earlier and therefore incorporated his writings into the collection of Isaiah's writings. For that reason, this anonymous prophet is conventionally known as Second Isaiah, and his writings are found in chapters 40-55 of the book of Isaiah.

Here's a brief snapshot of the major themes of Second Isaiah:

Second Isaiah begins speaking words of comfort and hope to his fellow exiles, the first passage we read this morning. He announces that Yahweh – which is God's proper name, just like my name is Wayne, but which is usually translated as “the LORD” – Yahweh has decided that the penitence of the people of Israel has been accepted and that Yahweh would soon come to his people with both might and tenderness, gather his flock like a shepherd, and lead them home.

Second Isaiah then picks up a theme from the first Isaiah and the other prophets and gives this theme its clearest expression – Yahweh alone is God. With biting satire he disparages the pagan gods of Babylon and other nations, calling them chunks of wood and metal who can do nothing in history because they are nothing. Yahweh is the one and only God who has created all that exists and is in absolute control of history. This was an important affirmation because the exiles were wondering if Babylon's victory over them was an indication that the gods of Babylon were stronger than Yahweh. Like Jeremiah, Second Isaiah understood the exile as Yahweh's proper judgment on Israel's sin, but not the end of the covenant. The covenant Yahweh made with Israel is sure and trustworthy for “the word of our God shall stand forever.” To those who said, “The Lord has forsaken us,” Second Isaiah says, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?” (49:14-15) Or using the image of marriage he says, “Where is your mother's bill of divorce with which I put her away?” (50:1) In other words, the exile is not a divorce by which Yahweh has ended the covenant with Israel. Again and again Second Isaiah says Yahweh is doing “a new thing”, and just as Yahweh once led Moses and the Israelites through the wilderness to the Promised Land, Yahweh will now come to his people and lead them through the desert back to Jerusalem.

Second Isaiah goes further to claim this judgment of exile was consistent with Yahweh's overall purpose. That purpose is to redeem his people and use them for a special function – to be a light to all the nations, the Gentiles, so that all people would eventually recognize Yahweh as the one and only God. Second Isaiah gives new emphasis to a theme of universalism in Jewish thought, that the people of Israel are indeed Yahweh's chosen people, but their “chosenness” is primarily being chosen for the purpose of bringing all nations to worship Yahweh.

Second Isaiah describes this purpose by means of the image of a servant. There are four poems, known as Servant Songs, which speak of a servant who fulfills God's purpose, but in doing so experiences suffering precisely because he is the LORD's servant. The identity of this servant is ambiguous. In the first Servant Song, which we read (42:1-9), it seems that the servant is a metaphor for the people of Israel, God's chosen among the nations. But in the second Servant Song (49:1-6), the servant's mission is to restore Israel, so it would seem to refer to an individual or a group within Israel. And in the third (50:4-9) and fourth (52:13-53:12) Servant Songs, the servant suffers vicariously on behalf of the people – that is, his sufferings are for the benefit of others. It is possible that Second Isaiah is speaking of his own experience here, but portions of the poem seem to imply that this suffering servant of the LORD is one yet to come.

Second Isaiah played a significant role in helping the remnant of the people of Israel solidify their belief that Yahweh, the LORD God, is the one and only God, the creator of the world, the Lord of history. Furthermore, Yahweh is faithful to the covenant promises and has given them a mission to the nations.

But the message of Second Isaiah took on a further significance 600 years later when the of Jesus searched the scriptures to help them put into words what they experienced God was doing in Jesus. Second Isaiah spoke of

- Yahweh coming to his people to redeem them (the Word became flesh and dwelled among us)
- The glory of the LORD being revealed so that all people shall see it together (and we have beheld his glory, the glory as of a father's only son)
- A voice crying, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD." (the message of John the Baptist)
- Yahweh gathering his flock like a shepherd (I am the Good Shepherd)
- Yahweh putting his spirit on a servant, who is a covenant to the people and a light to the nations (I am the light of the world)

Of this servant, Second Isaiah writes, "*He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity...Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*" Christian communities read that passage every Good Friday when we meditate on Jesus' crucifixion.

The first followers of Jesus, all observant Jews who knew their scripture, read these portions of Isaiah and concluded, "That perfectly describes Jesus – Yahweh has come to his people, redeemed them by his suffering servant, and given the community of God's people a mission to the Gentiles – that all peoples of the earth may come to know that there is but one God, Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel." They discerned that Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection are the climax to the long and winding narrative of Israel's scriptures, and in that sense, Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's scriptures.

This brings our survey of the Old Testament prophets to a close. Pastor Chris and I have found the series to be a benefit to ourselves, prodding us to get into parts of scripture that we don't read on a regular basis and helping us see that the message of the prophets is as relevant for us in 21st century America as it was for original audience in ancient Israel and Judah. The prophets would say, "This is the word of the Lord." And the people respond, "Thanks be to God."