

From Isaiah: God's Promises of Covenant and Community
April 26, 2020

As we approach this our Second Sunday of Easter, and our Fifth Sunday of Isolation, it is comforting to turn to the words of the Prophet Isaiah concerning God's promises, and the new Jerusalem. These are words worth hearing. Our lesson book includes Isaiah 61:8 to 62:12, but also discusses 56:6-8, which are important as well. I will be trying to supplement, not duplicate, what is in the lesson book. That's important tonight, on Thursday evening, if I am to mail this out tomorrow morning. It's already 11 PM as I begin these notes. So, I must be briefer than I'd prefer if there is to be hope that some of our class members get this through the mail in time for Sunday. Well, more realistically, maybe Monday.

You may recall from a previous lesson that the Book of Isaiah seems to have two parts. The first part, Chapters 1-39, is the historical Isaiah of Jerusalem whose ministry begins in the Year that King Uzziah died (Chapter 8). Isaiah was a contemporary of Micah and Amos. The remainder of the Book of Isaiah seems to be from a prophet or prophets who lived toward the end of the exile and afterwards, and were contemporary with Malachi.

The lesson writer paints an interesting picture of competing philosophies, and prophecies, in post-exile Jerusalem. He speaks of Haggai telling people that they need to rebuild the temple as a way to honor the Lord, so that the Lord will then bless the people. This, as if The Lord would thus have no other choice. This was the kind of perspective that got pre-exile Jerusalem in trouble: the idea that God needed Jerusalem more than Jerusalem showed, in her behavior, that she needed God. When Ezra and Nehemiah come on the scene a bit later, they said that what is needed was purity. It was the false ways, absorbed from the heathen neighbors, especially idolatry, that poisoned Israel's relationship with God. The Jews (as they are known after the exile) must purify themselves, and become a Holy people. That was meant in the sense of being set apart from others, and in particular, separated from the heathen (or Samaritan) women that some of the Jews in Jerusalem had married. Isaiah, in contrast, speaks of a universalism that welcomes others, any who would keep the Sabbath.

This is an interesting argument, with Isaiah 56: 6-8 being at the heart of it. This passage is not in the lesson book , but really needs to be read:

Isaiah 56: 6 And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast to my covenant –

7 these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

8 Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

We also saw how, in an earlier lesson, the prophet Malachi envisioned an even wider universal worship of God. So, who was “right”? Haggai, Ezra and Nehemiah, or Isaiah? Well, as usual, the truth is not as simple and clear as our words would pretend to make it. Rebuilding the Temple was an act of Faith. That mattered. It IS important to put away evil ways and follow paths of righteousness, as Ezra and Nehemiah would encourage. It is still possible to think one can manipulate God. That was what the heathen worship did. One can think to try and find a way to stay within the letter of the Law while exploiting your position. That was what some of the scribes and Pharisees were doing that Jesus spoke of later. It is also possible to compromise one’s faith to accommodate others to the extent that important principles are lost.

Look at the conditions Isaiah places on those who are to be accepted into the community:

“... love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast to my covenant...”

What does keeping the Covenant involve? Remember those Ten Commandments? And, how much of the additional Law?

We, as Christians, interpret the scriptures in light of Jesus’s teachings, and the gospel as proclaimed by the early church. We can read the whole Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 as a discussion of this very topic.

Later, when Jesus was asked by a scribe, “What must I do to inherit Eternal life,” Jesus asks, “What is written in the Law? What do you read there?” He (the scribe) answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this and you will live. This, again, is answering what one must do to be in covenant with God. (This is from Luke 10: 25-28. The Parable of the Good Samaritan follows.)

But there are practical issues that Christians have wrestled with. What kinds of behavior will we not tolerate of others who would call themselves fellow Christians? Over 150 years ago, various denominations in the United States split on such an issue. The Presbyterian Church (and others) split into separate Northern and Southern denominations over the issue of slavery. One Christian would say, “You cannot be my brother in Christ,” because of this issue. This rupture in the Christian communities was followed by the most terrible war in this country’s history. What kinds of behavior are we not willing to tolerate in others? Are there limits? Are there reasons for pronouncing anathema and condemnation on others who call themselves Christians? Church leaders have spoken, over the years, of many things that make you not a Christian. Some of these things have been contradictory. Some have led to other divisions in the Church.

This is not new or recent. Throughout the early centuries of the Church, leaders had to distinguish between heresy that would corrupt the Church, and those beliefs and practices that were different expressions, but were compatible with Jesus’s love and gospel. In this lesson, for the Jews, so it was in the times of Haggai, Isaiah, and Ezra and Nehemiah.

I think we miss something if we try to “choose sides.” God’s way and his creation are wider and more marvelous than the limits of men’s minds. We need to approach such issues with not just openness, but also with humility. For over and over, God has broken existing expectations to do something more marvelous and unexpected than the beliefs of the day would allow, up to and including the death and Resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Haggai, Ezra and Nehemiah, and Isaiah all have something

worthwhile to say. It seems that God gives different messages to different prophets, and that only by considering carefully all of these voices can we discern better where God may be leading us. Likewise, in the New Testament, there are different gospels and letters, with different perspectives, that complement each other in conveying what we, as Christians, need to know.

So, with that, we can read Isaiah 61: 8 to 62: 12 and marvel at the vision extended to those who labored amid the ruins of what had once been the proud city of Jerusalem. The walls were torn down. The rebuilding of the temple was a struggle. But they are promised that if they live consistently with the ways of God, expressed through the Law and the Prophets, extending from Moses through to Malachi and Isaiah of the Exile, God will surely bless them. Not only that, but all the nations would see, and call them blessed.

The expression of 62:3 is interesting: Speaking of Jerusalem, the prophet says, “You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.” In antiquity, many religions pictured a city’s walls as being a crown on the head of their local deity. (This may even be one of the reasons why Nehemiah thought the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s wall important.) Indeed, coins were minted in Babylon and other places showing this imagery. It is used here, but the crown is left in the hand of God, as a thing of beauty, rather than the sign of sovereignty. The Jews, even Isaiah himself, are not beyond borrowing images from the societies of the world at large. But this shows that they have come to understand that the Lord is indeed the Ruler of the Universe, owing no debt to or constraint by Jerusalem. It is to be a relationship of beauty and love, mutual appreciation, not ruler and subjects. More like a Father and his children. John in the Revelation so describes us as children of God, with Christ himself inviting us to come, and ultimately live with God in this New Jerusalem.

There’s a lot more that could be said, but time is short if this is going out in tomorrow’s mail. I won’t have time for individual notes, but I do hope that as you worship Sunday you will pray for all of us in our class, and for all those others needing God’s way and God’s light. Cindy and I are truly blessed to be part of our community with you.