

Isaiah and The Servant of the LORD April 5, 2020

Here we are, still “sheltering in place” amid the crisis of the “novel” coronavirus. I am preparing this on April 1 to supplement the material in our lesson book (The Present Word, Spring 2020, “Justice and the Prophets”, pp.31-36). I’m not trying to replace the lesson in the book. It’s pretty good; worth reading. Its focus is, as the title tells us, on the prophets and their message, with a special focus on “justice”, especially as seen in our day. Amid the current crisis, I think we need to hear more about salvation than condemnation for transgressions of justice. Isaiah is a good place to find such. Right here where the lesson book directs our attention.

I find history very interesting. Maybe you’ve noticed. Approaching this material, the first thing I like to do is put it into a historical context. In the case of Isaiah, that’s complicated. That’s because Isaiah is 66 chapters (the longest book in the Bible) spanning about 200 years! You may be wondering how that can be. The prophet Isaiah lived in the time of King Hezekiah, in Jerusalem, about the same time as Amos and Micah. That was when the Assyrian empire was building toward its height of power. The northern Kingdom of Israel would soon be conquered and disappear, and only a miracle would, and did, save Jerusalem. That’s pretty much consistent with what’s in Chapters 1-39. But then, in Chapters 40-66, we hear a voice or voices from the near the end of the exile, on into the Persian period, perhaps to about the time of Malachi. Without going into all the details, the general belief is that this later material, which has much in common with the earlier part, was written by a prophet or prophets who in a sense were followers, or students of, the earlier Isaiah. The style and themes are different. Isaiah in the earlier material speaks words of judgment and coming punishment. It also speaks of hope in God’s grace. The later Isaiah material is more focused on God’s saving acts that are pending, even to the point of citing King Cyrus of Persia by name as an instrument God will use (45:1). There are those who consider all of the book the work of that earlier Isaiah, but that he is prophesying about events 200 years in the future. If so, he changes his voice to suit the new circumstances, and we can be blessed by the words he speaks, whichever hypothesis you entertain.

Isaiah of the exile, or “Second Isaiah” as he is called, or just Isaiah, is speaking of a time late in the history of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar, who

conquered Jerusalem, is gone. Nabonidus is King of Babylon. It's an interesting situation. At some point there was a revolt against the previous king and Nabonidus was "elected" by his co-conspirators to be the king. Perhaps because he wasn't seen as a threat by the others. Where'd he come from? That's interesting too. He and his mother were captured by Nebuchadnezzar when he conquered Harran (Haran?). (Remember Haran, where Abraham came from on his way to Canaan?) It seems that Nebuchadnezzar made Nabonidus's mother his favorite wife, and that, of course, brought Nabonidus to good position within the court.

Nabonidus wasn't what you'd call a strong, or even competent, leader. His son, Belshazzar, was made co-regent, and was trying to run things in Babylon while Nabonidus was sort of taking a holiday. What? OK, maybe a sabbatical. He was, in fact, one of the first archaeologists. He was more interested in digging up ancient (for the day) temple sites, to find out what people were doing and worshiping way back then, than in being king. He wanted to reinstitute worship of Sin. (We can read in Genesis that Abraham's father Terah worshiped the god Sin, so Nabonidus must have done some good archaeology.) However, that's not what kings are supposed to be doing. They are supposed to be kings: issuing edicts, leading the army on campaigns, and acting as a chief priest of the god Marduk. The priests of Marduk (the current Babylonian god) were not pleased at all over this business of going back to Sin.

King Cyrus of Persia managed to conquer the Medes, and make allies of them. He then turned his eyes on decaying Babylon. Nabonidus, who happened to be in Edom (300 miles away) pursuing his interests at the time, hustled back, but too late. The priests of Marduk hailed Cyrus as saving them, and as an instrument of Marduk, just as the Jews hailed Cyrus as fulfilling God's will for them. Nabonidus was eased into retirement. For Cyrus, unlike the emperors of Assyria and Babylon, ruled with a light hand. Assyria had pioneered cruelty and intimidation as a technique to cow their opponents into submission. You read about the Chaldeans, the neo-Babylonians, in Habakkuk. Not much better if at all. The Persians, and Cyrus the Great, as he came to be known, were different. Cyrus was practically invited to come to Babylon and straighten things out. And, that's what he did, with very little chaos or destruction.

That's the world into which Isaiah is speaking. Not only are things going reasonably well for the Jews in Babylon, but the means of their liberation is in view. Furthermore, they by this time have come to a different relationship with

their God. The destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, and their residence in Babylon (within the domain of the priests of Marduk) did not allow reinstatement of Jewish temple worship. (The Jews who fled from the Babylonians into Egypt did build a substitute temple, on Elephantine Island in the Nile River.) Instead, the Jews in Babylon studied the scriptures that they had brought with them, edited and compiled them, made commentary, and considered what the Exile and the promises of the prophets had meant. It may be that it was here that the institution of the “synagogue” developed. Teachers, called rabbis, began to be the leaders of the Jewish communities. It was a different world. In this world Isaiah surveyed the scene and, inspired by God, wrote poetry of a literary quality of the very best known from antiquity. Poetry that addressed the Jewish experience of God in his time, and as we know, all times to come, for not only the Jews, but us as Christians. Salvation was at hand! But, what would it mean? What would happen?

I’m not a scholar of Jewish literature – I don’t know Hebrew. So, I have to just take it from others, that this writing in Isaiah 40-66, and that in 40-55 in particular, is a masterpiece. I use the singular, because although we can recognize several distinct poems, they are woven together in a unified and consistent whole that tells the magnificent story of what God is about to do. The King James translators did a wonderful job in bringing this literary quality into English. So, that’s the translation I’m using here. Read Isaiah 40: 1 ff.:

40:1 Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.

2 Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.

3 The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain:

5 And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.

Doesn’t that sound musical? It’s a vision of what is coming. That God is about to do a great thing. The poems continue as an epic over chapters 40-55. Embedded within these chapters are four of what are called the “Servant

poems,” concerning someone identified as “The Servant of the LORD,” or sometimes “the Suffering Servant.”

(When you see “The LORD”, with small capitals instead of lower case in the Bible, it is a translation into English of the sacred name “YHWH”, the name Moses is given by God at the burning bush. Other expressions meaning God are translations of other Hebrew names or titles for God.)

In Judaism, the “Servant of the LORD” is taken to mean the Jewish people. This is understandable. They have certainly suffered, all while maintaining a faith in their God and our God for two and a half millennia. They hold the “Suffering Servant” as thus being different from “The Messiah”. The Messiah is described in Isaiah 11 (200 years earlier) this way (another well known passage):

11:1 “There shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots:

2 And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of fear of the LORD;

3 And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD; and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears;

4 But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked.

5 And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reigns.

6 The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.”

You can keep reading. But nothing there about suffering. This is the “Messiah” we are talking about. Literally, the anointed of the LORD. The one who will come and make all things right. A descendant of David. That’s The Messiah the Jews are expecting, about 700 years after Isaiah of Jerusalem made this prophesy. A different person from the “Suffering Servant.” But, in Isaiah of the Exile, about 500 B.C., speaking of what God is about to do, puts the Servant of the LORD in a central role. We, as Christians, understand that Jesus,

in a unique and unanticipated way, fulfills the prophecies of both the Messiah and the Suffering Servant. He was not the Messiah the Jews, or anybody else at the time, expected. Jesus's own disciples found it difficult to accept that he was Messiah, and yet must take up his cross. A cross wasn't in the job description as they had read it. After the cross, and the Resurrection, and only then, did it start to make sense. The early Church turned to these passages in Isaiah. They finally understood what Jesus was actually talking about in his message to his hometown neighbors in Nazareth, found in Luke 4:16-30 (and parallels in Matthew and Mark).

Maybe the world, and the Jews, were not ready for this message of hope, a hope through God's Suffering Servant as articulated by Isaiah, until the Jews saw the light of hope starting to dawn towards the end of their exile. Yes, the cause of justice is upheld, but not through brute strength of conquest. That was the Assyrian and Chaldean way. Not by guile and even more tolerant (yet forceful) overlords, like the Persians, Greeks, and Romans, would be. But through the mission, life, and yes, suffering, of The Servant of the LORD. Who, in the end, would be uplifted and honored, and through whom we would all be saved. It is all at once the greatest of mysteries, and the greatest of wonders. Unfathomable, except by the grace of God. As Isaiah writes later, God tells us:

55: 8 “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD.

9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Thanks be to God, that we are not imprisoned by the limits of mankind's thoughts and ways.

Concluding prayer in the lesson book: *“Guide us down the difficult road of Holy Week, O God. Give us fresh new insights and a renewed will, that we may hear your Word to us today. Amen.”*

May we pray also for the vision to look beyond the immediacy of the current crisis for what God may be doing. May He work through events to help us to be thoughtful of each other, to be kind to each other, to help each other, and to put others, and God, before ourselves. May we learn to be better vessels, through which He may pour out his love for us all. Amen.