

Sunday, July 12, 2015
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – "The Vision of Isaiah"

Today was to be the start of our summer preaching series, which I had announced would be the Book of Isaiah.

As many of you know, for the past four summers, I have chosen one section of the bible to focus on throughout July and August.

After each sermon we have engaged in a conversation about the text – providing an opportunity for some interactive bible study.

Well, earlier this week when I took out my books on Isaiah and started reading and researching my files I discovered that just two summers ago – 2013 – I spent the summer exploring the Book of Isaiah!

I was aghast.

Not only did I have no recollection of having done this – neither did you!

The summer series was announced in the newsletter, and the weekly eblast;

we discussed it at the Deacon's meeting and not one person uttered a word.

No one asked why we were doing Isaiah again so soon or what had drawn me to choose a book we had already studied.

Once I recovered from the heartbreak of realizing that sermons are not often remembered (even by the preacher) I decided that we would take a look at Isaiah today and his vision for the people of Israel.

For the rest of the summer I will continue with the theme of vision and we will look at other scripture – both old and new testament – and the visions conveyed for God's people.

If you have a favorite passage that you'd like to see included, let me know.

This morning, I will give you a short tutorial on Isaiah and then I want to talk about vision and the role it plays in the development of the church – both in ancient times and today.

Isaiah is probably the best known of the prophetic writers.

He is, of course, more than one person, but he is often characterized as 'one of the greatest theologians of the Old Testament.'

When we study the prophets we must pay close attention to the historical age in which the message was delivered.

This first section includes: oracles against Judah and Jerusalem, oracles against various foreign enemies of Israel, a specific prophecy against Judah and two of her officials, a variety of apocalyptic judgments, salvation oracles, laments and judgment oracles.

Oracles are defined as divine communication or revelations offered by holy people chosen by God.

The prophetic word is not meant as a timeless truth uttered in isolation from the concrete events of history.

The prophets were speaking directly to the people of their day.

We study how they interpreted human's relationship with God at a given point in time, to learn from their experience and insights.

We then look at our own lives with a prophetic lens and discern what this scripture might be saying to us today.

Isaiah, for example, is concerned with the structure of community.

We too are concerned with the structure of our community – how we should live together, what our values ought to be.

These are the things that shape our vision.

These are often the things we fight about.

Isaiah Scholar, Elizabeth Achtemeier interprets Isaiah's theology this way:

“To say that God is holy is to say that God is totally other than anything in all creation – totally unique, totally different, totally other Creator God from all that he has created.

This God of total otherness from us, this God of terrifying power is ultimate power who wills to enter into covenant relationship with a people – the people of Israel. We are joined in a covenant bond with the power that made and runs the universe.”

Isaiah's God has all the power.

For created beings to live in peace and harmony they must succumb to God.

They must, we must, follow God's commands and ‘cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.’

What is your vision of God. Is it one of an all-powerful being?

Our New Testament reading this morning, attributed to Paul but more likely authored by his followers some time at the end of the first century articulated the writer's vision for the church. (We studied Paul's letters in the summer of 2012.)

Scholars believe that this letter was meant for several churches, rather than one specific congregation.

The perspective of the letter moves from a vastly cosmic picture of God's plan and the believers' inclusion in it, to the role and mission of the church and life within it.

Paul has clear ideas about faith, but also about how that faith might be lived.

In the passage which follows today's reading he says:

'I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.'

Isaiah and Paul and their followers had a vision of what they wanted their world to look like.

Both of their visions were rooted in faith.

Both men believed that if humanity could live up to God's expectations, God would reward them.

What is your vision?

I have asked the Church Council to devote their meeting next week to articulating a vision for our church.

I have asked them to start by answering these three questions:

1. What do you love about our church?
2. What would you like to see more of?
3. In your dreams, what will the church look like in 5 years?

The answers to these questions will guide a conversation about our vision for the church.

I'd like to hear your thoughts on these questions, as well as your vision for the church today.