

Sunday, July 7, 2013
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “This Scripture is Fulfilled in Your Hearing”

Welcome to summer! For those of you who haven't been with us the past few summers, let me give you an idea of what summer worship is like.

First of all, we ask everyone to sit in the center of the church.

This keeps us close to one another for singing without a choir and most importantly, for having a discussion after the sermon.

In the summer, we use our worship time for a study of sorts, this year on the Book of Isaiah.

Over the next seven weeks we will explore Isaiah's writings, starting with Chapter 1 and moving sequentially through to the final, chapter 66.

Each week, I will let you know what the reading will be for the following week, in case you want to prepare ahead of time for our discussions.

My goal is to have our time together be engaging, empowering and uplifting.

I hope that you will join me in making our worship truly interactive.

So, Why Isaiah?

Let's start off with some basic information on the prophet and his writing.

We don't know much about Isaiah.

From his writings we discern that he is a city man, born, raised, bred, and married in Jerusalem.

Perhaps he was born of noble heritage, he seems familiar with the inner workings of the ruling class.

He appears to have free access without being summoned and he acts as a counselor to the ruler Hezekiah.

This leads scholars to believe that he is, in fact, from the upper class. We know that he is married and has at least two sons: Shearjashub- which means *a remnant shall return* and

Maher-shalal-hash-baz which means *the spoil speeds, the prey hastes*.

Biblical scholars identify Isaiah as one of the most complex literary structures in the entire Old Testament.

According to Isaiah Scholar, Elizabeth Achtemeier

“Isaiah of Jerusalem is one of the greatest theologians in the OT.

In the midst of his turbulent world, he sets forth distinctive witnesses to the person and activity of God that persist and influence all the rest of the biblical canon.”

Isaiah is perhaps the most important, and probably best known of the prophets.

The Book of Isaiah is broken into three books:

First Isaiah is made up of chapters 1-39;

Second Isaiah covers chapters 40-55; and

Third Isaiah concludes with chapters 56-66.

There is consensus among Biblical scholars that Isaiah is the work of three distinct authors with First Isaiah being Isaiah the prophet and second and third being the work of disciples.

Our first few weeks will be spent on the first section of Isaiah.

This 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.

Isaiah’s corpus covers three separate historical epochs:

Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian.

First we have Judah in the Assyrian period, during the rule of Ahaz and Hesekiah, ranging from the eighth through at least the sixth century bc.

Second, in chapters 40-55 we are in the mid-sixth century bc with Israel in exile and Babylonian strength waning.

The Third and final section are in the late sixth century, with the exiled Israelites back in the homeland.

The focus of this final section is reestablishment of the community along social and religious lines.

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

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

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

So 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.

Isaiah believes that salvation will not come until the city will again have become faithful, until the government is righteous and just and counselors and judges are wise and upright.

This does not sound distinctly different from our own laments about the state of our government and the conduct of our officials.

It almost reads like a campaign speech... "If you vote for me I promise we will return to a time of faithfulness and righteousness."

The Book of Isaiah deals with the motif of power:

the power of a nation's leaders and of the Davidic throne;

the power of a revived Assyrian empire;

and most importantly, with the power of God.

Professor Achtemeier interprets Isaiah's theology this way:

"To say that God is holy is to say that he 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 is also moral power, unblemished purity, God of righteousness and justice.

I like Isaiah's theology.

I believe that we need to reclaim this idea of a mighty God.

Too often, in our culture today we find a domesticated God... a God fashioned in our own image.

We see a God that exists to meet our needs, protect our lives, and provide the resources that we require.

When we lose sight of the otherness of God – when we forget the power of our creator, we are in danger of falling into the type of cultural disarray described in scripture.

Last week at Silver Lake the theme of my daily devotions with the campers was “God Is.”

Each morning I presented a brief reflection and prayer about the many different ways we experience God.

Then I asked the children to record on a sign I posted, all the ways that they saw God during the week.

One group used chalk and expressed themselves on the pavement, covering a good portion of the road down to the lake.

They wrote, God is light, God is love, God is togetherness, God is peace, God is nature.

The other children recorded their thoughts on the poster – God is life, God is breath, God is hope, God is laughter, God is creation, God is all the living souls of all things of the world.

For these young people, God manifests his presence in a variety of ways, some powerful and mighty, but many of them were personal-God is family, God is friends, God is homemade pie, God is Silver Lake, God is swing sets and my favorite, God is a brand new pair of socks.

We can look to our biblical ancestors to help us define our own theology, or we can look to the prophets of today.

One young counselor at camp gave me a copy of a book she had just finished and encouraged me to read.

It is called “Crossroads” and is by William Paul Young, author of “The Shack” a popular book from a few years ago.

The story line is somewhat predictable – shallow man has near death experience and finds Jesus, changes his life, all is well.

The appeal of the story is the possibility of God entering into our lives and using God’s power to make everything ok.

This is something that people are hungry for.

Young’s first book, the Shack, sold 18 million copies- 18 million people yearning for a new way to know God.

The question this raises is, “If we want an all-powerful God to fix things when they are broken – do we want the same God to come into our lives uninvited?”

Are we willing, like Isaiah, to answer God's call – Here am I – send me – even when it doesn't fit our plans?

We will study Isaiah over the next few weeks to help us discern the many ways we might define our own theology.

Let's take a few moments now to explore how we might finish the sentence, God Is...

Questions for this week:

1. God Is....
2. If you were a modern day prophet and needed to name your children to send a message about the state of affairs in our community – in our world – what names would you choose?
3. If we want an all-powerful God to fix things when they are broken – do we want the same God to come into our lives uninvited?
4. Are we willing, like Isaiah, to answer God's call – Here am I – send me – even when it doesn't fit our plans?

[Conversation with the congregation]

Next week we will explore chapter 5 of Isaiah and the prophet's interpretation of sin.