

Sunday, August 11, 2013
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Sermon – “The Servant’s Mission”

Today is the sixth Sunday in our study of Isaiah.

We have spent the past five weeks exploring the first of three books in the Isaiah corpus.

Scholars are in consensus that Book One was authentically written by the prophet Isaiah, son of Amoz.

Book One is identified as the Book of the King.

We explored Isaiah’s theology of God as sovereign, holy, and powerful.

Second Isaiah, sometimes called Deutero Isaiah or Book of the Servant is attributed to an unknown prophet who lived in Babylon during the Babylonian exile of the sixth century.

The prophet announces to the exiled Israelites that the end of their exile is imminent.

The prophet’s message is one of deliverance rather than judgment.

Second Isaiah encompasses the first Isaiah’s emphasis on the holiness of God.

This prophet’s message, however, is one of consolation delivered in long, lyrical oracles, reassuring the exiles that God still controls history.

So today, we jump from chapter 11 to chapter 49.

Let me summarize a bit what occurred in the first 48 chapters:

In the Isaianic literature each section hints at the theme of the next section.

The early chapters set the scene of developing darkness and the possibility that divine grace had been exhausted.

Isaiah discovered, in his own experience, that forgiveness and reconciliation with God was still a possibility.

Over the next several chapters, his individual experience provided a clue to communal restoration.

Isaiah faced the political errors and sinful behaviors of his day with the vision of the coming Messianic king.

While the promise of the Messiah was foremost in book one, the reality of sin and the need for forgiveness remain.

It is to this that the prophet turns in the second book.

Second Isaiah opens with a historical prologue that includes King Hezekiah's illness and a prediction of Babylonian captivity.

A pattern develops which is followed throughout the book: first, he deals with the situation in terms of principles of divine action; next he turns to apply his message to the historical situation and finally he envisions the ultimate acts of God.

In the section we heard today, Isaiah addresses the contrast between the new beginning afforded by redemption from Babylon and the unchanged relationship to the Lord expressed by "no peace for the wicked."

This sets the scene for the 'greater deliverance' about to be enacted: "The Work of the Servant of the Lord."

Isaiah's depiction of the servant starts out in chapter 42 sounding biographical, but moves into autobiographical in our reading today where he is described as "One who the Lord made and called" before his birth.

The servant claims to be *Israel* and to be in his own person the Lord's covenant and salvation – not to be the preacher or even the promoter of these things, but to be them himself.

First Isaiah promised a servant to deal with the plight of God's people.

Second Isaiah delivers the servant as one commissioned to minister to Israel.

Israel was the name of an individual before it became a national name.

In Genesis 28 we read of Jacob at Bethel receiving the name *Israel* and with it the blessing and responsibility of the Abrahamic promises.

What does it mean to receive God's blessings?

In the Bible the way blessing works is very different from how we tend to view it in our time.

Historically, as well as in our world today, blessings are seen as being given to individuals for their own benefit.

Some people fall into the trap of thinking that health, wealth and happiness are signs of God's blessing, while poverty and suffering are signs of God's "curse" or punishment.

Throughout the Bible, however, we see a very different understanding of blessing- one that undermines this individualistic view.

It is the idea that those who are blessed are being equipped to be channels of God's blessing to others, and that blessings are given not to individuals, but through them to the community.

Isaiah, like Jacob before him and Abraham before that, are blessed into service by God.

With the name and the blessing, came the weight of the world upon their shoulders.

Isaiah brings us full circle back to Jacob's blessing as he penetrates the secrets of God's activity among us.

The giving of the name to the Servant in today's passage reflects the prophet's discovery that Israel in exile is not really capable at that moment of living up to what it means to be *Israel*.

He will have to take on the responsibility of reconciliation himself.

The servant is despondent because although no effort has been spared, nothing has been achieved.

One commentator noted that the message for us is

"The antidote to despondency is first, the wisdom of God."

To the servant all seems a waste of effort, but he turns from his own wisdom and rests in the God who called and appointed him.

Secondly it is the power of God.

Although he sees nothing coming out of his work, it is not for him to decide.

As the called servant he has been faithful in laboring and spending himself, now it is for the Lord to bring what fruit he will out of it all.

"Resting in faith is the answer to despondency."

Motyer tells us that, "What was diffused throughout our Lord's whole earthly course, Isaiah compresses into a single moment. Thus Isaiah foresaw a Servant with a real human nature, tested like we are and proving himself to be the author and perfecter of the way of faith, a real, personal faith that can still say *My God* when nothing any longer seems worthwhile."

The servant finds himself suddenly reminded of his own preparation and his consequent dignity and strength in God.

The servant is reminded that God has fashioned him for this very thing.

He has been fashioned for effectiveness.

The task which seems to have defeated him is in fact the very thing the Lord has prepared him for: the spiritual restoration of the people.

In a Stillspeaking Devotional this week, Donna Shaper quoted Terry Eagleton's description of the American people: "The good news about the citizens of this kindly, violent, bigoted, generous-spirited nation is that if ever the planet is plunged into nuclear war, they will be the first to crawl over the edge of the crater, dust themselves down, and proceed to build a new world. The bad news is that they will have started the war."

For Isaiah despondency flies away and buoyancy takes its place.

To say that God is his strength is not to say that his strength comes from God but that God is so present with him and in him that the divine strength becomes his.

Again, turning to Motyer: “Despondency arises through listening to ourselves and our self-assessment instead of looking to God, recalling his purposes, living according to our dignity in him and rediscovering in him our source of power.”

We are called to embrace the power of God and the wisdom of God and to embody and share those gifts - spreading peace and joy.

Henri Nouwen reminds us that

Good news becomes bad news when it is announced without peace and joy. Anyone who proclaims the forgiving and healing love of Jesus with a bitter heart is a false witness. Jesus is the savior of the world. We are not. We are called to witness, always with our lives and sometimes with our words, to the great things God has done for us. But this witness must come from a heart that is willing to give without getting anything in return.

We are to be servants. One writer cautioned that we must never be the heroes of our own stories.

We must endeavor to place others before ourselves, to see God’s grace in every life, in every being.

When we pray for others - especially those with whom we disagree or struggle - we place our faith in God's ways of love, forgiveness and inclusivity.

When we place our trust in God's ways, and pray for God's Reign to come on the earth we live the life of faith, and we bring blessing to others.

Isaiah knew that God had called him to a difficult task.

Yet, he persevered.

We must not grow weary in our efforts to bring peace and joy into the world.

We come together to be empowered to live out our call as humble servants.

Let’s explore some of the ways we might do that.

Questions:

1. What are some of the barriers that keep us from viewing ourselves as servants?
2. In what ways can community be built and blessed in an individualistic culture?
3. Are you motivated to be a blessings to others? How do you live that out?