

# *Wading River Congregational Church*

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### Isaiah 1-9 *“Do Not Fear What They Fear”*

Isaiah is quoted in the NT more than any other prophet: in relation to Immanuel, the child born of a virgin, and to the Servant of the LORD who suffers to redeem his people. But Isaiah ministered in a particular historic moment, when Israel is about to be overrun by the Assyrians and dispersed across the Middle East. Isaiah's call is not to the northern kingdom of Israel – that is all too late – but to the small southern kingdom of Judah, which until this point has been the small faithful remnant of God's chosen people.

#### 1) *Judah Will Fall*

The problem Isaiah is called to confront is that Judah is going the same way as Israel. Under a series of bad kings, especially Ahaz and his grandson Manasseh, idolatry and corruption infect Judah as badly as they did Israel.

It all starts with fear. In the final years of the northern kingdom, Israel is first half-conquered and then becomes an ally of Damascus – the people we would today call the Syrians. Little Judah is afraid of Syria and Israel, and Syria and Israel are afraid of the Assyrians. King Ahaz of Judah places his bets: he makes a treaty with the Assyrians, and refers to himself as the “servant and vassal” of the Assyrian ruler. He sends gold and silver from the Temple in Jerusalem as tribute money. The Assyrians are pleased,

and as a reward attack Damascus and Israel. Judah's fear is in fact the final straw that brings about the conquest of Israel by Assyria!

Ahaz of Judah makes a trip to the conquered city of Damascus to meet the victorious Assyrians. While he is there he decides to copy an altar he sees, and has it installed in place of the bronze altar in the Temple in Jerusalem. On his return, Ahaz offers sacrifices to the Syrian gods, and even sacrifices his own sons in the fire to Moloch. He removes many furnishings from the Temple “out of deference to the King of Assyria,” finally shutting the doors of the Temple, and setting up foreign altars on every street corner in Jerusalem.

Fear of foreigners has led Judah to adopt foreign faiths. It is a strange decision. And into that national, cultural and religious situation, Isaiah is called to bring “the word of the LORD” to Ahaz and his successors. Isaiah's ministry covers the reign of four kings; not one of them is over 25 when he comes to the throne, the youngest is sixteen. To say that Judah has a leadership problem is a major understatement! Isaiah's first words sound political, but are in fact deeply spiritual: “*Do not fear what they fear.*” If the LORD is your God, you do not need to fear Israel or Syria. In the LORD's eyes they are just “smoking sticks” that will soon be snuffed out. And do not, Isaiah tells king

Ahaz, make an alliance with Assyria, for the king of Assyria who will soon "have his foot on your neck."

"If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all," says Isaiah. Political alliances, power plays, calculations of which is likely to be the winning side, are the very opposite of the life of faith for the people of God! The problem is *fear*, but the answer is not politics; it is *trust*. Who will Judah trust for her safety? The Assyrians or the LORD? Isaiah knows the answer: he sees what is to come. Judah will never trust the LORD enough, even though he rules over the politics of the nations. He will not allow the Assyrians to conquer Judah - and when in later years they do besiege Jerusalem, the LORD intervenes with a miraculous overnight slaughter in the Assyrian camp and an Assyrian retreat (immortalized by Byron's poem *The Destruction of Sennacherib* - "The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold/ And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold/...)

What Isaiah sees, long before anyone else in Judah, is that the main threats to Judah's future are their internal idolatry and corruption, and the external threat of the *Babylonians*, who will rise to defeat the Assyrians in the coming decades. Judah will survive the Assyrians, but be overrun by the Babylonians, and the day will come in 586 BC when they will burn the Temple and the royal palace in Jerusalem, reduce the city to rubble, and take all the leaders and every educated person in Judah into exile in Babylon.

Judah will fall, as Israel did, and for the same reasons. They abandoned the LORD their God, not just in worship, but in their public life, in their society, in their culture. Nowhere was this more obvious than in their lack of care for the weakest - the fatherless, the widow, the poor. As Isaiah said, when

the LORD came down to see the vineyard he had planted, he found only bad fruit, and no good grapes.

## 2) *The LORD's Sign*

Is all lost? Is there a future for God's chosen people? Yes, says Isaiah, but you will need new eyes to see it.

Isaiah invites king Ahaz to seek a sign from the LORD of his plans for Judah. But with mock piety, Ahaz "refuses to put the Lord to the test" (he had read that somewhere). He doesn't have time for all this "seeking God;" he is busy sending envoys to Assyria. Then, says Isaiah, "God will give you *the sign of his choosing*: the virgin shall be with child, and will give birth to a son, and will call Him *Immanuel* (God With Us)."

What kind of sign is this? A child? Born to a virgin? What Ahaz wants is troops, weapons, armies, alliances; what the LORD offers is a baby? We don't know who the original child was - though God's promise through Isaiah is that he will grow up and prosper; that is, the Assyrians will not destroy Judah during the child's lifetime! What *we* know, of course, is that this prophecy is fulfilled hundreds of years later by the true "shoot from the stump of Jesse," a new "son of David," a new "king of the Jews." Jesus is the "the great light" who dawns on "the people living in darkness" in the northern regions of "Zebulun and Napthali, by the sea of Galilee." He is the one who will be called "Prince of Peace;" he is the one on whose shoulders a new and righteous kingdom will be built.

Judah longs for peace, but Ahaz and the kings of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC cannot deliver it. They know only about fear and war; Isaiah knows about peace and a child of God. The only way "the vine of Israel" will ever become fruitful is when *the "true vine"*

appears, and people start to trust him and not their weapons. *There is salvation* ahead, but first Judah, like Israel, must learn to give up warfare and idolatry and oppression of the needy; they will go into exile – will *die* as a nation – until they are “*resurrected*” as “*the new Israel*” – the people who put their trust in God’s Messiah, Jesus called the Christ.

### 3) *The Faith of the Prophet*

All this Isaiah sees. But where does he get this certainty about God’s dealings with his people; about a child who is “*God with us,*” about the Suffering Servant whose wounds heal his people?

The answer lies in the vision of God that called Isaiah to his ministry. “*I saw the LORD,*” he says; he was “*high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the Temple.*” He was surrounded by winged seraphim who cried out “*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.*” The Temple shook at the sound of their voices, and it was filled with smoke.

How would you or I, how would anyone, react to such an encounter? *Fear*. If the appearance of angels causes people throughout the Bible to fall on their faces, what would it mean to “*see the LORD*”? We are told over and over that “*no-one can see God and live.*” But Isaiah is spared; he cries out “*Woe is me...*” – indeed! – but then reveals what it means to “*fear the LORD*”: “*I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.*” *Sin makes humans fear God*. Isaiah knows that he, his people, his culture, stand exposed before the LORD and cannot hide their sin. He expects to die.

But then a wondrous moment of grace and forgiveness overwhelms him: a seraph brings a burning coal from the altar and touches his lips, and says “*Your guilt is taken away, and your sin is atoned for.*” Isaiah is spared, by the

mercy of God, because his sin has been *covered* – atoned for. And although he has seen the LORD, he will not die. Then the voice of the LORD rings out: “*Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?*” A trembling Isaiah says “*Here I am, LORD. Send me.*” “*Here I am*” – this is the OT cry of faith, of fear and trust, of submission to the LORD and to his will.

“*Go and tell my people,*” says the LORD: “*their eyes and ears will be closed until their cities are ruined, their people sent away, until only a remnant is left; a seed, a stump in the land...*” Isaiah is commissioned, and overwhelmed by the sight of the glory of the LORD, by his own guilt, by the grace and forgiveness of the LORD, by knowing that now he belongs body and soul to the LORD, and must do whatever God tells him to do. And if that means “*prophecy to Judah in its last days,*” that is what he will do. The LORD has sent him.

“*Whatever happened to Israel?*”, we have been asking. They succumbed to fear of foreigners. They turned desperately to politics and alliances, to power and warfare, to cultural despair and suicide. They adopted every “*other god*” they dreamed might possibly help them. But while Israel feared foreigners, Isaiah and the prophets feared something else entirely: they *feared the LORD*. And from that fear, and the grace and forgiveness and calling of the LORD, came their trust, their faith, their courage, their endurance, their discernment, their wisdom, their passion for justice and righteousness and holiness.

“*Do not fear what they fear,*” says Isaiah – to us and to Judah 2700 years ago. It’s not that there is nothing threatening out there: the forces of Damascus and Assyria were real. But the people who trust God do not need to fear them as people with no faith do. We need to look clearly at *our* fears, and ask if

we are just as afraid as our friends who are unbelievers? We may not face invasion, but I am sure we will hear often in the next 8 months of this Presidential election season that we are threatened by terrorists, and that we must be sure to elect someone who is "strong on national security."

And if we don't fear terrorism, I suspect there is today a widespread and growing anxiety in our society about the economy and the future of the nation. Whatever they may think in Washington or on Wall Street, we know that we have *already been in recession* for a year or more: jobs are scarce, home prices are falling, costs are rising, debt is reaching our limit to even service it, let alone pay it down. There is as much anxiety around now as I have seen or felt in years. One local retailer tells me the only businesses doing well are the liquor stores!

"Do not fear what they fear," says the LORD. "To you, a child is born; to you, a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulders." Trust God, and wait. And remember that at issue is not the survival of America, but the faithful survival of the people of God. Do not let us forget who we are, and whose we are, and "Do not fear what they fear."

Let us pray...