

I Isaiah 2:1-5 The Light of the Lord

I like the prophet Isaiah. I do not envy him. But I like him. Though he lived in the 8th century BCE, that is, the 700's, he can be thought of as the father of New Testament theology. The people of his day were exotic by our customs. They did not dress the way we do, nor speak a language that is even similar to ours. It is hard to explain or even understand the differences in knowledge and technology that mark the two eras, theirs and ours. Isaiah himself was apparently an exotic character even in his own time, and one is right to suppose that if he were alive today, he would be strange to us too. Yet his understanding of the world and his religious vision of victory in defeat is as relevant today as it ever was, and as challenging and demanding. It is a vision that is largely resisted, not only by the faithful in Isaiah's time, but also in ours. It is in retrospect that people have realized that Isaiah's message is inspired, a word from God.

A Word About Light

It is a word about "light." In the bible, as in general, light is considered a good thing because in it one can see. It exposes falsehoods. It illuminates truths.

To be living in darkness is to be afraid, sad, alone, makes you want to stay inside as if the danger is gone

if it is shut out. I am reminded of the Springsteen song, "Cover Me,"

Outside's the rain, the driving snow
I can hear the wild wind blowing
Turn out the light, and bolt the door
I ain't going out there no more

The light is the opposite. It is warm and one can see the truth about the world and its people, so there is no fear, and like summer, one wants to go outside and be a part of things.

Isaiah's vision for Jerusalem is that in the Last Days it will be a light for the world. It will be a place the people's come to learn the ways of God and walk in the light. One thinks of Jesus when he said, "You are the light of the world."

A Word About Peace

The people of Isaiah's time were threatened by war and faced the fear of being conquered, a fear largely unknown to us because even though we are aware of its threats, they are far away and remote, not right outside the city limits. Isaiah spoke word of peace to a people under siege, a people who could see the invading enemy from their doorsteps. He acknowledged the tragedy of their situation but saw a

hopeful end to the darkness. He foresaw Jerusalem and its people not as a nation like other nations, but as a “nation of priests,” which is the way the Book of Exodus puts it. He saw a place where the peoples of the world come together to learn God’s ways, and his vision is powerful enough that it has been written into the larger consciousness of the human mind;

“They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.”

We also live in a time and in a land that “trains for war,” only the nations are bigger and the swords more fearsome.

A Word About Justice

Part of what light and peace involves is what we typically call justice. Isaiah sees Mt. Zion as a place where justice happens and disputes are settled.

Like them, we also live in a world where at every level of life there are disputes between people that need to be settled. Some of the disputes are so complex and involve such contradictions that one wonders if they could ever be resolved. I am struck by the hopefulness of Isaiah’s prophecy especially in such a tragic time as

he lived. We also live in tragic times. Do we dare such hopefulness in our time?

Church and Jerusalem

Presently, neither Jerusalem itself nor the church as the New Israel is a place where people can go to learn how to live in the light and peace and justice that Isaiah saw. We still dream about and hope for it though.

In Jerusalem on the mountain of the Lord’s temple sits an Islamic mosque called the, “Dome of the Rock” which is at the center of the conflict between Muslims and Jews in that part of the world. The church itself is divided. It is easy to say that we are divided along denominational lines or by worship style and music but these are almost entirely superficial or they represent past conflicts and don’t seem to be the principle division among us. We are divided along *racial lines* and by *political ideology* and those seem to be more potent divisions than any other in our time.

The only conclusion that we can reach is that the proclamations of Isaiah have never been realized. Perhaps that is why he said, “in the Last Days,” which points to a time beyond time when all will be well and we can all go outside without fear.

Thanksgiving and Christmas

This Thursday past was Thanksgiving. Many of us gathered with family and friends and shared a feast and time spent with little purpose other than to be together. And then, “black Friday” happened and the mad dash towards Christmas began. Today is the first Sunday of Advent. We go through the motions of this season with its busyness and beauty while the world continues on with its pain and wonder. I don’t know if we are closer now to a catastrophe like what happened to Israel but I know that we are anxious.

It seems to me that even though the times have changed these last 2700 years or so, in some ways nothing is really all that different. Like them, we have political intrigue and the problems associated with international relations. Like them we have a world of plenty from which we have all benefited, but we also have poverty and disease and war. And we must each figure out the particulars of our everyday lives, relationships with family and friends, making ends meet, searching for fulfillment.

Do we dare hope as Isaiah hoped?

Yes! We do so hope. And our hope eases our minds and calms our fears. And it drives us to do good when we get the chance; to be positive when things seem to

be falling apart; to help wherever we find need; to be kind and compassionate in the face of strife and pain; to wait patiently; and to be thankful for every good gift. Because of this arrogant hope, we give up neither on the world, nor anyone who lives in it.

I like Isaiah because he dared that hope. I like him because he put it into words that got written down. I like him because he made of fool of himself in ways I am too self-conscious to do in order to spread that hope around. I like him because in the history of the human race, no one has expressed this hope better than he did. I like him because he allowed God to put this hope into his heart.

There are two responses:

One is to resist because he called on all of us to hope only in God; we like to think our knowledge or strength or goodness or ingenuity can solve our problems, or because we are cynical and don’t think they can be solved.

The other option is to accept and embrace Isaiah’s hope by trusting God and by living our lives in pursuit of this high calling to the end of our days, and to the end of time.

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