

Bible Studies for Liberation, Volume 2

Isaiah and Economic Refugees



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All Biblical passages from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

References from

Hyun Chul Paul Kim and Louis Stulman, *You are My People: An Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010),

Tex Sample, *Hard Living People and Mainstream Christians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

Bob Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

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Introduction

“Written prophecy is at the same time disaster literature and survival literature. It functions simultaneously as a disturbing cultural expression of lament and as a complex theological response to massive human wreckage.” Hyun Chul Paul Kim and Louis Stulman

“Almost to a person, one hears abiding testimony about God and divine providence in a world that runs pillar to post between disaster and survival.” Tex Sample

The first quote, from biblical scholars Kim and Stulman, argues that prophetic literature is both disaster and survival literature, written in a context of unbelievable loss and hardship and seeking to find meaning and hope in the midst of it. The second quote, from Tex Sample’s book on “hard living people” argues that people we consider “down and out”—the poor, homeless, and addicts, for example—live in between these two realities, always between disaster and survival.

Isaiah was written over a time span fraught with war and devastation and exile. The book acknowledges the extreme violence of that time as a “meditation on the horror of war.” It is also “the literary legacy of the weak and vulnerable,” written by and for the survivors of disaster.

Because the prophets occupy this unique space in the Hebrew Bible, prophetic literature is uniquely suited to “hard living people,” or in my own words, “economic refugees.” In my own work in communities living in the space between disaster and survival—particularly in homeless communities—I have witnessed the specter of disaster is ever close. People who are homeless have lost everything, have often lost family members, have little auton-

omy over their own lives, and live at the mercy of an economic system designed to keep them at the bottom. At the same time, I have found unbelievable resilience, survival, and hope. People live daily between disaster and survival.

In the following project, I seek to create a short six week Bible study designed for use in homeless communities or among other economic refugees, rooted in the book of Isaiah. These devotionals are only meant to be a guide to larger discussion. It is vitally important that the participants themselves are able to reflect on what the passage means in their context. My goal is only to provide enough introduction and background to facilitate this. I am a firm believer that good theology comes from the underside—in discussions and studies on the margins. Any Bible study using this material should be designed as an open ended, discussion based time of sharing. “Hard living people,” to use Sample’s designation, have unique and powerful insight into life and what God means to them.

I have chosen six passages from the book of Isaiah that represent some of what I believe to be the key themes in the book. These themes also have significance for economic refugees. The selections range from seven to sixteen verses. While some of the passages seem long, I tried to provide enough text to catch overarching themes in the selections.

The prophet in first Isaiah is speaking to a society not unlike our own, where the rich oppress the poor and this is one of Yahweh’s chief complaints. As the book continues, it explores themes of wandering in the wilderness, exile and homelessness, and loss. Finally, the book offers hope for the sufferers and echoes all of our longings for a better world. It also suggests that those called as servants of Yahweh are the wandering exiles themselves.

Notes on using this study guide:

1. Open with prayer and introductions, so that everyone knows each other's names.
2. Invite someone to read the passage and then allow a short time of silence.
3. The devotional text may be read by the facilitator or simply used as a guide for discussion. This text is in no way meant to replace conversation and insights from the group itself. It does provide themes and openings for conversation.
4. The questions can be used as a guide. There should be ample time for questions, digressions, and discussion. Let the participants guide the conversation as much as possible.
5. Close with prayer requests.

The World of Isaiah

Text: Isaiah 1:15-23

When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.

Come now, let us argue it out,
says the Lord:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.
If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;
but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be devoured by the sword;
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

How the faithful city
has become a whore!
She that was full of justice,
righteousness lodged in her—

but now murderers!
Your silver has become dross,
your wine is mixed with water.
Your princes are rebels
and companions of thieves.
Everyone loves a bribe
and runs after gifts.
They do not defend the orphan,
and the widow's cause does not come before them.

Devotional

The prophet Isaiah began his ministry in ancient Judah. Judah was a small country in the middle of giant superpowers and it was ruled by a wealthy elite who were more interested in saving their own skin than in taking care of their people. They were worried about foreign invaders and about their economic situation. But they were not always worried about the poor, about orphans, or about doing what was right. It was a time of great division between the rich and the poor and a time when the country's leaders were corrupt and greedy.

Isaiah, as a prophet, was sent by God to preach to these rulers, warning them of their sin and threatening judgment. He is sent by God to preach an unpopular message. He is called to tell the ruling class that God is angry with them and will judge them because they care more about their own gain than doing what is right.

Isaiah pulls no punches when he preaches to the leaders of Judah. The leaders of the land rob from those around them. They accept bribes from the rich and powerful instead of acting justly. They line their own pockets and walk past people in need. They ignore the widow and the orphan. During this time, a widow or an or-

phan would have been the most vulnerable members of society. A widow was left without any social or family support and no longer had a male member of the household to provide for the family. Orphans, then as now, were without any family support. These would have been the people most likely to end up on the street or dying of hunger. All throughout the Hebrew Bible, God is very clear that caring for these venerable members of society is of utmost importance. However, in the time of Isaiah, that is not happening. People are left on the street without support while the rulers line their pockets and go to parties.

Because of this, God will not listen to the prayers of those who oppress those around them. All of the beautiful worship of the temple and all of the prayers of the rich and well fed mean nothing, if they are not accompanied by justice. God wants repentance. God tells the rulers that they still have a chance. They need to turn from their wicked practices and stop oppressing and murdering the poor.

“Cease to do evil,
learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.”

There is still room for repentance. “Though your sins are as scarlet,” says the Lord. God is serious about how terrible their sins of oppression are. There is a great sadness in the heart of God to see Judah full of oppression and murder. God gives them a chance to repent. Repentance is not simply saying “I am sorry”; it is changing direction, it is turning things around. The rulers and powerful people of Judah need to turn their lives around. They need to turn

around and care about the poor, the orphan, the widow and all those in need. Then God will heal them. If not, God makes it clear that God will not tolerate these sins forever.

There is good news in this passage, especially for the poor in Judah and the poor in all times. God is on the side of the poor and will not allow oppression to go on forever. God does not support governments or leaders or authorities that act unjustly or cruelly. To escape divine judgment, they must change and value the things that God values.

Questions for Discussion

1. How are the times that Isaiah lived in similar to the times we live in today?
2. How do we see oppression of people who are poor in our own society? What are some examples?
3. How do churches and church leaders treat people who are homeless or poor?
4. What are some examples of today of the practices that Isaiah is preaching against?
5. What does it mean for you that God is on the side of the poor and those who are most vulnerable?
6. Have you even been treated unjustly by someone and hoped that God would judge them? Do you ever hope they repent?

A New Dream

Text: Isaiah 24:17-25:1-10

Terror, and the pit, and the snare
are upon you, O inhabitant of the earth!
Whoever flees at the sound of the terror
shall fall into the pit,
and whoever climbs out of the pit
shall be caught in the snare.
For the windows of heaven are opened,
and the foundations of the earth tremble.
The earth is utterly broken,
the earth is torn asunder,
the earth is violently shaken.
The earth staggers like a drunkard,
it sways like a hut;
its transgression lies heavy upon it,
and it falls, and will not rise again.

On that day the Lord will punish
the host of heaven in heaven,
and on earth the kings of the earth.
They will be gathered together
like prisoners in a pit;
they will be shut up in a prison,
and after many days they will be punished.
Then the moon will be abashed,
and the sun ashamed;
for the Lord of hosts will reign
on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,
and before his elders he will manifest his glory.

O Lord, you are my God;
I will exalt you, I will praise your name;

for you have done wonderful things,
plans formed of old, faithful and sure.
For you have made the city a heap,
the fortified city a ruin;
the palace of aliens is a city no more,
it will never be rebuilt.
Therefore strong peoples will glorify you;
cities of ruthless nations will fear you.
For you have been a refuge to the poor,
a refuge to the needy in their distress,
a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat.
When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm,
the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place,
you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds;
the song of the ruthless was stilled.

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained
clear.

And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
he will swallow up death for ever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all
the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.

It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might
save us.

This is the Lord for whom we have waited;

let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.
For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.

Devotional

When things go wrong in our lives, it is easy to start thinking about the end of the world. This is especially true in times of crisis where a great number of people are facing hard times. Economic crashes, war, or other disasters make us wonder if the world really is ending. And we imagine what that might be like. We call it an apocalypse. And we wonder—will things get better or worse? Is there any hope?

Isaiah's ministry lasted for a long time. Eventually, the country of Judah was faced with war from Assyria. This large superpower to the north was gobbling up land all around them, enslaving people, and sending them into exile. Whole groups of people were being taken captive. The Assyrians would relocate them to other lands and would take people from other countries and drop them off in Judah's cities to survive as they could. People were dying, people were losing their homes, people were split up from their families, and people were desperately trying to survive. Things were looking pretty grim.

So, in this passage, Isaiah imagines what the apocalypse might look like. He uses a type of poetry that was popular in his time to describe it. It is not much different from some of our science fiction books and movies that imagine what the end of the world is like. First, he expresses the fear that people are feeling. He describes the earth as staggering around like a drunken person. Everyone is running away but there is nowhere to hide. If you run one way, you fall in a hole. If you run the other way, you get caught in a trap. It's a catch 22 for everyone. There is terror everywhere. That is how people are feeling. Isaiah imagines that this must be what the end of the world is like.

Then he imagines the fate of the people in power, the people who have created many of the problems in the first place. He believes that God will judge them. The kings of the earth who are now killing people and tearing them from their homes will be put in prison themselves. Their great cities will lie in ruins. They will not be able to torture and enslave anymore. Isaiah has to believe that there is justice in the world. He has to believe that God will protect the oppressed.

And, suddenly, Isaiah's tone changes. He begins to rejoice, because the end of the world will not just be full of fear and judgment. "For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress," he cries to God. Isaiah begins imagining a better world, a world where God reigns. The people who have been between a rock and a hard spot so very long will find peace and rest and joy.

Everyone will be invited to a great feast. Like the Eucharist, where all are welcome, all the peoples of the world will gather and eat their fill. There will be no divisions at the table—everyone will eat in joy and peace together. No more pain and hunger. No more running from one place to another. That is what Isaiah dreamed about. He never saw it happen—he lived in the middle of war his whole life and probably died in it. But he still continued to hope and to dream. Perhaps it was this dream helped him and his people struggle on.

When we gather together for Eucharist or for worship or bible study, we remember this hope. For just a moment, we experience this dream of Isaiah. Sometimes when we meet together or we something for others or we have a party or dance together, we get a taste of what this dream might be like. Then it passes and we are back in a world full of suffering and sorrow. We continue to

dream of heaven, waiting for it, hoping beyond hope that one day we will sit at this great feast.

Questions

1. Do you ever think about the end of the world?
2. What kind of movies or stories about the end of the world come to mind?
3. Have you ever been in “catch 22” situations where there are no good options?
4. What is hope to you?
5. How do you keep up hope in the middle of hard times?
6. Have you ever been to a feast? What was it like?

A way in the wilderness

Text: Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.'

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;

the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Devotional

In this passage, the prophet is once again dreaming of a better world. These verses show us what God cares about and what God's priorities are. The effects of human sin have injured both people and even the earth itself. The land of Israel in Isaiah's time is becoming a wasteland of war. Both people and the land are suffering greatly.

In the time of the prophet, war and pillaging armies had turned the land of Israel and Judah into a wasteland. Everywhere there were the marks of war and destruction. The whole land was turning into a desert. Crops were no longer being planted and armies destroyed the animals that people depended on for food. Cities had been burned to the ground. Even the great forests were being cut down and the wood stolen away from the people.

In our own time, we have seen much of the land around us polluted. Our rivers are dirty, many parts of our cities are ugly and full of garbage, the air is getting darker, and it is harder to find the beauty of creation. Animals often die because of this pollution and we have to live in it, even though it is not healthy. Most of

the time, it is the poorest people that live with the most pollution. In some places, our beautiful land has turned into a desert of waste.

God mourns this destruction of creation. The prophet promises that it will be restored. He dreams of the desert growing flowers again and fresh clean water running through it. He dreams of pools of clean water with grass growing around it. The prophet also dreams of people finding joy and happiness. The people who were surviving war were just left to die or take care of themselves the best they could. Many were injured or disabled because of war. Nobody seemed to care about them. In this passage, the people that no one seems to listen to are God's priority. They will leap and sing and hear and see. Those who feel forgotten and alone, those who have survived terrible things, will rejoice in God's love for them.

Sometimes a vision like this just seems like an impossible dream. The world is what it is and how will it ever change? The prophet encourages us to "be strong and do not fear." God will come and save us, even when it seems like we are waiting for a long time. The prophet says that getting to this place is like a pilgrimage—a "Holy Highway." All those people who are being torn from their homes because of war will come back to their homes and find beauty. That is their great hope.

Our lives are a little like this—a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage is a holy journey to find God. For the prophet, it was a journey of all the people who had been torn away from their homes. They were going to return and replant their gardens and rejoice in God's love.

For us, a pilgrimage can be many things. It can be an actual journey to a special place in order to pray or visit a shrine. Or it can be a regular journey where we unexpectedly find God. Or it can

be a metaphor for our whole lives. Our lives are like a journey that leads us through many unexpected places. Sometimes we stumble through the wilderness. Sometimes we go through beautiful places. Sometimes it feels like we are always searching for what we will never find. We search for a place to call home, a place we can be ourselves. We search for God. We search for a home for our souls. We search for freedom, just like the prophet's people who are looking for home after war.

Isaiah calls this journey a Holy Way, a holy highway. It is full of people searching for the promises of God. No matter where we go or have been, God finds us. The prophet dreams of a holy highway that will lead his people to a place where sorrow and sighing shall be no more. It is the dream that many of us carry—finding a place of rest. For now, we carry our sorrow and our longing. That is what pilgrimage is; it is a journey of hope. In all of our wanderings in life, we want to belong, to find God, and to find rest. Some of us never find that in this life. Some of us wander for a long time.

We hope for the end of a long journey that will give us rest in God. We hope that our journeys will lead us toward a better world, where the earth and all the people in it will find rest and joy. We hope that our polluted rivers will become clean again and that we will be treated with dignity and respect. We hope to find God—in ourselves, in each other, and in the world around us.

Questions

1. What do you think a better world would look like?
2. Do you think it is possible for things to get better?
3. What is the most beautiful place you have ever seen?
4. Where do you find places to enjoy God's creation?

5. Have any of you survived war?
6. What has your life's pilgrimage been like? What kind of places have you been to?
7. What have you found on this journey? Have you ever found rest?

Comfort for Exiles

Text: Isaiah 40:1-10

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

A voice says, 'Cry out!'

And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.
Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;

lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
'Here is your God!'
See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

Devotional

The book of Isaiah is divided into two halves. Chapter 40 begins the second half. It is written to the people of Jerusalem who were taken away by war. In 587 B.C., the city of Jerusalem was captured and most of the people in it were taken into slavery to Babylon, the new superpower in that area of the world. Some scholars think that 15,000-30,000 people were marched from Jerusalem to Babylon when the city was taken. Many more were killed.

The people who were now in exile must have been devastated. They had lost everything and many had lost members of their family and were carried off to live far from home. They were homesick and heartsick, the victims of a terrible disaster. They were now all landless, homeless, lonely, and jobless. They were living in a foreign land among people who hated them.

Over and over in the history of the world this has happened. People are forced to move from their homes. People are forced to leave their homelands and flee to other countries or look for work somewhere else so they can feed their families. And it is hard.

They try to hold on to their own culture and find a place to belong.

God's message through the prophet is very gentle to these suffering people. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." God feels the sadness of these exiles and refugees and wants to comfort them. God will be like a gentle shepherd to these homeless people, gathering the lambs in his arms and gently leading their mothers. God is with them, supporting them and holding them and cherishing them.

Even though they are living in the cities of Babylon, where there is great wealth and technology, it feels like a wilderness to them. It is not their home and, because they are exiles, they do not always have access to the benefits of Babylon's advanced civilization. Some of them are poor in the middle of the vast wealth of the empire. Babylon is not their home. The prophet thinks of Babylon's greatness as grass; "The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." Babylon's greatness is ultimately worthless. God is more powerful than Babylon and God will save them. God is greater than their oppressors.

The Lord will come to rescue the exiles and all of the people will help to prepare a way for God. The prophet compares this to building a highway, when potholes are filled in and the road is made level, so that everyone can see where they are going and the coming glory of God. God is going to come in power, with salvation for the people. It is just like the Exodus out of Egypt—God is going to lead the exiles out of Babylon and feed and care for them.

And it is the exiles themselves who are called to help prepare the way. These people who have lost everything and live homeless in Babylon are chosen by God to be God's messengers. They will help build this highway for God. They will cry out as a "herald of

good tidings.” A herald was someone who traveled throughout a city or village and proclaimed the daily news. The exiles who are far from home are asked by God to go throughout their communities and give the good news that God is coming to save them. These homeless exiles themselves are called by God to preach their coming liberation.

Questions

1. Many people today have experienced circumstances like exile. How do you identify with the exiles of this passage? Have you had similar experiences?
2. What do you think of God’s message to these exiles? How have you experienced God comforting you in your life?
3. Have you even taken care of animals? Is there special care needed for pregnant and young animals?
4. Have you ever experienced living in a place like Babylon where you feel out of place?
5. How is the situation that the captive Israelites find themselves in similar to many people in our society today?
6. What do you think about the fact that God calls the people who are homeless and suffering to be the people who share the good news?

The Call of "Daughter Zion"

Text: Isaiah 54:1-14

Sing, O barren one who did not bear;

burst into song and shout,
you who have not been in labor!

For the children of the desolate woman will be more
than the children of her that is married, says the Lord.

Enlarge the site of your tent,
and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out;
do not hold back; lengthen your cords
and strengthen your stakes.

For you will spread out to the right and to the left,
and your descendants will possess the nations
and will settle the desolate towns.

Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed;
do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer disgrace;
for you will forget the shame of your youth,
and the disgrace of your widowhood you will remember no
more.

For your Maker is your husband,
the Lord of hosts is his name;
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,
the God of the whole earth he is called.

For the Lord has called you
like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,
like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off,
says your God.

For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.

In overflowing wrath for a moment

I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,
says the Lord, your Redeemer.

This is like the days of Noah to me:

Just as I swore that the waters of Noah
would never again go over the earth,
so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you
and will not rebuke you.

For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted,

I am about to set your stones in antimony,
and lay your foundations with sapphires.

I will make your pinnacles of rubies,
your gates of jewels,
and all your wall of precious stones.

All your children shall be taught by the Lord,
and great shall be the prosperity of your children.

In righteousness you shall be established;
you shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear;
and from terror, for it shall not come near you.

Devotional

In this part of Isaiah, there are two characters that are called to bring good news to the people. One is often called “Lady Zion” or “Daughter Zion.” The other is called “The Servant.” These two characters represent those exiles who are called by God to bring the good news to God’s people. Daughter Zion in some ways rep-

resents all the people of Israel and their struggle and suffering. She also represents the women who have suffered in war and loss and exile as this story has unfolded.

This passage is a description of Daughter Zion. In this passage, she is called to sing and shout and share the promises of God with her people. It is interesting that God does not call powerful people or priests or religious leaders to do this. God calls this woman. Let's see what kind of woman this Daughter Zion is.

She is a "desolate woman" with many children. She is a woman of deep sadness who has been torn from her home and lives in a foreign land. She has been shamed and disgraced. People do not think highly of her. She is an abandoned woman. Her husband left her when she was young. She is "afflicted... storm tossed, and not comforted." She is afraid for her children and does not know where to turn. She does not really have it all together. She has survived war and exile and she is alone and afraid.

Instead of being angry, God treats her with compassion and love. God will be her husband, since her husband left her. Even though she felt completely abandoned and it seemed like God was so angry with her, God has a different message for her. God will remember her and promises that steadfast love will be with her forever. God is not angry and will not punish her.

Instead, she is told to burst into song, because she will be blessed. She does not need to fear, for God will remove her sense of shame. God will give her precious gifts and her children will do well. They will be taught by God and they will be blessed in the world. She will get through the terrible times of war and exile and she will prosper. She has made many mistakes and even though God hid God's face from her for a brief moment and everything seemed lost, God has come back to her.

“For the Lord has called you,” the prophet tells her. She is called to sing and shout the good news, that God will deliver them. God does not try to find a person that is “put together” to proclaim the good news. God wants Daughter Zion to do it, even after all that she has been through. She is God’s chosen. God does not wait for the college educated or the wealthy or people who have it all together to do God’s will. God simply tells this woman, this Daughter Zion, that she will have the strength to proclaim the love and faithfulness of God. Even after all her mistakes, God wants her.

It seems like God does that a lot. God calls people who the rest of the world thinks are nobodies to do the work of God. Jesus is born to a poor unwed mother, not to a powerful Roman family. Daughter Zion is called to proclaim good news and liberation to her people. The same is true for each of us. We do not have to be “put together” to do God’s work. God seems to prefer to choose the people who are not.

Questions

1. Do you sometimes feel like everything is falling apart for you?
2. Do you worry about your children?
3. Have you ever felt like God has abandoned you?
4. Have you ever felt like this woman, like Daughter Zion?
5. Do you think you might be called by God to do God’s work?

The Servant who Saves

Text: Isaiah 61:1-7

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks,
foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines;
but you shall be called priests of the Lord,
you shall be named ministers of our God;
you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations,
and in their riches you shall glory.
Because their shame was double,
and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot,
therefore they shall possess a double portion;
everlasting joy shall be theirs.

Devotional

This passage is about the second character that we mentioned last week—“The Servant.” All throughout the second half of the book of Isaiah, there is talk of this servant. This servant is from among the exiles—he is a slave in Babylon. He represents all of the exiles who are living in Babylon, with little hope, feeling like failures, and with little way out of their situation. This servant is called by God to do great things. Once again, God chooses a person who is insignificant to the eyes of the world. He chooses an imprisoned, lonely, homeless exile.

And what is the servant called to do? The spirit of God is upon him to bring good news to people who are oppressed, to people who are in prison, and to people who are broken with sorrow. He and those around him are called to “become agents of liberation to others like themselves.” This is the passage that Jesus read when he first preached in his hometown (Luke 4:16-21). Jesus was also a poor man called by God to preach good news.

In this passage, God sides with people who are suffering and oppressed. The servant of God is anointed to bring good news to the oppressed. What is this good news? As the passage goes on to say, it is that they will be given gladness and that God will help them rebuild their lives. It is that they will become priests and ministers of God and find joy and rest and peace. Those who are full of sorrow will find joy. Those who are in prison will find release. It is the prisoners and the exiles and the oppressed and the poor that will display the glory of God.

Our society, all around us, teaches that God is on the side of the powerful and wealthy and ruling authorities. But that is not what God says in Isaiah. God goes to prison cells and to the

streets and to the places where people weep and where people make mistakes. God proclaims salvation and liberation there.

And we are called to wake up and to listen. Then, we are all, each of us, called to be the servants of God and to bring good news. We are each called to be the priests and ministers of God. This is the mission that is entrusted to us.

Here is my servant, God says. Here is my servant, my inmate, my transient, my refugee. I have put my spirit on him, on her, I have anointed them, to bring my good news. Prisoners will bring prisoners out of jail. Those who are grieving will comfort those who mourn. Those who are oppressed will preach liberation and freedom.

This is the way of God. Many, many years later, the apostle Paul wrote the same thing. “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (I Cor. 1:26-27).

Questions

1. What do you think of this servant?
2. How can each of us be “agents of liberation”?
3. What does oppression look like today?
4. What are you called to do? What do you think this looks like for you?

Closing

“For God so loves His transients, He can place us where He needs us to do His will. This, because He knows we find a sense of pride and honor in doing so.” Paul Estes

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