

May 19, 2019

St. John's College

SOLAS:Vespers--Soli Deo Gloria

“The Vision of Isaiah”

Isaiah 1:1

Welcome/Introductory remarks

Welcome to our final Vespers service for the year! Over the year we have used these services to worship God together in some unique ways and to explore the five Solas, important ideas that inspired the Protestant Reformers. Tonight we are looking at the controlling idea that binds them all together: Soli Deo Gloria -- To the Glory of God Alone. What better way to consider the idea of God's glory than to sing to him? And that's what we will be doing for a good part of the evening!

The reason the concept of Soli Deo Gloria binds the others together is because of what glory is. It is not what we think. We imagine that God's conception of glory is, like ours, selfish, that it is a scarcity, something that he doesn't have enough of and needs to get more of. But glory is not like that. Glory is an essential aspect of his being, and is, like him, inexhaustible, eternal. It is not something we could withhold from him any more than we can remove another person's humanity from them.

The book of Revelation says: “Worthy are you, our Lord our God, to receive glory...for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.” (Rev 4:12) All of Creation is

an expression of God's glory, every physical parameter, every moral imperative, every galaxy, every star, every order of being animate or inanimate exists by the glory of God and for the glory of God and gives glory to God just by existing, just by being what they were made to be. In other words, that which is good is that which glorifies God, that which accomplishes, consciously or unconsciously, the goal of its creation. Again, Creation "glorifies God" by fulfilling the purpose for which God in his wisdom has created it.

But we, created for the express purpose of stewarding God's Creation, of singing God's praise eternally as the pinnacle of Creation, chose to rebel, to seek our own glory, to define

our own purpose. We sinned. In doing so, we broke the world and became broken, we lost our way, rejected our goal, forgot our purpose, and we are utterly incapable of recovering it. We hardened our hearts.

But God reached out to us. He gave us his Word to be our guide, and Scripture alone teaches us what our purpose is and how to accomplish it. This is the idea of Sola Scriptura. Not only this, he became a part of his Creation, he became human, the only one who did not twist and turn away from his purpose, to remove our sins from us by dying for us. Only Jesus, the Messiah, otherwise known as the Christ, perfectly God and perfectly human, could do this. This is the idea of Solus Christus. How do we

experience this deliverance? By faith alone. This is Sola Fide. But we cannot earn it, for that would only turn our hearts inward once again, away from God, away from our created purpose. We must only receive it, by Grace Alone -- Sola Gratia. Like the rest of the universe, we were created by the glory of God alone to the glory of God alone. But according to Scripture alone, because we rejected our purpose and became lost, we needed to be saved by faith alone in Christ alone, so that by grace alone our hearts would change, and we could recover our ability to exist for the glory of God alone.

The book of Isaiah offers one of the most elevated, comprehensive portraits of God anywhere in

Scripture. Tonight, we will be taking a bird's eye view of the book as an introduction to a more detailed study which I feel God is leading me to do through Vespers, at least for the foreseeable future.

Isaiah is one of the central texts of Scripture. Since the earliest beginnings of the church it has often been informally referred to as the fifth Gospel. Sadly, like too many other Old Testament books, nowadays it is often glossed over or neglected altogether. And the fact that it contains some of the most memorable and inspiring phrases in the Bible only means that it is ripe for abuse. It is thus one of the most familiar but misunderstood books of the Bible.

But attempting to condense a book like Isaiah into a few short words as I am attempting to do tonight is a little like expecting people to get a good sense of Beethoven's Fifth by whistling the first four notes! So, as a word of warning, tonight's sermon is a little on the long side. If you have a Bible with you, either on your phone or a paper copy, you will likely find it useful to keep handy. For those of you with Bibles on your phones, I am using the English Standard Version.

Also, because there is nothing that will give you a better sense of Isaiah than Isaiah himself, we will be hearing some pivotal passages that I hope will help to get across some of his main emphases. These passages

are printed at the back of your program.

Isaiah's characteristic designation for God is "the Holy One of Israel". It's a somewhat perplexing title. "Holiness" is an attribute of transcendence, of otherness, of separate-ness. But Isaiah's favourite way to refer to God implies that this "Holy One" has at the same time attached himself not only to his created universe, and not only to one to one small part of it, not only to a particular bipedal species. According to Isaiah, he attaches himself to the descendants of one particular person: Israel, more commonly known as Abraham's grandson, Jacob.

The implications of this are mind-boggling: Isaiah serves One

who is perfect but willingly gets his hands dirty, One who is not bound by time or place but willingly inhabits one particular piece of dusty real estate, One who is everything that we are not -- eternal, unchangeable, all-powerful, all-knowing, good -- but willingly put himself in a position where every one of those divine attributes is put to the test. The Holy One of Israel is the ultimate King who is willing to become the ultimate Servant.

In order to explore this tension, the hymns that we will be singing tonight will especially emphasize the holiness of God: his divinity, his perfection, his majesty, and some of the words we will be singing directly quote Isaiah. On the other hand, the spoken words

this evening will especially draw out his involvement with humanity, and more specifically with one tribe in Israel: Judah.

Just before we get to singing, I'd like to thank you all for your interest in SOLAS:Vespers and your generous support this year. If you'd like to make a donation tonight, there is an envelope in your program provided for that purpose which you can deposit in the box on the table as you leave.

I'd especially like to thank all those, too many to name, who have volunteered their time and talents to help make each Vespers service so special.

Please stay after the service for some refreshments, and if there is interest,

we will have a Q&A afterwards here in the chapel as well.

As I mentioned, tonight is our last Vespers service for the year, but if you turn to the second page of tonight's program you will find the dates for next year's services. Please feel free to tear out this first page of the program and take it home with you. All the information for next year's services will also be available on the website: solasvespers.org.

As a reminder, all my remarks will be available at our website, which is again: solasvespers.org. So if you want to go back and review anything you can find it there.

The Vision of Isaiah (part 1): "Here I am..."

Gustav Mahler once wrote: "A symphony must be like the world. It must embrace everything." Isaiah's symphony spans the entire universe from the beginning of time to its end and beyond. How do you begin to summarize such a rich and varied work as this, written by an ancient genius and inspired by no less than God himself?

Simply, as Isaiah does: "The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah." We will start with the most tangible section of that opening sentence: "the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah,

kings of Judah." We know something of this time, something of these men, something of that place.

The first of the kings Isaiah mentions, Uzziah, ruled in Jerusalem over the land of Judah for 52 years.

Uzziah's reign was the second longest in Judah's history, and was a time of relative stability and prosperity, but it came after many generations of turmoil. Apostasy, mass murder, and assassinations characterized the reign of many of his immediate forebears.

Uzziah's own father was assassinated, and so Uzziah found himself on the throne at the tender age of 16. He was the first king in many generations to turn firmly back to God. 2 Ch 26:5 tells us that "he set himself to seek God...and as long as he sought the

LORD, God made him prosper". Uzziah set about restoring stability to his realm on many fronts, pursuing a policy of agricultural development, building up his army and military installations, subjugating the Philistines to west, and forcing the Ammonites in the east to pay tribute (2 Chron 26; 2 Ki 15:1-5).

2 Ch 26:15-16: "...his fame spread far, for he was marvelously helped, till he was strong. But when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction." Towards the end of his reign, Uzziah was struck with leprosy when in his arrogance he attempted to bypass the priests in the Temple. He spent the final years of his reign shunned and shamed while his son Jotham

governed in his stead, pursuing similar policies as his father (2 Ch 27).

This twilight of Uzziah's reign was the period in which Isaiah spent his formative years. We know little about Isaiah's personal life other than that he was married and had at least two sons. The introductory verse we are considering today tells us that he was the son of a man named Amoz, who may have been a scribe. There is a tradition that holds that Isaiah's father was the brother of King Uzziah, but though Isaiah seems to have had access to the royal family, there is no other evidence that suggests he belonged to it himself. Regardless, Isaiah was obviously well-educated, and it does seem that Uzziah was at least a fascinating object of study for

him, as 2 Ch 26:22 strikingly makes the point of relating that Isaiah wrote a book about him -- "the rest of the acts of Uzziah, from first to last" -- a book that is sadly lost.

After five introductory chapters that set out his main areas of concern, Isaiah's symphony really gets going. He relates to us the pivotal moment of his life. I'd like to invite my good friend Mark Wilcoxson to come now and read for us the sixth chapter of Isaiah:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two

they flew. And one called to another and said:

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”*

The foundations on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said,

“Here am I; send me!” And he said, “Go and say to this people:

*‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
keep looking, but do not understand.’
Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their
eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and comprehend with their minds,
and turn and be healed.”*

Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said:

*“Until cities lie waste
without inhabitant,
and houses without people,
and the land is utterly desolate;
until the Lord sends everyone far away,*

*and vast is the emptiness in the midst
of the land.*

*Even if a tenth part remain in it,
it will be burned again,
like a terebinth or an oak
whose stump remains standing
when it is felled.”*

The holy seed is its stump.

The Vision of Isaiah (part 2): The Vision Unfolds

As his earthly sovereign lay dead or dying, Isaiah had an encounter with his true king. Whatever Isaiah's boyhood impressions: of himself, of his nation, and of its largely successful ruler, in the burning light of the Holy One of Israel, he saw things as they truly were.

“I am a man of unclean lips,” he cried, “and I live among a people of unclean lips.” The Temple was apparently not the only thing shaken by God's presence. Isaiah was filled with horror at his own sinfulness, at the knowledge that his lips merely gave expression to the blackness of his own heart and that, try as we might, none of us can truly avoid participating in the sins of our culture. As a sinful man in the presence of a perfectly righteous and holy Lord, he was certain he was about to die.

But he did not die. He experienced the atoning grace of God as his sin was “blotted out”. He experienced the strengthening grace of God to trust in him, to hear him speak, and to eagerly

step forward and accept his mission from his true King.

In the verse we are focusing on, the first verse of the entire book, Isaiah promises that what we are about to read is a “vision” which he “saw”. Given this powerful first encounter with God, it’s not surprising that he would use these terms. That said, the words in our verse refer to the entirety of the book. That is, the whole book is the vision, or perhaps we could say that it is the fruit of that first vision, a vision resulting in an unrelenting conviction of his own sinfulness and that of his people, yet also a vision that made him fully awake to the possibility of God’s grace to atone for sin and to prepare his people to serve.

As our introductory verse implies, Isaiah’s anthology of prophecy was put together sometime after the reign of the fourth king he mentions, Hezekiah, or at least near the end of it. This meant that he had prophesied “concerning Judah and Jerusalem” for a long time, somewhere between 25 and 50 years. It seems that after an eventful career preaching to his contemporaries, he compiled his work for future generations. This may be reflected in his instruction of 8:16 to “bind up the testimony” and to “seal the teaching among my disciples”.

He did not arrange his material in strictly chronological order. Only rarely does he clue us in to the original context that God’s word came to him. Rather, he deployed the words that he

had received from God over a lifetime as a composer arranges musical elements in a symphony, sometimes in ways that fulfil our expectations, sometimes in ways that surprise us, but always ensuring that the overarching message of the work will have the maximum impact.

Isaiah knew that despite what his contemporaries thought, the greatest problem they faced was not foreign oppression, nor lack of global influence, nor poverty, nor famine, but sin. Sin corrupted everyone, affected every thing. So, while Isaiah's book is ostensibly organized around political crises involving Ahaz and Hezekiah, his overarching interest, his vision, is in demonstrating that the Holy One of Israel has a plan to

deal with that more fundamental problem: sin.

This is “the vision that Isaiah...saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem” (you may want to keep your Bibles open as we embark on this whirlwind tour of the book!):

The first chapter is an indictment of the sin of Judah, a tightly argued legal brief. The next four chapters throw this problem of sin into sharp relief as he contrasts what the city of God should be with the current reality of Jerusalem, what he calls the “filth of the daughters of Zion” (4:4), a choice vineyard filled with bitter fruit (5:1-7).

Isaiah is a study in contrasts. The contrast between the impermanence and fundamental impotence of global

rulers and “the eternal power and divine nature” (Rom 1:20) of Earth’s true king is another favourite, which we saw as he juxtaposed Uzziah’s frailty and isolation with a immanent Lord whose presence made the ground shake.

After the story of Isaiah’s call in chapter 6, he transports us a number of years into the future. Jerusalem is threatened by the northern kingdom of Israel in league with Damascus. Judah’s king, Ahaz, ignores Isaiah’s advice to turn to God, and instead makes an alliance with the brutal Assyrian empire. This was a little like getting *The Godfather* to protect you from the neighborhood bully.

Here again a contrast: Ahaz’s failure to trust a God he found distant, a God

he could not see, is shown up by Isaiah’s prediction of the birth of one who will be called “Immanuel/God With Us” (7:14). In chapter 9 we hear more about this enigmatic child, the true successor to King David who will be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (9:6-7). In chapter 11 he is called the “shoot from the stump of Jesse”, David’s father, on whom the Spirit of God will rest (11:1-2), and he, unlike Ahaz, “shall not judge by what his eyes see ... or what his ears hear ... but with righteousness ... and with equity” (11:3-4).

This “root of Jesse” we are told, will “stand as a signal to the peoples”, of whom foreign nations will “inquire” (11:10).

Thus Isaiah introduces the idea that this Prince of Peace will rule in Zion, in Jerusalem, but that Judah and Jerusalem will merely be the epicentre of his rule: he will rule over the whole earth, over all people. And so, proceeding from Judah and Jerusalem he turns his attention in like fashion to them, assembling oracles in chs. 13-23 that pronounce judgement on the nations of the ancient world, calling out the sin of Babylon and Assyria, Philistia and Moab and Damascus, Cush and Egypt, Tyre and Sidon. He takes a moment along the way to remind his readers of an oracle that must have seemed rather unlikely when he first preached it: that the warring superpowers of Assyria and

Egypt would one day come together to worship Israel's God (19:23-25).

He brings this exposition of global sin to a dramatic conclusion in ch. 24-27, first announcing a devastating judgement that will produce a dystopian landscape. "...a curse devours the earth," he says "and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt..." He continues, "therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left." (24:6) But he doesn't leave us in despair -- true to form, Isaiah sets the deepest darkness next to the brightest light, and the next three chapters flesh out the hopeful hints he has given us earlier in the book. Whereas before "every house [was] shut up", and "all joy [had] grown dark" (24:10-11), now we are

told that “the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food...and well-aged wine” (25:6). Whereas before he promised “terror and the pit and the snare” (24:17), now “the LORD God will wipe away tears from all faces”, that he will “swallow up death forever” (25:8).

After this climactic vision of the end of time, he brings his readers back to the here and now, to the troubles of the present, or for his first readers, the troubles of the recent past: the rapacious Assyrian Empire and its destruction of the northern kingdom that not so very long ago had seemed to be the real menace, its new emperor Sennacherib setting his sights on Judah, and Judah’s new king Hezekiah’s decision -- despite

Isaiah’s assurances of God’s protection -- to put his trust in an alliance with the devil he knows, the fading superpower: Egypt. God, speaking through Isaiah, laments (30:1,15-17): “Ah, stubborn children...who carry out a plan, but not mine, and who make an alliance but not of my Spirit, that they may add sin to sin...In returning and rest you shall be saved, in quietness and trust shall be your strength. But you were unwilling...therefore your pursuers shall be swift...till you are left like a flagstaff on the top of a mountain.” Isaiah for his part wears his frustration and irritation on his sleeve: “Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses...but do not look to the Holy One of Israel...The Egyptians are man, and

not God, and their horses are flesh, not spirit...” (31:1,3) Still, God had told Isaiah that he would be merciful to Jerusalem: “As a lion growls over his prey...so the LORD of hosts will come down to fight on Mount Zion...like birds hovering, so the LORD of hosts will protect Jerusalem...” (31:4-5).

By chapter 36, events have come to a head, and to make sure we understand what is about to happen, Isaiah switches gears to narrate the drama in prose. Assyria has crushed the walled cities of Judah. They have ravaged the Judean countryside and squashed Egypt’s half-hearted, lame attempt at a rescue. To use Isaiah’s phrase, Jerusalem stands alone “like a lodge in a cucumber field” (1:8). That is, Judah’s farms and fortresses lie

pell-mell, tossed like kindling by Sennacherib’s seemingly invincible forces.

Finally, Hezekiah cries out to God. God’s response is swift and decisive, and in a manner reminiscent of Israel’s Exodus from bondage in Egypt, Isaiah relates plainly: “...the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when the people awoke, behold these were all dead bodies.” (37:36-38)

But despite the spectacular deliverance from the Assyrian hordes, from a human perspective the pinnacle of Isaiah’s prophetic career, he knows that Judah’s real problem still lies unaddressed. God’s people are still rebellious, and despite God’s

demonstrable faithfulness, they will very quickly return to business as usual.

We read in ch. 39 that just like his father Ahaz, Hezekiah sowed the seeds of Jerusalem's ultimate destruction by showing off his city's treasure in a bid to impress a delegation from Assyria's mortal enemy, the up and coming superpower, Babylon.

In symphonic terms, we could call the first 39 chapters the "Exposition", that is, the first part of a large scale musical form in which the main themes are articulated. The next section of a symphony we would label the "Development", where the composer plays with the themes, transposing them to new key areas,

fragmenting them, combining them in new ways so that our conception of them is transformed.

Anyone who reads Isaiah can detect this shift in tone in ch. 40. He seems to be more seasoned, a slower burn, not as quick tempered. There is a maturity to this mood, a loftier perspective and a smoother integration in the composition. It is as if Isaiah is now sitting back in an interval of peace, and ruminating on a long, eventful life. He has witnessed both destruction and deliverance, God's judgement and his mercy. But he knows that Judah's sin has still not been dealt with. He has to reconcile the knowledge that history is inevitably going to repeat itself with the promise that God has a glorious

future in store for his chosen people, his chosen servant, Israel (41:8).

Yet another contrast: even as Isaiah asserts the coming exile he immediately announces comfort. The solution, both to the problem of the exile and to the greater problem of sin, is revealed slowly, gradually. Throughout this Development section Isaiah pivots back and forth. On the one hand there is a message promising the hope of return from exile through the agency of an earthly deliverer whom he uncannily names: Cyrus (44:26-45:7), who was indeed the Persian emperor who allowed the Jewish exiles to return to the Promised Land more than 150 years after Isaiah predicted it.

As I said, Isaiah pivots from that temporal promise to an eternal one that will deal with the problem of sin once and for all. He begins to write of the Servant, a figure whose identity at first seems mysterious even to Isaiah. Gradually but with the increasing force of conviction it begins to dawn on Isaiah throughout chs. 42-53 that the Servant embodies the true and faithful remnant of Israel, of necessity a remnant of one since he is the only one without sin. He is one who stands in her place, whose suffering on her behalf will remove her sin once and for all. He is one “upon whom [God] has put his Spirit” (42:1) just like the coming King he predicted in ch. 11: one given “as a covenant for the people,” (42:6), one who will not only “raise up the tribes of Jacob”, but will

be “a light for the nations” and who will bring God’s “salvation to the ends of the earth” (49:6), thus one “in whom [God] will be glorified” (49:3).

Isaiah returns again and again to this figure. Each time the Servant acquires greater definition. He becomes increasingly compelling. He is one who “sustains with a word him who is weary” (50:4). He is one who gives “his back to those who strike” and his “cheeks to those who pull out the beard”, who does not hide “from disgrace and spitting” (50:8). And finally in chapter 52:13–53:12, at the precise moment that Isaiah announces Jerusalem’s ultimate triumph, he offers once again a sharp and sudden contrast to outline the surprising means of Zion’s salvation:

*See, my servant shall prosper;
he shall be exalted and lifted up,
and shall be very high.*

*Just as there were many who were
astonished at him
—so marred was his appearance,
beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of mortals—
so he shall startle many nations;
kings shall shut their mouths because
of him;
for that which had not been told them
they shall see,
and that which they had not heard
they shall contemplate.*

*Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord
been revealed?
For he grew up before him like a young
plant,*

*and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we
should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we
should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted
with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their
faces
he was despised, and we held him of
no account.*

*Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our
transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;*

*upon him was the punishment that
made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.*

*He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its
shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By a perversion of justice he was taken
away.*

*Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the
living,
stricken for the transgression of my
people.*

*They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.*

*Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush
him with pain.*

*When you make his life an offering for
sin,*

*he shall see his offspring, and shall
prolong his days;
through him the will of the Lord shall
prosper.*

*Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his
knowledge.*

*The righteous one, my servant, shall
make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will allot him a portion with
the great,*

*and he shall divide the spoil with the
strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the
transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the
transgressors.*

*The Vision of Isaiah (part 3): My
Covenant, My Spirit*

Isaiah 59:

*See, the Lord's hand is not too short to
save,
nor his ear too dull to hear.
Rather, your iniquities have been
barriers
between you and your God,*

*and your sins have hidden his face from
you
so that he does not hear.
For your hands are defiled with blood,
and your fingers with iniquity;
your lips have spoken lies,
your tongue mutters wickedness.
No one brings suit justly,
no one goes to law honestly;
they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies,
conceiving mischief and begetting
iniquity.
They hatch adders' eggs,
and weave the spider's web;
whoever eats their eggs dies,
and the crushed egg hatches out a
viper.
Their webs cannot serve as clothing;
they cannot cover themselves with
what they make.
Their works are works of iniquity,*

*and deeds of violence are in their
hands.
Their feet run to evil,
and they rush to shed innocent blood;
their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity,
desolation and destruction are in their
highways.
The way of peace they do not know,
and there is no justice in their paths.
Their roads they have made crooked;
no one who walks in them knows
peace.
Therefore justice is far from us,
and righteousness does not reach us;
we wait for light, and lo! there is
darkness;
and for brightness, but we walk in
gloom.
We grope like the blind along a wall,
groping like those who have no eyes;*

*we stumble at noon as in the twilight,
among the vigorous as though we
were dead.
We all growl like bears;
like doves we moan mournfully.
We wait for justice, but there is none;
for salvation, but it is far from us.
For our transgressions before you are
many,
and our sins testify against us.
Our transgressions indeed are with us,
and we know our iniquities:
transgressing, and denying the Lord,
and turning away from following our
God,
talking oppression and revolt,
conceiving lying words and uttering
them from the heart.
Justice is turned back,
and righteousness stands at a distance;
for truth stumbles in the public square,*

*and uprightness cannot enter.
Truth is lacking,
and whoever turns from evil is
despoiled.
The Lord saw it, and it displeased him
that there was no justice.
He saw that there was no one,
and was appalled that there was no
one to intervene;
so his own arm brought him victory,
and his righteousness upheld him.
He put on righteousness like a
breastplate,
and a helmet of salvation on his head;
he put on garments of vengeance for
clothing,
and wrapped himself in fury as in a
mantle.
According to their deeds, so will he
repay;*

*wrath to his adversaries, requital to his
enemies;
to the coastlands he will render
requital.
So those in the west shall fear the name
of the Lord,
and those in the east, his glory;
for he will come like a pent-up stream
that the wind of the Lord drives on.
And he will come to Zion as Redeemer,
to those in Jacob who turn from
transgression, says the Lord.
And as for me, this is my covenant with
them, says the Lord: my spirit that is
upon you, and my words that I have put
in your mouth, shall not depart out of
your mouth, or out of the mouths of your
children, or out of the mouths of your
children's children, says the Lord, from
now on and forever.*

The vision of Isaiah that he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem involved an ultimate reckoning with sin in the astonishing person of the Servant who, as we heard in the passage Ron read, was both “high and lifted up” (52:13), and “despised and rejected” (53:3). “High and lifted up” are precisely the same words that Isaiah used to describe God in the Temple back in ch. 6, and throughout what I’ve been calling the Development section, the Servant emerged as the one who embodies Israel both in her suffering and in her glory, whose perfection was “marred” beyond recognition in order that he might “bear the sins of many” (52:14,53:12). He personifies what Israel was always called to be, what Israel can be, if only she would

recognize him as the coming king that Isaiah had been predicting all along. By now this characteristic tension between transcendence and presence, between mortality and immortality is something we should all recognize: This Servant, this King, wholly other, wholly with us, is none other than the Holy One of Israel.

Upon the completion of the Servant's work in ch. 53, Isaiah explodes with joy in ch 54 and 55 at the tender reconciliation of Israel with God: her Maker and her husband (54:1-8), at the establishment of a new covenant, an "everlasting covenant" (55:3), a "covenant of peace" (54:10), at the beautification of Zion (54:11), at the mission to call every nation to this

same reconciliation with God (55:5-7).

And so the themes of sin and punishment and deliverance which were so prominent in the first 39 chapters, the section I called in musical terms the Exposition, have now been transformed.

And yet, as we just heard in Tom's reading of ch. 59, sin is still present, still the chronic problem of all of humanity. For not all have embraced their Servant King; most have not surrendered themselves and their sin to be cleansed by his atoning sacrifice. And even those who have still wrestle with the reality that they still sin.

What we have in the last 11 chapters is a Recapitulation -- again, this is a

symphonic description, but one that I think suits this section especially well.

To review: Isaiah's vision set forth first an Exposition of the problem we face -- sin -- which has undergone a Development, a transformation, a fresh rendering of the terms and an unexpected solution. Now we hear a Recapitulation of the problem of sin, albeit one that assumes the transformation brought about by The Servant King's sacrifice.

Of course, we who are Christians identify The Servant King as none other than Jesus, the Messiah. The Gospel of Luke (4:16-21) records that Jesus was so certain of this that right at the beginning of his ministry, before he fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy of his passion and death, before he

had done much of anything in fact, he audaciously claimed that he had already fulfilled ch. 61 a passage from Isaiah's Recapitulation, which assumes the accomplished work of the Servant King: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" he says -- remember, the Spirit's presence is the primary characteristic that Isaiah prophesied both of the King (11:2) and of the Servant (42:1) --

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the
captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are
oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

The “year of the Lord’s favour”, is of course the transformed, new reality that was ushered in by Jesus, one that would only be made possible by his dealing with the problem of sin through his death on the cross, inaugurating the new covenant (59:21), the possibility of a new kind of life, a life that embraces the vibrant tension of the Holy One of Israel, transcendent yet committed to time and place, a life of the Spirit and of the Word.

For the same Spirit that was upon Jesus -- the Holy Spirit of God -- likewise lives in those who cede control of their lives to him, to the Servant King, to the Holy One of Israel. As Isaiah says:

57:15 -- “...thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit...”

And the Spirit is the One, as we heard at the end of ch. 59, who puts God’s words in our mouths, and does not let them depart from us. It is this Spirit enabled regard for God’s Word that naturally accompanies a contrite spirit, as God says at the beginning of Isaiah’s final chapter, “...this is the one to whom I will look; he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.” (66:2)

Throughout these last chapters, Isaiah makes it absolutely clear that people from every nation, not just

Judah, not just Israel, will join themselves to the new covenant with Israel's Servant King (e.g. 56:3-8).

But while sin is dealt with, until we die or God creates new heavens and the new earth that Isaiah tells us about in ch. 65, sin will be with us. Not everyone will bow to the Servant King, to Jesus, not every Jew, and not every Gentile. Isaiah's Recapitulation of the problem of sin in this section makes this clear. The final verse of the whole book makes this all too clear.

What is "the vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah"?

That our biggest problem is sin -- always has been, always will be. But *for* his glory alone, God has stepped in

to time and space: the Holy One of Israel, The Servant King, Christ Alone has made a way for all of us to live *to* God's glory alone by faith alone. If Isaiah's vision is correct, if we can trust Scripture -- and we know that Scripture alone is all we can trust -- by his grace alone he has taken our sin away and given us his Spirit. But not only has he given us a new heart, he will give us a new heaven and a new earth where we will have all eternity with him to be glorified and to glorify him alone.