

Sept. 15, 2019
St. John's College
SOLAS:Vespers
"Hear, O Heavens"
Isaiah 1:2-4

Reading: Isaiah 1

Pictures: Promenade

Clutching your ticket stub, you're sitting with anticipation in the plush surroundings of a darkened theater. There's a hush, then a burst of warm applause as down in the orchestra pit the conductor makes his way to the podium. The curtain stays down, so you close your eyes as the dramatic opening chords of Don Giovanni flood over the audience. An overture doesn't offer much in the way of details, but it does set the tone for

what's about to come, and offers a first glimpse of some the major themes. Thus, it is typically written after all the other music has been completed.

The first chapter of Isaiah functions in much the same way. Quite possibly written after all the other material in the book was compiled, after a lifetime of ministry, this is vintage Isaiah, the utterance of a mature voice. It doesn't so much summarize the rest of the book as broadly hint at what it contains.

Having now heard this chapter read aloud you will likely be struck by the fact that it is by no means light fare. To our ears, Isaiah's God seems awfully severe.

But you may have noticed a couple of bright spots, fleeting moments of hope in

the midst of the gloom and doom. It is important not to miss them. For the moment, they go by so quickly that they're easy to pass over, but as the book progresses these streaks of brilliance will become more and more prominent, increasingly urgent and, in proportionally the same spot as it occurs in this masterful overture, what is known in aesthetic circles as the "golden mean" or "golden section", Isaiah's vision of deliverance will explode from the page in rapturous glory.

Despite the great length of the entire book, I've decided to stay in this first chapter of Isaiah for awhile, even for the first 5 or 6 of our Vespers services this year, because I'd like to use this first chapter to orient us, to familiarize

ourselves with Isaiah's language, some of his common metaphors and thematic preoccupations.

So today, we will be focusing on just 3 or 4 verses from this chapter, the underlined portions from our reading. But don't worry, after these first few sermons, my plan is to pick up the pace.

If you've been to one of these services before, you'll know that I like to break up my preaching into smaller sections by inserting musical selections that I hope will shed light on the text in more tangential ways, and you'll also know that I recently discovered an incredible treasure trove of devotional music in the Genevan Psalter. Tonight I'd like to introduce to you a new Psalm, which I

expect we will sing throughout the year. Our brass quintet will start us off by playing the melody through for us, and then harmonize as we sing the first two stanzas of the Psalm.

Congregational Song: Psalm 50 vv1,2

“Abraham—count the stars. Count the grains of sand.” So we heard early on the voice of God calling. And Abraham and his descendants paid close attention to the patterns of the sky and the world around them. Unlike his contemporaries, however, Abraham didn’t see in the sun, the moon, and stars the primordial gods and monsters of their imagination, mythological beings perpetually reenacting their stories in the sky. Nor did he populate the earth as they did with

lesser divine beings. Rather, he followed the God who led him far from his homely idols, the God who could guide and protect him wherever he would go because he had revealed himself as Lord of all lands. He is the One who “numbers” and “brings out [the stars]...calling them by name” (Is 40:26) having designed each of them personally, all one billion trillion of them! He is the One whom Abraham called “Yahweh, God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth” (Gen 14:22).

Long after Abraham, his God would continue revealing himself through his descendant Isaiah, who described this Yahweh as “the One...who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy” (57:15). That is, wholly, mindbendingly other, the

One who invents time and transcends space, who invents space and transcends time. “Before me”, he says through Isaiah, “no god was formed, nor shall there be any after” (43:10). Again, he declares even more forcefully: “I am the first and I am the last,” and to drive the point home he adds rhetorically, “who is like me? Let him proclaim it...you are my witnesses! Is there a God besides me?...I know not any” (44:6-8).

It is to the words of this God that Isaiah calls all of space and time—“Hear, O Heavens!”—every galaxy, every star, giant and dwarf, every black hole and quasar, every nebula, every planet, everything alien that exists because of his will and follows his unbending, ancient laws—to bear witness. “Give ear, O

earth!” The rightful King of Creation commands the whole world: the birds, the bees, the rivers, the trees, the far off and the very near, the very stuff of our lives, to lend an ear. All these things he created. And when Yahweh speaks, all Creation should stand at attention.

All things owe their existence to him, and yet there is one category in Creation upon which he has bestowed special attention, one class of being upon whom he has set his own likeness.

And, ironically, it is we, the bearers of God’s image, who chronically reject his word. When Yahweh speaks, most of us rarely bother to listen. We are truly the offspring of our first parents, who were tossed from the Garden. We are the

rightful heirs of a broken world. We not only want to be *like* God, we assume that we *are* God. We compulsively distance ourselves from the Giver of Life at the cost of our own.

Despite this, God sought us. His plan? To redeem all humanity through the offspring of that ancient stargazer Abraham, offspring he called Israel, upon whom God “set his heart” (Deut 10:15), through whom he would call us all back to himself.

Thus the Holy One, the wholly other, perfect, unchanging unchangeable Creator of an impossibly vast universe, made himself the Holy One of Israel: the One who inhabits eternity attaching himself to a disappointing, finite man,

promising that this nobody would become a great nation (Gen 12:2); promising that this person would become a people, even his most treasured possession (Ex 19:6); promising that this dried up seed would fill the whole earth with fruit (Is 27:6; Gen 22:18).

Despite the sublime artistry that characterizes all of Creation, it is Israel that the Creator calls his first-born (Ex 4:22). These are his very own children.

Pictures: Tuileries

If you’ve had a child, you probably remember that burst of intense feeling when you first held her, the unutterable wonder of her perfection. At the same time there was the exquisite pain of

possibility, the searing hope for his bright future.

That same poignant aspiration characterizes God's longing for his people. In addition to the metaphorical notion of Israel as God's "first born", the Bible repeatedly gives us another image of child-rearing: that of adoption. God regards his people as foundlings, abandoned infants he discovers, and rescues, and raises as his own. In this touching passage from Deut 32 Moses recounts God's dealings with Israel: "He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching

them, bearing them on its pinions, the LORD (Yahweh) alone guided him...He made him ride on the high places of the land, and he ate the produce of the field, and he suckled him with honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock."

This is the image of loving care and provision that God is getting at as he presents his case to his cosmic assembly of witnesses. "Children I have reared and brought up..." He has saved this people, fostered them, adopted them as his own. He has elevated them, taught them how to live, given them an identity.

And how have they repaid his kindness? "...they have rebelled against me..."

The end of the passage spells it out even more vividly: they, like all of us, have not

only rebelled, they have not only deliberately separated themselves from him—the word translated “forsaken” is the same as that used of divorce—they “despise”—they scorn, they spit on—the very transcendent One who stooped so low in order to give them life and purpose.

They are “utterly estranged”, Isaiah concludes. And this estrangement was initiated entirely on their side: one commentary renders the Hebrew as literally Israel’s having “be-stranged themselves backwards”!

We all know something of what such a rejection feels like, don’t we? When you just give and give, and find you’ve been taken advantage of? It is like a punch in

the stomach. You feel betrayed, used, so...stupid...

At the heart of our passage is a little word that is difficult to translate: “Ho!” is this word in Hebrew. “Ah!” it says in the ESV, which is good in that it communicates the idea of a guttural cry. But the full sense of the word is more like our old English: “Alas!” But it is a cry, not a sigh. “Ho!” It is a cry of sadness, of woe, of personal pain, but also of resolve. “Ho!” We see it later in the chapter when God determines: “Ho! I will get relief from my enemies”, knowing that to do so means turning his hand against his beloved.

“HO!” It is the expression of the broken heart of the father. “HO!” It is the heart’s cry of the battered wife. “HO!” How did it

get to this? “HO!” I have been betrayed!
“HO! Sinful nation! A people laden with
iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children
who deal corruptly! “HO!”

...

God asks: “What more could I have
done...that I have not already done?”
(5:4, NLT)

Pictures: Bydlo

In the ancient world, oxen, like the one
illustrated in that last piece were
regarded as the most slow-witted
members of the animal kingdom.
Donkeys too. God throws down a vivid
illustration of how perplexing and
outrageous Israel’s behaviour was to him:
“The ox isn’t so stupid that it doesn’t
recognize its owner. The stubborn donkey

at least knows it’s master’s crib, the
manger where it will find its next meal.
But this people, my people, who owe me
their very lives: whom I rescued from
slavery, whom I have dignified and taught
to be distinct, to whom I have given a
homeland, for whom I have raised up
generation after generation of leaders—
judges and kings, priests and prophets—
to shepherd them and reveal myself to
them, Israel—my first born—won’t even
make eye contact with me!”

The *nation* to whom God promised
greatness had chosen the path of
degeneracy, the *people* who were his
treasured possession had become
worthless, the *offspring* of Abraham
preferring to identify with Adam and with
Eve, deceived, the beautiful *children* who

held so much promise devoured the fruit that was rotten to the core.

How terrible is the cost of our rebellion: we break; we die; we watch our loved ones suffer. Injury. Cancer. Mental illness. Greed. Destruction. Poverty. War. The heavens frown. The earth groans.

And yet...this is not the end of the story. In this first chapter of Isaiah the sense of estrangement and of God's righteous indignation rarely relents, but at its centre we find a promise of reconciliation, so unexpected it almost seems out of place. Even as God's people distance themselves, even as they experience the consequences of forsaking him, he continues to call them. "Come

now, let us reason together,' says the LORD" (v18).

How could this be possible? If you've ever experienced betrayal, the pain of rejection, the idea of turning and extending a warm invitation to the very one who stabbed you in the back seems inconceivable. Yet this is the offer that Isaiah—"the mouth of the LORD," as he calls himself—records.

But how?

"Children I have reared and brought up", God says. But one has *not* rebelled. Isaiah whispers of this one: "to us a child is born" (9:6). But we are all rotten, the issue of evil. Yet there is one who is the true seed of Abraham (the whispers grow to a murmur), the "shoot from the stump

of Jesse” (11:1) who “grew up...like a young plant, like a root out of dry ground...” (53:1) And though all are weighed down with guilt (the murmurs grow into a proclamation) “the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (53:6).

It’s fitting that the universe’s Owner was oiled by oxen upon arrival; the Master laid in the dumbfounded donkeys’ crib. The One “through whom all things were made” John’s Gospel tells us (1:3)—God himself, Yahweh in human form, Jesus the Messiah, the Root of Jesse (Is 11:10), the Seed of Abraham, the Son of Man—would finally “come to his own” (John 1:11). They would still rebel against him, forsake him, despise him, just like the rest of us from time immemorial. But “God has consigned all to disobedience, that he

may have mercy on all” (Rom 11:32). He would live a perfect life. He would die, bearing the weight of our sins. Bearing our sins away from us.

And he would rise, this true child of Abraham, to bless every nation. He would rise to make all who receive him “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession...” He would rise to call us “out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Pet 2:9).

He would rise, bidding us “Come.” “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters...incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live...” Isaiah records him saying (55:1,3) amidst the raucous celebration of redemption by all

of Creation, after foreseeing the Messiah's atoning death in ch. 53.

...

"Come now, let us reason together." This is the invitation at the heart of the chapter, at the heart of the book of Isaiah, at the heart of the whole Bible, at the very heart of God. He has always been determined to rescue us from the wilderness of our sin and rebellion. He has always been determined to elevate us, to adopt us as his own. He simply bids us to turn and come.

"*Come now*, let us reason together". This is not like a command to your dog: "COME!" Nor is it designed to provoke terror. It is soft, gentle: "come now". It is

the father's warm-hearted invitation to his child, the close friend's tender rebuke.

"Come now, let us *reason together*". God calls us to raise us up, offering a thought that is as staggering as it is dignifying: the Maker of our very minds wants to hear what is going on inside of them!

"Come now, let *us* reason *together*". This grace is mind-boggling. The Holy One promises to engage! The Holy One of Israel has designs to be the Holy One of me, and the Holy One of you.

Through Isaiah, God called an ancient king before he was born, before he had ears to hear him or a mind to know him. He called him by name. He said to Cyrus: "I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me...I am

Yahweh, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west that there is none beside me; I am Yahweh, and there is no other.” (45:4-6)

Through Isaiah, God is calling you. He has been calling since before you were born, since before you had ears to hear him, and a mind to know him. After he addresses Cyrus, God goes on: “I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, ‘Seek me in vain’...Assemble yourselves and come; draw near together, you survivors of the nations...turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth...” (45:20,22)

Still your doubts. Don’t be those who reject Isaiah—who reject Jesus—because he offers far more than you think he has a right to. He is calling you!

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz: “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near, let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” (Is 55:6-7)

“Hear, O heavens. Give ear, O earth.”

(That includes you!) “For Yahweh is speaking!” Don’t miss this. The Holy One who is a universe away yet nearer than your own breath is calling you. Jesus is calling you. By name. “All that the Father

gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (John 6:37).

Don't forsake him.

Don't despise him.

“...to all who did receive him he gave the right to become children of God.” (John 1:12)

Pictures: Great Gate of Kiev