

The 3 Isaiahs: Heart of Prophecy
Isaiah 6:1-8; 49:14-15; 61:1-2a; 65:1
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In my 19 years as a service technician at a John Deere dealership I saw quite a few young service technicians begin their first full-time job right out of tech school. Their 2 years of classroom and lab training and even the internship there at the dealership where they served as an apprentice with another experienced tech was good and necessary preparation. It was so good that the demeanor of some after they graduated and started into their first full-time job seemed to indicate they thought now that they had the formal training complete—doing the actual job was going to be a breeze!

However, things like getting parts ordered correctly and in a timely fashion, keeping track of their tools, digital entry on repair orders caught up, and keeping their workspace clean and organized enough to be efficient in a job where you set your own pace—and your paycheck reflects that pace—was often quite a steep and frustrating learning curve.

Additionally, there was somewhat of an overall gap between the proper way and best practices were presented in class vs. what was actually being done more quickly—not necessarily safer, but quicker at the local dealership level by more experienced techs. The more experienced techs knew the importance of being taught the proper way to do things, before you learn the, well, more abbreviated version. There are lots of little tricks that only come with time and experience.

I think maybe this is somewhat of a universal phenomenon. I once heard someone describe their first year of work at their first job as a journalist after finishing college with a journalism degree. They had all this training, and idealism. And then they went to work for a small town newspaper, and pretty much had to set their training aside or up on a shelf in order to be able to find their way in their new career. I have heard teachers describe something like this in their first year of teaching. You perhaps have had your own experience of this in your life.

Regardless of whether we received much formal education or not, we tend to start out our lives with clear answers for things, confidence in what we've been taught and we know, or confidence we know where to find answers. You put the correct change into the pop machine, and hit the right selection, and you expect the desired result to roll on out just the way things are supposed to work. $1+1=2$

And that's how things start out for our prophet of the week, Isaiah. But first, a bit about this 3 Isaiah thing..

Biblical scholars agree that the book of Isaiah is not the work of just one writer, but of at least 3. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah that includes the prophet's call and inauguration to ministry in the time before exile is all the work of what we might call the main historical prophet, Isaiah.

The second writer, who Bible scholars have named II Isaiah and who writes chapters 40-55, gives witness to people in exile in Babylon. In contrast to the first 39 chapters, the tone is so comforting, reassuring, nurturing and mothering that some have suggested II Isaiah may have been written by a woman but attributed to Isaiah. When you read these 15 chapters in the middle that are so *different* in tone from the others this does not seem like a stretch.

And in III Isaiah, 56-66, the people have returned from exile, yet are overwhelmed with the rebuilding of the temple. Severe economic hardship tempts them to worship other gods.

Does it matter if Isaiah is written by 3 writers or by 1? On the one hand, no. But on the other hand, making historical-critical distinctions of the different writers and the period in which they lived, and people they were writing to—is so very important! It reminds us that real people, in real situations, wrote the Bible. The words didn't just drop out of the sky and onto the page. If we just read words on the page as if they are hanging in mid-air and try to take them straight up literally without regard to the context we can make Scripture say whatever we want! And that's how people have quoted the Bible as justification for slavery, justification for war, over-the-top private accumulation of wealth, patriarchy, polygamy, or even genocide. When we consider that real people inspired by God in real contexts wrote this stuff down, then we are able to read and see beyond our own bubble, we can instead then let the Bible read us—rather than the other way around.

Well, back to the early chapters of Isaiah. The young Isaiah is primarily given a vision of a simple world of doom and reward, where people do bad and they are punished. They do good and they are rewarded. This is how all the prophets seem to start out. He IS given a glimpse of the hopeful kingdom of God where wars cease and swords are beaten into plowshares, but only a passing glimpse.

Isaiah's call and inaugural vision in chapter 6, his graduation if you will, is profound and awe inspiring. He is given a vision of the throne room of God... Holy, Holy, Holy, or we might say, Awesome, awesome, awesome. What Isaiah sees is so beyond ordinary human experience that he doesn't know whether to run away or stay put and poor Isaiah is shaking in his boots!

This incredible sense of divine transcendence, while necessary for Isaiah's preparation for his vocation as a prophet, and for us as we develop our understanding of a God or a Higher Power, is necessary. We need to develop a sense of God's majesty and power and Holy otherness (Karl Barth). The only problem is, it leaves the gap so huge between us humans and God that it's hard to overcome. "Left to itself," Richard Rohr says, "it often creates a religion of purity and impurity..."

Even though Isaiah is humbled and seemingly purged of his ego, (woe is me, I'm doomed!) he still has a lot of angry judgement to pronounce against enemies inside and outside of Israel before he can begin to experience a heartfelt sadness for the people of Israel and the whole world in chapter 24, and to eventually get to freedom of praise in chapter 33.

It's like Isaiah gets the full quantum packet of awesomeness in his original calling and vision at the beginning of his prophetic ministry, but now it will take him the rest of his life to unpack what that means in real life. Isn't that how things go for us? We catch a glimpse of the peaceable kingdom, or a vision of how we will make the world a better place in ways that fit our personality and interests and we sell everything to buy that treasure, yet, there is so much learning yet to be done in the laboratory of life.

And our spiritual development goes right along with this. We enter life and adulthood full of ideas and ideals of how things should work. Our ideas of

parenting, before we actually HAVE kids, is like this, right? Or marriage. We get married thinking we have this marriage thing all figured out, just like our parents did (at least for those of us who had the privilege of growing up thinking our parents had a relatively good relationship). And when it comes to faith in Jesus, we think we more or less know these things. Like the Jewish people of Isaiah's time, we have our temple rituals with clear instructions. We've got our ticket to heaven. This is our starting point of our journey of life and of faith. And many of us may spend the largest portion of our lives here. In a relatively orderly world. $1+1=2$.

But throughout this series, Pastor Lois and I have been pointing out the pattern of order, disorder, and reorder that Richard Rohr notices in the prophets as they grow and develop throughout their writings. We can observe these same movements in our own lives.

We start out with lots of answers and ideals. But for many of us, exile happens. The textbook learning ideals don't work in your career like you imagined. The good die young. Marriages sometimes end. The righteous suffer (think Job). Kids don't respond to our parenting or turn out like we'd imagined. A leader we once admired turns out to be a phony. Sudden illnesses happen, our once strong bodies let us down. Suffering, the great wrecking ball of order, slams us or people dear to us. The simple world where the good are rewarded and the bad are punished starts to crack. Things we hung our hats on no longer make sense as they did before. The container that once held our faith is not big enough anymore. This is a time of deconstruction, or disorder, or exile. It may feel like we are losing our faith. The Scripture passages and Bible stories that once inspired us may no longer move us like they had before. Exile. It can feel like God has abandoned us. Oh, but hear these words of comfort from the second writer of Isaiah 49:14-15...or in 40:27-31.

Here in exile, we may slowly begin to notice something. Our hearts have not been withered away, but are expanded and are now bigger than our understandings or our theology. We hear the words of 42:1-4 in what's considered a foreshadowing of the coming Christ (and this is one of MANY such foreshadowings—Handel's Messiah is chock-full of Isaiah's beautiful depictions of the coming of this new order of peace and comfort through Jesus).

This is the beginning of reorder. In a time of re-order or reconstruction, We still have ways of understanding things, but not in a rigid sort of way. Vernon Arnigan wrote once “Belief in God is more life falling in love that it is proving something”.

The container of our beliefs and convictions is much larger, and much more expandable and expansive. We are humble about what we think we understand. We are less critical of others, and ourselves, and it’s no longer so important to us that people are punished for their wrongs. We no longer demand people deserve the good they get. In its place are *tears for the brokenness of all of humanity*--and maybe even the universe. We begin to understand love, mercy, grace--the heart of God. We no longer need God to be a God of vengeance.

And now, like Isaiah 61:1-4, we can proclaim with Jesus, and with Jesus as our model and inspiration, proclaim good news to the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim release to the captives, and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

Notice that this is the passage Jesus first quotes at the beginning of his prophetic ministry. But he stops abruptly after “the year of the Lord’s favor”. He stops before the next line “..and a day of vindication from the Lord” Jesus rolls up the scroll hands it to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. All eyes are on him as he sits there in silence. And then he says “Today this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it” Clearly Jesus mic drop moment. Boom!

What? No vengeance? No slaying of our enemies? No God who demands blood sacrifice?

Can God really be this merciful? Can He? Can she? Can we?

Where would you place yourself in this journey of order, disorder, and reorder?

- Does your faith and life more or less make sense and add up for you?
That’s ok.
- Have you been knocked off your feet and drug off in exile, in a strange land where things you once found inspirational no longer inspire you in the same way? When you try to add 2+2 you get 5, or 6.
- Are you finding yourself on the far side of exile, with a heart that has a new roominess or spaciousness for the tears of things.

Where would you place yourself? There isn't a wrong place to be. With the spiritual life, there is just where we are. But I think it is helpful to think about this pattern, and can give movement and new energy to us and new vitality as we recognize this inner landscape.

If you aren't sure I would encourage you to talk to a trusted friend who won't freak out if you express doubts about faith to them. Or Pastor Lois and I would love to talk with you one on one over a cup of coffee or some rainy day when you happen to stop by the office. Or drop us a note in an email or a prayer note in the bowl.

I think its important to note this pattern of spiritual development over time is not linear. We may circle back often. Like the stages of grief there is a progression through identifiable stages toward acceptance, but at any stage in the process we may find ourselves right back at the beginning stage, (denial, anger, bargaining) of experiencing the effects of each stage all at once. Even while the whole process is moving gradually toward acceptance.

This I think is true of this spiritual pattern of order, disorder, and reorder. We may find ourselves on the far side of an exile like time of disorder, our anger now replaced more by sadness and tears for the overall pain of the world. And then someone cuts you off in traffic, and you catch yourself hoping they crash or that they at least get a ticket for speeding and driving erratically. Or you find yourself loathing a political leader or party, and find yourself drawn to social media posts that promise annihilation of that person's career. Or vengeance toward a political party that elected or reelected them. "We'll make them pay for what they've done!" We're right back in that world of order, winners and losers, desire for vengeance.

Ah, but when the Holy Spirit finds us, and we again find the tears of things and new energy to love, to speak into the brokenness all around us without being overwhelmed with the disorder. And we can follow the steps of Jesus and spread love and mercy and kindness, and slowly make the world a better place for all of its inhabitants. Amen?