

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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John Crosby
Isaiah
Isaiah 6, 40**

We don't realize that much of the great art and literature of our day comes from the books that we call the prophets. We usually just think of the prophets as the angry ones, but there is great beauty and hope in their writings and we ought to ferret that out as well. The reality, though, is that the primary role of the prophets is to say, "Before God can speak words of good news to you, you have to hear the real news, the bad news." The reason we need to preach on justice, the reason the prophets sound disturbed, the reason we need to submit ourselves to the discipline of regularly sitting under their words is because it really is *false* news, not *good* news, if you don't hear the *real* news. There is a lot of false news out there, a lot of preachers who are saying, "Oh, trust me. It's really good. It is all going to be good."

Laura and I were at a parade yesterday and we saw a church that had a slogan posted that said *Less guilt, more joy*. I like the thought if it's rooted in reality, but it reminded me of the prophet Micah. Micah looks and says, "There are all kinds of prophets around the scene these days. How do you tell the good ones from the bad?" He says it this way.

¹¹ If a liar and deceiver comes and says,
'I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,'
that would be just the prophet for this people! [Micah 2:11]

That's the kind of prophet we want, right? Plenty of wine and beer for you. It sounds like a commercial. Preaching that tastes great and is less filling. Those are the words we *want* to hear but it is not what we *need* to hear. We read the prophets, stumble through them sometimes, and we ask, "Why are they so angry? Even if it's true, this feels exaggerated. I mean, I know there is violence in the world. Certainly that's not connected to my anger or my self-centeredness or my lack of love. I mean, cheating goes on every day but that's just the way the world works. Everybody shades the truth a little for profit." A few miles away from any church on Planet Earth, there are children growing up in poverty, many of them without education, medicine or hope. "So what if in ancient Israel, they got that wrong? We have all these social programs. Why do you have to go off the deep end? The prophets act like the world is falling apart."

Maybe we ought to stop there for a second. "The prophets act like the world is falling apart." Is it? We tend to avoid preaching from the prophets in *all* churches. We tend to avoid it because we really don't want to know the truth about what sin does to our world and what sin is doing to us because that would make people who give offerings at church feel uncomfortable. We don't want that. God knows, we don't want the offering to go down. It's like that great scene in the movie *A Few Good Men*. Remember that? Tom Cruise and the wicked Jack Nicholson, "You want the truth?" "I want the truth." "You can't handle the truth!" That's the prophets. We can't

handle the truth and we can't handle the truth in part because we have been fed false news so long that when we hear the real news, it sounds odd. To paraphrase the great rabbi scholar Abraham Heschel: Our inability to sense the depth of misery happens in part because of our incapacity to sense our own failures. That is a simple fact of fallen humanity that no explanation can cover up and it hurts to hear that. That's the role of the prophets. Nobody wants to apply for the job.

The most famous of all the prophets is Isaiah. We are going to give two weeks to Isaiah. As you leave today, you can get your baseball cards of the prophets out on the round table. If you haven't picked them up yet, they are a short summary of each of the prophets, including Isaiah. Isaiah is the most famous of the prophets for a lot of reasons. He is a poet. [Slide shown of Isaiah on top of the Sistine Chapel with Michelangelo.] His language and his images created much of western culture in ways we don't even know. But who wrote the book Isaiah? Well, most of the prophetic books are named after the person whose life is portrayed. Often the prophets themselves write as well as go through it, but this is written *about* the prophet Isaiah. He was married to another prophet, a woman prophet. They have at least two sons. It's likely Isaiah lives in Jerusalem, the capitol, because much of the book focuses on the city and he has interactions personally with at least two of the kings. He has a long life. He prophesizes under the reign of four different kings, Uzziah, Jotham, wicked Ahaz, and good Hezekiah. Frankly, the fifth king he prophesized under probably killed him, King Manasseh.

Last week you heard Dee McIntosh talking about how there is first Isaiah and second Isaiah and third Isaiah. What that really means is that there are 66 chapters: chapters 1 through 39 sound like Harry and chapters 40 through 55 sound like Sally, and chapters 56 through 66 sound like another voice altogether. There are three different voices and that may be what actually happened. One is the prophet himself. The second is the school of prophets, that is, the student prophets who gathered around Isaiah, and the third are people who write, "Then I heard Isaiah say this." What I want to make sure is that that is perfectly understandable to you but what is not happening here is that somebody has waited until long after all the events Isaiah is talking about take place and saying, "Isaiah prophesized this would happen" and it's already happened. Almost certainly, Isaiah spoke about things before they came to pass and that's why he was killed.

In the Christian tradition, starting at about second century AD, Isaiah is seen as one of the heroes of the faith you read about in Hebrews 11. Remember, they talk about all the great people of the faith. Isaiah is the one who is killed and it says "and some were sawed in two for their faith." That's Isaiah. He will tell the truth even when it's not popular. It's not popular. He speaks to the southern part of Israel called Judah after their civil war. The southern part has a great century. They have a century of prosperity and growth and peace and in that period of good times, long before war and after the recession, in that period of great times, they build massive churches. Everybody is very religious. They go to church and then during the rest of the week, they live like hell. They do whatever they want, but they go to church so it's covered. Isaiah is saying, "You can't do that. You can't say, 'I love God on Saturday,' remember they worshipped on Saturday, and then the next day, go out and ruin the lives of the poor." He says, "Turn around or bad things will happen." They don't turn around and bad things happened.

I don't know what you think about when you think about Isaiah, but my picture of this prophet was formed over 30 years ago, shortly after I became a follower of God and it was not from

reading the prophet. It was from watching a movie. You might remember the movie. It won an Academy Award, sort of unexpectedly. The person who is speaking is the hero of the movie, a runner who is also a pastor.

[*Chariots of Fire* video clip.]

My text this afternoon is taken from Isaiah, chapter 40.

¹⁵ Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: ¹⁷ All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity.

²³ That bringeth the princes to nothing; he maketh the judges of the earth as vanity.

²⁸ Hast thou not known? Hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? ²⁹ He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength.

³¹ But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.

I was a young man. It was a great reminder that our strength is nothing compared with what lies before us. I loved it. I think that was what I learned about Isaiah or else it was learning to say eye-ZI-ah. I loved that, too. Did you see that guy's pulpit? Can we build one of those pulpits for here? I'd love that, too. But to understand Isaiah and where he ends up there in chapter 40, you have to understand the beginning of the prophet. In some ways, the Book of Isaiah really begins in chapter 6. Listen to the Word of God.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³ And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. ⁵ “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.” ⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” ⁸ 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!”

The prophet is understood as a person who sees God and then everything changes. Once the

prophets see God, they never see the world the same. That actually is the theme of Isaiah. Isaiah sees God and then comes away and says, “Oh, trust me. It’s a lot worse than you think but in the end, it will be a lot better than you can possibly imagine.” And it’s filled with judgment, not because God is angry, but because Isaiah has seen who God really is. We talk about God all the time. What happens when we talk about God all the time is that you start to believe that God is sort of a Mr. Rogers on steroids, a really nice guy. I read Isaiah and Isaiah says, “I saw the Lord” and he says, “Oh, I’m ruined” because he has seen the real thing.

Brothers and sisters, God is not your copilot. Jesus is not your homeboy. There is a God who is holy and the prophets see life through the images of a holy God. It’s like God’s character shows what real life is about. Imagine this. You’re here in church and they start to sing and somebody near you is singing very loud and terribly off-key. The person sounds awful. Now if you have a tin ear, you’re not musically sensitive, you don’t care all that much and, frankly, if the kid singing loud and bad is your grandchild, you go, “Isn’t that cute!” But what if you have perfect pitch? What if you are Heather Hood or Rich Larson and this person next to you is just terrible and loud, it’s different. You know what it could be. You know what it should be. You know what it’s supposed to be. You know how bad it is and it’s painful to you. You look at this tin-eared grandma and you wonder, how can she stand to listen to this? Why doesn’t she just shoot him?

It’s that for God. God has pitch-perfect character. On a scale of 1 to 10, what is the pitch, what is the character of God? How **compassionate** is God, a 1 or a 10? In terms of God’s compassion, this is what Isaiah says.

¹⁶ See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands [Isaiah 49:16].

“I’ve carved your name on the palms of my hands. That’s how much you mean to Me.” One to 10, what is God’s **commitment to justice**?

¹⁷ Learn to do right; seek justice.
Defend the oppressed.
Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow [Isaiah 1:17].

One to 10, how much does God **care about the poor**?

⁶ “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? [Isaiah 58:6-7]

One to 10, what is the character of God, His pitch, when we talk about **love**?

¹⁰ Though the mountains be shaken
and the hills be removed,
yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken
nor my covenant of peace be removed,”
says the LORD, who has compassion on you [Isaiah 54:10].

By the time you get through testing God's pitch, His character, all of us are saying, "Okay, okay. I've got bad thinking. Uncle. But our concern for justice must start with and flow out of the character of God rather than any fashionable, merely human agenda. A lot of us are social prophets. We are angry about justice mostly because it disagrees with our politics. Any concern for justice must start with the character of God. The prophet sees God and is never the same. They are humble. They know that they are a person of unclean lips and they see the path of sin. "I live among a people of unclean lips." They never get desensitized to injustice. Sometimes you have to make justice and injustice concrete. You have to see it. In a setting where many of us are pretty well off, we have to remind ourselves how much injustice stings in our lives, like Dave Hagler.

Hagler lives out in Boulder, Colorado and in the summers, he is an umpire for a softball league. But in the winter one day, he is driving along and going a little too fast. He is literally going to the hospital and a policeman pulls him over and says, "You're speeding." He says, "I know but I've got a good reason. Please let me go." Over and over he begs the policeman but the policeman won't listen and writes him a ticket. He says, "Oh, come on, give me a break here, will you?" The policeman says, "Look, if you've got a problem with it, go to court." Well, the first game of the season, Hagler is the umpire behind the plate and the very first batter to come up is that same police officer. Yeah, you love this, right? They recognize each other. The officer takes a practice swing and says, "So how did that thing with the ticket go?" Hagler, the umpire, looks at him and says, "You better swing at everything."

The human condition is to strike back when we have been struck. We hate it when somebody treats us unfairly whether it is at home or at work or in our neighborhood. The call of Jesus, the call of the prophets, is to get as passionate about somebody else being the victim as you are when you are the one who is getting hurt. The prophets get especially concerned about injustice to those you might be inclined to overlook because everybody else overlooks them too. So what's the big idea in Isaiah? Isaiah's theme is very simple. It's in chapter 12. It says,

² "Behold, God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid;
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation."

We have a wonderful little Christmas song here from Isaiah called *The First Song of Isaiah*. It says,

Surely, it is God who saves me;
I will trust and not be afraid.
For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense,
And God will be my Savior.

Isaiah chapter 12 is where this comes from. That's what Isaiah's name literally means, salvation of God. So if it's about salvation, why all this talk about judgment? Why all the bad news? Well, judgment indicates the need to be saved. You guys are doing pretty well. You don't really feel like you need to be saved but remember, before the Bible can be good news, it has to tell us the bad news. The bulk of the early part of Isaiah contains judgments against religious people, who've turned their backs on the Lord, who should know better, showing that those who persist in rebellion receive judgment. You could almost say, "And then I saw a group of Presbyterians. They build churches. They come to church and sing the songs and come out and walk right by the poor." How do you apply what is 2,700 years old? What's Isaiah saying to you today?

First, I think Isaiah contains one of the clearest expressions of the Gospel. Remember Gospel comes from *god-spell*, God talk, good news. Isaiah shows that better than anywhere else in the Old Testament. Right from the first, people have turned from God, failed to act like His children, and hurt His other children. But God holds out hope. Even to hard-hearted people, even to half-hearted Presbyterians. He says, "I will not make you better people. I will cleanse your sin and I will give you blessings that give you strength to try again. Salvation lies only in God." The only question Isaiah has is whether or not we will accept God's offer. Have you experienced that lately? Have you felt like a person of unclean lips or are you feeling pretty good? "Woe is me!" says Isaiah. "I am a man of unclean lips and I live with others just as needy of God's mercy."

For Isaiah, the chief sins of God's people were first that they dealt with others unjustly, and then secondly, they tried to cover it up with religion. They offered God talk without changing their lives. Do you see anything in your life that might sound like that? The way you treat your family or your colleagues? Do you ever walk by strangers with disdain or treat another's political views with contempt? Isaiah's message calls people to come back, to see God, and to live out our love for our neighbors.

The second application that I encourage you to think about when you read Isaiah is that it provides the most comprehensive picture of Jesus in the Old Testament. The end of Isaiah, chapters 40 to 66, is all about grace and grace is not a concept. Grace is a person. As New Testament writers looked at Isaiah, they saw more than Isaiah even knew. See if you remember any of these verses from Christmas season?

The announcement of the Savior's coming:

³ A voice of one calling:
"In the wilderness prepare
the way for the LORD;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God [Isaiah 40:3].

Or the birth of the Savior? You might recognize this.

⁶ For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace [Isaiah 9:6].

How about the Savior's mission? Isaiah talks about it and Jesus uses it for His very first sermon.

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners . . . [Isaiah 61:1 and Jesus in Luke 4:18]

How about the Savior's sacrificial death? Isaiah says, "Thousands of years from now, one will come and His death will change your life."

⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all [Isaiah 53:6].

And Jesus says, "I am the one."

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep [John 10:11].

And then Isaiah says, "It's not over when it's over. After you've laid the iniquity on Him, after you've killed Him, He will return."

"Arise, shine!
For your light has come;
the glory of the LORD has risen upon you [Isaiah 60:1].

Jesus said,

¹² . . . "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life [John 8:12]."

Isaiah is a prophet of hope and one who comes to save people, even to save people from themselves, maybe even save you from yourself. It's on a cross that we most clearly see God's hatred of injustice. It's at an empty tomb that we most loudly proclaim God's victory. How do you remember all that, all that stuff about Isaiah? Well, Isaiah says,

⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God endures forever." [Isaiah 40:8]

The word of the Lord endures in your life forever only if it comes home from your head to your heart. The very first mission trip I ever did with my wife was to Haiti. I went on a little scouting trip in advance because we were going to take high school kids. [Slide shown.] This is a tiny island right off the coast of Haiti called La Gonâve. The name means cheese, block of cheese. You can see it from Port-au-Prince. You sail out to it or you fly in. It is filled with the poorest

people in the western hemisphere. The children get water out of bat caves that you would not use to water your lawn. You see that and you walk around the island and then you come to a little cinder block building. It's a clinic run by nuns.

When the nuns first came to La Gonâve, the only people taking care of the sick children were the witch doctors in the hills. And so the nuns had to start to say, "No, there's just one God, our God, and God offers us medicine to help you get better." The people started to pour in out of the hills. They started to train nurses. Our guide took us on a tour of this little cinder block place and they were all so proud. It was like 1920s medicine, but they had started to change dressings and they had started to change sheets. They were ratty old sheets, but they were clean. We were walking from room to room and we got to one room where everybody else was busy and they wanted to change the sheets. So they asked me if I would pick up the little boy and hold him while they changed his bed. His name was John. John looked like he was about three, but he was almost eight. He had come in too late they thought. He had huge sores on his legs and his arms that he would scratch down to the skin. Because they couldn't afford to give him clean bandages all the time, they wrapped him in bandages and then wrapped the bandages in newspaper.

So I'm holding this little boy wrapped with newspaper and I look down at him and he's got my name. It felt like I held him for a half-hour, but it was probably three or four minutes. His little body just soaked into mine. When I put him back down on the bed, I look and I've got newsprint ink all over my hands. Well, I'm a guy and soon I've got newsprint ink all over my hands and all over my trousers and there's no place to wash. We go off and an hour or two later at lunch, the ink has settled deep into my hands and I cannot scrub it off. Ten days, two weeks later, you can still see the cartoons. Every time I opened my hands and looked down, I saw little John and I remembered the nurse saying, "He probably will not make it through the day." People would say, "Dude, your hands! When is it going to come off?" And I would say, "I hope it never comes off." It's 39 years later and I can still see this little kid on my hands. That's how God thinks about you and the reason I know that is this prophet Isaiah says in chapter 49, "Why do the people of God say, 'God has forgotten me?'"

¹⁵ "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?"

Even if a mother forgets the baby suckling at her breast,

Though she may forget,
I will not forget you!

God says,

¹⁶ See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are ever before me [Isaiah 49:15-16].

And as an exclamation point, "I've put nails through those hands. I will never forget you." When Isaiah looked up and saw God, he said, "Woe is me!" And then God looked down at His hands and saw you and He saw Isaiah.

Lord God, I pray that this was a different kind of sermon. I pray that this old prophet Isaiah would come alive and that he would afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted and most of all, that we would see the living God. Not Mr. Rogers on steroids, not Jesus as a homeboy but the real God who has our names carved in blood on His hands. In that love, we ask for grace. Amen.

Attribution: Many of the themes in this sermon are from Chuck Colson's ministry BreakPoint and John Ortberg's article Preaching Like a Prophet from *Leadership Journal*, a *Christianity Today* brand. *Soli Deo gloria*.