

“Harbingers & Hope”

Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44 ¹

Good morning! You gather for worship this morning during tumultuous political times in your nation and in frightening times in the world beyond your shores. I've come to visit you to remind you of some things that may help to put this fear and tumult in a larger perspective.

My name is Isaiah. I was God's prophet in Jerusalem from 740-681 B.C., warning my people of God's impending judgment and calling them back to God in repentance. The days in which I lived were challenging days—similar in some ways to your own time.

Our two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, enjoyed peace and prosperity, but there was much wickedness in the land, and God had been warning my people of coming judgment for a long time. I had already been preaching for eighteen years when God's judgment fell on Israel in the year 722. Our ten northern tribes were conquered and deported by the army of the Assyrian Empire, and they've been lost to history ever since.

The southern kingdom of Judah would be destroyed in a similar way in 587, nearly a hundred years after my death. When thinking about that destruction, it's important to realize that God warned my people of impending judgment upon their sin for almost two hundred years before that judgment finally came. God gave many, many warnings, nearly every one of which was ignored. But I'm anticipating the story. Let me go back to the beginning.

God called me into His service in 740 B.C., the same year that King Uzziah died. Uzziah had been our king for over *fifty* years. I know that's hard for you to imagine, as often as you change leaders today, but there may still be some among you who can remember the last of the years that Franklin Roosevelt was your President. Multiply that sense of stability by more than three times, and you get a sense of how disturbing it was for our King to die!

The King was dead, the nation was in turmoil, and I was praying alone in the Temple when I first saw the Lord. *He was sitting on a lofty throne, and the train of his robe filled the Temple. Hovering around him were mighty seraphim, each with six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with the remaining two they flew. In a great chorus they sang, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty! The whole earth is filled with his glory!”*

The glorious singing shook the Temple to its foundations, and the entire sanctuary was filled with smoke. Then I said, “My destruction is sealed, for I am a sinful man and a member of a sinful race. Yet I have seen the King, the LORD Almighty!”

*Then one of the seraphim flew over to the altar, and he picked up a burning coal with a pair of tongs. He touched my lips with it and said, “See, this coal has touched your lips. Now your guilt is removed and your sins are forgiven.” Then I heard the Lord asking, “Whom should I send as a messenger to my people? Who will go for us?” And I said, “**Lord, I'll go! Send me**” (Isaiah 6:1-8). ²*

Well, that awesome moment marked the beginning of a truly amazing journey. God revealed His messages to me in visions, which I recorded in a book called *The Vision of the Prophet Isaiah, Son of Amoz*. My book was included in *The Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel*, and you still have it in your Bible today. Today my book is simply called *Isaiah*.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 17, 2016.

² All Scripture is from the *New Living Translation* (NLT; Tyndale, 1996).

The messages God sent to my people through me *for the next fifty-nine years* were, for the most part, stern warnings of impending judgment, and people didn't like to hear them. I didn't enjoy delivering those messages, either. Pleasant or not, though, every one of us must give account of our lives to God, and nations must do this, too. I lived in a time when judgment was approaching quickly, and it might be that you live in such times as well.

Even though God does deliver judgment where judgment is due, God's judgment always carries a message of Hope within it. When God evicted Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, God also gave the hint of a promise of restoration in the distant future (Genesis 3:15). It was so with the prophecies God delivered through me as well. Like the seed the farmer saves from this year's harvest for next year's planting, God's judgment always preserves a righteous remnant of His people and invites them to begin again.

God told me more clearly than He had ever told anyone before what He intended to do through the coming Messiah, which is actually why I've come to speak to you today. I want you to hear some of my prophecies from long, long ago. They are prophecies of warning, of judgment, of restoration, and of the coming Servant King, whom you know as Jesus of Nazareth, the promised Messiah. I will read them as I wrote them in *The Vision of the Prophet Isaiah, Son of Amoz*. Many of these words may be familiar to you, but I doubt that you've ever heard them like this

“Why do you keep parading through my courts with your worthless sacrifices? The incense you bring me is a stench in my nostrils! Your celebrations of the new moon and the Sabbath day, and your special days for fasting—even your most pious meetings—are all sinful and false. I want nothing more to do with them. I hate all your festivals and sacrifices. I cannot stand the sight of them! From now on, when you lift up your hands in prayer, I will refuse to look. Even though you offer many prayers, I will not listen. For your hands are covered with the blood of your innocent victims. Wash yourselves and be clean! Let me no longer see your evil deeds. Give up your wicked ways. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the orphan. Fight for the rights of widows.

*“Come now, let us argue this out,” says the LORD. **“No matter how deep the stain of your sins, I can remove it. I can make you as clean as freshly fallen snow. Even if you are stained as red as crimson, I can make you as white as wool.** If you will only obey me and let me help you, then you will have plenty to eat. But if you keep turning away and refusing to listen, you will be destroyed by your enemies. I, the LORD, have spoken!” (Isaiah 1:12-20).*

The earth suffers for the sins of its people, for they have twisted the instructions of God, violated his laws, and broken his everlasting covenant (24:5). God's people could have rest in their own land if they would only obey him, but they will not listen. So the LORD will spell out his message for them again, repeating it over and over, a line at a time, in very simple words. Yet they will stumble over this simple, straightforward message (28:12-13).

And so the Lord says, “These people say they are mine. They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far away” (29:13). The Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says, “Only in returning to me and waiting for me will you be saved. In quietness and confidence is your strength. But you would have none of it (30:15).

The LORD still waits for you to come to him so he can show you his love and compassion (30:18); but destruction is certain for those who look to [themselves] for help, trusting their cavalry and chariots instead of looking to the LORD, the Holy One of Israel (31:1). You are a pleasure-crazy kingdom, living at ease and feeling secure, bragging as if you were the greatest in the world! You say, “I'm self-sufficient and not accountable to anyone! (47:8) But the lands beyond the sea watch in fear. Remote lands tremble and mobilize for war (41:5).

Listen! The LORD is not too weak to save you, and he is not becoming deaf. He can hear you when you call. But there is a problem—your sins have cut you off from God. Because of your sin, he has turned away and will not listen anymore (59:1-2). He will send a signal to the nations far away. He will whistle to those at the ends of the earth, and they will come racing toward Jerusalem. They will not get tired or stumble. They will run without stopping for rest or sleep. Not a belt will be loose, not a sandal thong broken. Their arrows will be sharp and their bows ready for battle. Sparks will fly from their horses' hooves as the wheels of their chariots spin like the wind. Roaring like lions, they will pounce on their prey. They will seize my people and carry them off into captivity, and no one will be there to rescue them. The enemy nations will growl over their victims like the roaring of the sea. A cloud of darkness and sorrow will hover over Israel. The clouds will blot out the light (5:26-30).

Nevertheless, that time of darkness and despair will not go on forever. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali will soon be humbled, but there will be a time in the future when Galilee of the Gentiles, which lies along the road that runs between Jordan and the sea, will be filled with glory. **The people who walk in darkness will see a great light**—a light that will shine on all who live in the land where death casts its shadow (9:1-2). **Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot—yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root.** And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD (11:1-2).

In that day of peace, battle gear will no longer be issued. Never again will uniforms be bloodstained by war. All such equipment will be burned. **For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. And the government will rest on his shoulders. These will be his royal titles: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His ever expanding, peaceful government will never end. He will rule forever with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David. The passionate commitment of the LORD Almighty will guarantee this!** (9:5-7).

And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf. The lame will leap like a deer, and those who cannot speak will shout and sing! Springs will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams will water the desert. And a main road will go through that once deserted land. It will be named **the Highway of Holiness**. Evil-hearted people will never travel on it. It will be only for those who walk in God's ways (35:5-6, 8).

But now, O Israel, the LORD who created you says: **"Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine. When you go through deep waters and great trouble, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown! When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior** (43:1-3). And my blessings are for Gentiles, too, when they commit themselves to the LORD. I will bring them also to my holy mountain of Jerusalem and will fill them with joy in my house of prayer. I will accept their burnt offerings and sacrifices, because **my Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations.** For the Sovereign LORD, who brings back the outcasts of Israel, says: **I will bring others, too, besides my people Israel"** (56:3, 6-8).

"Look at my servant, whom I strengthen. He is my chosen one, and I am pleased with him. I have put my Spirit upon him. He will reveal justice to the nations. He will be gentle—he will not shout or raise his voice in public. He will not crush those who are weak or quench the smallest hope. He will bring full justice to all who have been wronged. He will not stop until truth and righteousness prevail throughout the earth" (42:1-4).

My servant grew up in the LORD's presence like a tender green shoot, sprouting from a root in dry and sterile ground. There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing

to attract us to him. He was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with bitterest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way when he went by. He was despised, and we did not care.

Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God for his own sins! **But he was wounded and crushed for our sins. He was beaten that we might have peace. He was whipped, and we were healed! All of us have strayed away like sheep. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the LORD laid on him the guilt and sins of us all.**

He was oppressed and treated harshly, yet he never said a word. He was led as a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth. From prison and trial they led him away to his death. But who among the people realized that he was dying for their sins—that he was suffering their punishment? He had done no wrong, and he never deceived anyone. But he was buried like a criminal; he was put in a rich man's grave.

But it was the LORD's good plan to crush him and fill him with grief. Yet when his life is made an offering for sin, he will have a multitude of children, many heirs. He will enjoy a long life, and the LORD's plan will prosper in his hands. When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish, he will be satisfied. And because of what he has experienced, my righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, **for he will bear all their sins** (53:2-11).

Such were the words the LORD gave to me, seven hundred years before Messiah came. The prophecies were amazingly specific, don't you think? As you move beyond our Lord's crucifixion and resurrection, past the experiences of Holy Week so clearly foretold through the prophecies God gave to me, part of what lies before you is simply wonder and amazement at God's eternal plan for your salvation. But though it is right for you to celebrate the events of our Lord's Passion, to do only this is to miss the Main Thing that God is up to.

For just as I prophesied and warned of Messiah's First Coming, even so, our Lord Christ prophesied, promised, and warned of His Second Coming, which lies before you still. As He himself told you, **"No one knows the day or the hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows.**

"When the Son of Man returns, it will be like it was in Noah's day. In those days before the Flood, the people were enjoying banquets and parties and weddings right up to the time Noah entered his boat. People didn't realize what was going to happen until the Flood came and swept them all away. That is the way it will be when the Son of Man comes.

"Two men will be working together in the field; one will be taken, the other left. Two women will be grinding flour at the mill; one will be taken, the other left. So be prepared, because you don't know what day your Lord is coming.

*"Know this: A homeowner who knew exactly when a burglar was coming would stay alert and not permit the house to be broken into. **You also must be ready all the time. For the Son of Man will come when least expected**" (Matthew 24:36-44).*

Are you ready to welcome Him? Will you be glad to see Him when He comes?