

<sup>7</sup>Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

I've heard people say, "I wonder what Jesus was thinking?" "I wonder what Jesus was thinking when he rode into Jerusalem?" Others have said, "I wonder what was going through the mind of Jesus when he said, 'Father forgive them, they know not what they do?'" If we want to know what Jesus was thinking, if we want to know what was going through his mind, we only need to read the Old Testament. And if we want to understand the mind of Jesus even better, then we need to know today's lesson from Isaiah.

First, we require just a touch of background: the book of Isaiah has two parts, the first part was written before the people of Judah were conquered and taken into exile and the second part, after they returned. The time of Judah and Isaiah took place centuries before the time of Jesus. In those days, when foreign armies conquered a country, they either slaughtered all the inhabitants or they took the country's intellectual and religious elites into exile. When the conquerors took away the elite, they left the crushed common people to cope on their own.

When the second half of Isaiah was composed, a part of which we read this morning, the vanquished have returned decades later to their country. All the cultural institutions those conquered people had known lay in ruin. Even the Temple, the center of their lives, had been toppled. The returning Israelites were utterly powerless, dispossessed, conquered people. Given their condition what were they to hope? More than that, what were they to do? Where was their God?

Listen to the striking response from second Isaiah:

Listen, far-flung islands,

pay attention, faraway people:

God put me to work from the day I was born.

The moment I entered the world he named me.

He gave me speech that would cut and penetrate.

He kept his hand on me to protect me.

He made me his straight arrow

and hid me in his quiver.

He said to me, "You're my dear servant,

Israel, through whom I'll shine." (The Message)

As far as the rest of the world was concerned, God's people, Israel, were thoroughly disgraced and powerless. But how wrong the world was! God who works through history took this defeated people, weak and isolated, and made them God's instrument of hope. And not just the instrument of hope for Israel but for the whole world.

"Listen you coastlands, and pay attention everyone...God said to me that I am God's servant and God will shine through me." In Isaiah's words, not only were the people of Israel far from being subject, they were the complete shining hope of God for the world! Can you believe it? The most oppressed, vulnerable and lonely people have, in a complete reversal of expectation, become the hope for the world.

I think we can respond to Second Isaiah's declaration in one of two ways: On one hand, we'd have to conclude that Second Isaiah was completely deluded, out of his mind. How could a conquered minority in the backwater of culture and history become the hope of humanity? On the other hand, Isaiah was right. Israel was and would continue to be the channel of hope for the world. Israel was the birthplace of Christ.

Why shouldn't we think of Isaiah as deluded? As far as the rest of the world was concerned, how could such a pitiful and subject nation ever shine with God's glory? If you were the world, watching Israel's humiliated status, wouldn't you think that Israel was not God's chosen people? Israel would be a historical dead end for itself, for the world and for us.

But that's not how history turned out. On the other hand, we read the prophet Isaiah as inspired by God. If God speaks with and encourages Isaiah, we're in for a very surprising development. It turns out that Isaiah was right: as we heard this morning, the hope of the world is not measured in political influence. Our hopes are not founded on tremendous wealth or the size of our military. We will learn from Christ that the hope of the world does not come from bluster and threats. Instead, and this must have been comical at the time, God turns power upside down. The influential and the dictatorial are not in charge. Instead God means to save the world by first serving God's people not by coercing them.

When we read Isaiah, we're getting into the mind of Jesus. Now we can see how Jesus thought. The history of Jesus, the history of Israel and indeed, our history as descendants of both, is not a story of failed, conquered weaklings but of a people chosen to lead as servants. God as it turns out, leads upside down. God knows, and surely Jesus showed us, that every leader who postures with belligerent threat or who seeks to rule by raw power will fail. Absolutely will fail, have failed

in fact. I ask you, in all human history, can you think of one nation or leader who has survived a thousand years? Hitler's ambition was to establish a thousand year Reich, a thousand-year kingdom. Did he succeed? By no means. Not even close. And no one else has succeeded either. But Israel has survived and thrived. Christ has brought a hope that has shaped us for more than two thousand years. Evil mocks our hope but the mocking turns back on the evil. Joseph Stalin once scorned the Pope by asking where are the Pope's armies? God's peaceful armies are everywhere as it turns out, the very body of Christ. And Stalin, where's he? He's buried in history.

So what was Jesus thinking? Isaiah continues this morning with this:

"And now," God says,  
 this God who took me in hand  
 from the moment of birth to be his servant...  
 God, Redeemer of Israel, The Holy of Israel,  
 says to the despised one, kicked around by the nations,  
 slave labor to the ruling class:  
 "Kings will see, get to their feet—the princes, too—  
 and then fall on their faces in homage  
 Because of God, who has faithfully kept his word,  
 The Holy of Israel, who has chosen you."

We will hear this developing story of a suffering servant for the coming weeks. As we journey towards Easter—person after person, disciple after disciple, especially Peter, will counsel Jesus to rally the people for violent overthrow of the government. In a strange development, we'll discover that the enemies of Jesus understood the threat Jesus posed better than his followers. Satan invited Jesus to rule in Satan's fashion to undermine the servant leadership of Jesus. Judas wanted Jesus to trade on his popularity to lead a popular revolt. Peter wanted Jesus to lead a peasant revolt into Jerusalem. But Jesus knew, as Isaiah had foretold, that the one chosen from his birth would one day lead humanity by the means of forgiveness and peace. Not, I must add, by coercion and control.

If there was one thought that completely occupied the mind of Jesus it must be this, that God will prevail. Dictators will rise and tyrants seek power but they have only one ultimate weapon—they have only the threat of death. God, who loves us so completely that God became Jesus, triumphed over the greatest threat of all—God conquered death. Isaiah wrote it, Christ thought it--Kings and princes, presidents and dictators will kneel for God's love. Love alone can win the

hearts of God's people and peaceful, generous, and compassionate love makes humanity's great hope. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Bullock  
Trinity Episcopal  
Bend, Oregon