

Title: Our God Saves!
Text: Isaiah 1.1; 40.8; 45.22
Theme: Understanding Isaiah
Series: Isaiah #1
Prop Stmt: The word of God stands forever
Aim: I want to encourage my people to be confident in God's Word, to be obedient to God's Word and to be bold in speaking God's Word.

Kristin Chenoweth claims to be a pro-gay Christian. When asked about this, she gave a lesson in hermeneutics. Now, she didn't use that word, but she told us about her grandma. You see, Kristin has a friend who is gay and refused to believe that this was as serious as the Bible says, so she asked her grandmother who said, "Well, Kris, I read the Bible like I eat fish: I take the meat, and it serves me well, but I don't choke on the bone." Kristin went on to say, "I read my Bible and I pray and all of that - I really do. But at the same time, I don't think being gay is a sin. Period."ⁱ

What just happened? "I take the meat, and it serves me well, but I don't choke on the bone." In other words, "I take the part that suits me, but the part that doesn't suit me, I discard." In other words, I determine which part of the Bible is true for me. You can believe what you want, I will believe what I want, don't bother me with your beliefs and I won't bother you. What kind of a God is that? What kind of a God reveals his Word and then leaves it up to you to figure out which part you like and which part you don't?

Our world is full of religious people who are looking for a little bit of religion in order to be comfortable, but who have absolutely no intention of surrendering themselves to the Eternal King. You have your religion, I have mine. I admire you for your beliefs, which means you have to admire me for mine. I expect you to sanction my beliefs, even if they conflict with yours.

Question: will you obey God - no matter what? Or, do you demand to know first what he says, and then sit in judgment on him, that is deciding whether or not you find it acceptable? Are you willing to stand face to face with God and tell him that you find some of his word, like fish bones? They have no value. Welcome to the religious views of Isaiah's day. The spiritual atmosphere, morals, political and economic environment were very similar to the air we breathe.

Why Isaiah? I want to feed you a balanced diet. So, it is my habit now to alternate between New Testament and Old Testament. I have chosen Isaiah for three reasons: 1) The message and setting of this book is very timely for our church at this time. 2) This book is quoted more times (66) in the New Testament than any other Old Testament book, except Psalms, much of which appears in Matthew's gospel. So, while I am preaching Isaiah for you to see the majesty of God put on display, I am also preaching Isaiah to set us up in order to study Christ up close and personal in Matthew's gospel, which is next - if the Lord allows. 3) As I have already indicated, God is really, really big in Isaiah. Contemporary Christianity has a very puny God.

Much of contemporary Christianity is embarrassed by the God of the Bible and therefore seeks to diminish him to the point where he is presented as an impotent, yet kind deity who begs us to pay some attention to him and who is happy if we can set aside some to go to church once or twice a month as long as the service is not too long. But, since this God is serving us, and exists to make us comfortable, if he can, he is really not worth living for, much less dying for. In an effort to be relevant, God is so often presented as anything but relevant. Isaiah does not know that god. The God that Isaiah knows and presents is the God who does ALL things for his own sake and will not share his glory with another (48.11). Therefore, the way God is put on display in Isaiah is nothing short of awe-some! He is Sovereign! He is eternally present, eternally relevant, and eternally central to everything that takes place. He raises up kings, armies, nations and empires. He puts down kings, armies, nations and empires. He is mighty! He is mighty to save and he is mighty to judge! He is high, holy and lifted up (chapter 6) yet he dwells with those who are humble and contrite in spirit (57.15). His wrath against sin is devastating (9.12, 17, 21; 10.4). His power is fierce and his judgments are true, but to the repentant he cleanses and atones for sin (6.7) because his salvation, like a fountain pours forth in endless supply (12.3), while his peace like the mighty Mississippi flows for the needy (66.12). Those who rest in his promises are granted strength (30.15), while those who rebel against him face a death that will never end (66.24). Cornerstone, I pray that God will give us a fresh vision of his majestic glory. It is not my job to protect you from God, it is my job to expose you to God and to leave you trembling in his presence until you become aware that unless you are rescued by someone else, that you will not survive. Then I want you to see Jesus. That is why I am preaching Isaiah and then Matthew. I pray that God will humble us and overwhelm us. I pray that God will expose our idols, crush our idols and replace them with himself. I pray that we will recover a high view of God, a fresh awareness of our sin and a new appreciation for his eternal kingdom, because as we will see, all of the others are coming down. But, when they all fall down, He comes down.

1. Understanding the Book

A. The historical setting

For about 80 years (40 – David and 40 – Solomon; 1010 – 931 BC) the nation of Israel had been the dominant power of the Ancient Near East. Following the reign of Solomon, the nation of Israel broke up into two separate kingdoms known as Israel (northern kingdom) and Judah (southern kingdom). She was religiously, militarily, politically and economically the standard of the world. Following the civil war, things began to unravel. Now, about 200 years later, Israel was on the verge of annihilation and Judah appeared to be following in her steps.

As you can tell from the opening verse, Isaiah was a prophet who ministered the Word of God during the reign of four different kings. His calling and commissioning by God took place in 740 BC when King Uzziah died and he lived long enough to

record the death of Sennacherib, King of Assyria which took place in 681 BC. That means that Isaiah was a prophet for about 60 years.

For the previous 50 years (790 – 740 BC), the southern kingdom (Judah) had enjoyed a time of relative peace and prosperity. Uzziah returned Judah to conditions that were similar during the reigns of David and Solomon. But, that was all about to change. As chapter 6 tells us, “In the year that king Uzziah died.” God chose to reveal his majesty to Isaiah in that year and it was timely. Like the growing clouds of Mordor (Tolkein’s Lord of the Rings novels), the nation of Assyria was ferociously gathering up more and more territory. She had four kings whose combined reign was about 100 years; Tiglath-Pileser III, Shalmaneser V, Sargon II and Sennacherib. While those kings figure in the Scriptures, the expansionist policies of Assyria went back to 900 BC. For almost 300 years, she was the empire to fear. These rulers led their empire with their army and fought with a ruthlessness and brutality that rightfully earned them the fear of the entire Ancient Near East (and beyond). Any who dared rebel against them were destroyed without mercy. Those they conquered, they usually uprooted and scattered them all over their vast holdings. At the beginning of this book, Assyria is the obvious threat, but later on, we find out, there is another. There are two urgent military threats in this book both of which threaten the existence of Judah and become the occasion for the question of: Who are you going to trust?

The question of “who are you going to trust” is played out on the game called history. To the student of military history, we can understand why Assyria encounters Syria, Israel, and Judah. These little nations were honestly not much of a threat at this time, but Assyria had to go through them in order to get to Egypt. Besides, these nations were attractive because they were rather wealthy. But all in all, if you conquered Babylon to the east and Egypt to the west, you had yourself one serious empire!

Threat number one: Because of the growing Assyrian threat, Syria and Israel form a pact and attempt to coerce Judah into joining them. When Judah does not, Syria and Israel prepare to attack. What is Judah going to do? Who is Ahaz going to trust? Isaiah tells him what is going to happen. Isaiah tells him to turn his heart to God and trust him fully. Instead, Ahaz puts his faith in Assyria. As it turns out, Syria and Israel are destroyed, as God said they would be, but now Ahaz is in servant-hood to Assyria.

Threat number two: Ahaz’s son, Hezekiah inherits this servile relationship to Assyria and decides to break it, to which Assyria does not take too kindly to. This time, Assyria invades. What is Judah going to do? Who is Hezekiah going to trust? Can Egypt save them? There is some high drama in this book. This time, Hezekiah throws himself at the mercy of God and God saves! Whoa does God save! In one night, the angel of the Lord went through the military campsite of the Assyrian army sitting not too far outside of Jerusalem and killed 185,000 soldiers. In one night, the

entire world scene shifted. The unstoppable Assyrian army was inexplicably devastated.

To the world, it was Hezekiah who had pulled off the upset of century. In reality it was God. So, when an envoy from Babylon came to Hezekiah to congratulate him on his recovery from his illness and (obviously) to thank him for wiping out the Assyrian army, Hezekiah let's the whole thing go to his head and he shows them the riches of his reign. So, while the Assyrians were the initial threat, the first section ends on an ominous note, which sets the stage for the second part of the book.

Dates you need to know:

740 BC – Uzziah dies.

722 BC – Israel is destroyed by the Assyrians

701 BC – Assyria invades Judah

606 BC – Nebuchadnezzar invades Judah for the first time

586 BC – Judah falls to Nebuchadnezzar and is exiled to Babylon

538 BC – Cyrus issues a decree permitting the Jews to return home

586 is a major date in the OT since it is the date of the largest deportation of the Jews to exile in Babylon and 538 is the end of it. As such, Isaiah is a pre-exilic prophet (written before the exile). Ezekiel and Daniel are exilic prophets (written during) and guys like Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi are post-exilic (written after the return).

B. The overview

Isaiah is, in many ways, a microcosm of the Bible. The first thirty nine chapters are characterized by God announcing his plan to judge the world (specifically his own rebellious people) while chapters 40-66 speak of God's deliverance. God judges and God saves. It is like Old Testament and New Testament. In other words, chapters 1-39 have more law and some gospel, while chapters 40-66 have more gospel and some law.

Chapters 1-39 are written in view of the Assyrian threat. Chapters 40-55 are written in view of the Babylonian exile to come and chapters 56-66 are written about culmination of the world. Do you see the point? The Assyrian threat was real, but there was a greater problem yet to come. The Babylonian threat was also real and consequential, but it was only a taste of what is to come. And, what was to come then, is yet to come for us. Therefore, we need to listen to this prophet. Your biggest enemy is not without it is within. No army can stand before God. No rebel will be ignored by God. Humble yourself before Him – He's Mighty to save.

Notice how verse 1 begins. "The vision of Isaiah...."

2. Understanding the Man

Isaiah means “Yahweh (Jehovah) has saved”. This is so fitting since Isaiah’s prophecy is a vision of the majesty of God that is unstoppable in its power and plan to rescue the humble and unstoppable in its power and plan to judge the proud. As such, I think that one of the verses that summarizes this book (and the Bible for that matter) is 45.22, “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.” Isaiah was the man, whose very name reflected the heart of the message that he was chosen to declare. “The vision of...”

A. The office of a prophet

A prophet is oftentimes called a “seer.” He sees what others do not because things are revealed to him that are not revealed to others. Isaiah saw beyond the immediate to the important. He saw beyond the circumstances to what really mattered. He was not fooled by what was trendy, nor was he caught up in the hype of the crowd. He heard from God – directly and that brought with it a heavy price and awesome responsibility.

i. True prophets

True prophets are called by God. There were schools of prophets who were the students of prophets, and functioned as copiers and relayers of messages, but those who actually received a message from God were chosen, not by man, not by the person himself, but by God. The calling of a prophet was an awesome calling, but a lonely, dangerous and difficult one as well. What do you do with the message when you know that it is not going to be received well? What do you do when God gives you a message of judgment for the king and the king has the power to kill you?

True prophets were to protect the people of God from the sins of those around them by speaking God’s word to them. They were also forerunners of Christ, whom God had promised would be the perfect prophet whose life and message would be a perfect union of truth and integrity.

True prophets were supposed to be viewed as a precious gift from God. He was the One who raised them up. He was the One who spoke to them. He was the One who ordained that they speak to the people. But why? Why did God do it this way? Why did he wrap such incredible truth in the skin of ordinary men? (It all pointed to Christ!) God delivers, God saves, God rescues by means of his Word and his Word came to us in Christ, who, as Isaiah said, looked like an ordinary person. True prophets were often ordinary, while false ones tended to be a bit sensational. False prophets, like true prophets also claimed to be speak for God (or the gods). How were people to know the difference?

ii. False prophets

The presence of false prophets ensured that true prophets would always be controversial. In one sense, it did not take much courage to be a false prophet because you simply took a poll and found out what people wanted you to believe and say, and then you said it, and they thought you were wonderful. On the other hand, when you claim to speak for God and you really do not, then one day you will face the One whose name you took in vain and he does not overlook that. Isaiah and others speak of false prophets as living for themselves; doing, or saying whatever they need to say in order to stay in positions of respect, influence and power. Whatever would be approved by their audience, whatever would find favor with their hearers, they would say.

The nature of prophecy lends itself to being vulnerable to abuse. The revelation is usually received in private – so, who can argue with it – right? If, you are respected by the people, (and this respect is often leveraged by the king whose approval can be lucrative and beneficial to keeping your head on your shoulders) then, life can go well with you. The king needs your validation and you need your head and money, so the relationship between the king and the prophet (false) can be a mutual admiration society. But, in the event that God really speaks, the true prophet can be a real pain in the neck. Often times he was ostracized. His presence in the court was often met with rolling eyes and disgust. For the arrogant, the prophet never had good news.

Any prophet who spoke in the name of another god, was to be automatically disqualified, except of course, if the people themselves had become so corrupt that they accepted false prophets as being true (e.g. prophets of Baal).

Any prophet whose messages did not come true, were also to be automatically disqualified, but again, if that (false) prophet had the sympathies and loyalties of the people, then, in spite of his lies, he may still enjoy their favor – but the favor of the people is no substitute for the favor of God.

My sheep hear my voice...only the true people of God (within the “people of God”) will hear the Word of God. The pretenders will validate false prophets to their own demise.

Claiming to be “directed by God” is akin to claiming to receive revelation. Be careful. We should pray about matters seriously, but at the same time, we can pray with a bias and not truly be led by the Lord, even though we are claiming it. My family is facing a couple of pretty big decisions that we are praying carefully and consistently about. We are seeking the Lord and seeking to seek the Lord with an open hand and heart. One of the indicators of whether or hands and hearts are truly open is if we are willing to listen to the counsel of others.

Some of you have determined what you think is the will of God and if someone dares question you about it, you react with fangs, which should be an indication that you are not seeing something clearly. But, when you react with a “how dare you question

me” attitude, then you are setting yourself up for major failure, because you may be claiming that you have received a “yes” when in reality, God has said “no” but you just don’t want to hear it.

B. The life of a prophet

We owe so much to these prophets. If they had kept silent, we would not know whether God was robed in wrath or mercy. We would be left to gaze with nothing but questions into the night sky and wonder what power brought it about? If God had not spoken, then what rest could we bring to our consciences, what hope could we give the dying, what comfort could we give the bereaved? What direction could we give to the longings of our hearts for eternal happiness and what warnings could we give the wicked whose violence and greed heaps destruction upon others? Close your Bible and put it away and ask yourself, are there any answers to these ultimate questions apart from this book? Without God’s word, all we have is the hollow echo of our opinions reverberating through the chasms of time. But in the end, those opinions count for nothing, for they are spoken by men dead or dying. We need words of life. We need to hear from One outside of us, from One who can save us, from One who will tell us the way. God is and He has spoken through his prophet Isaiah – will you listen? Most of those who heard Isaiah in person did not.

i. Receiving the message

Remember that Isaiah was a man, not a machine. The message that God gave him was serious. He had to tell his own people that their beloved country was under the judgment of God and was going to be wiped out. It did not exactly make his poll numbers increase. But Isaiah did more than receive the message, he had to live it.

ii. Living the message

When we get to chapters seven and eight we will see where God uses the conception and birth of a son to Isaiah and his wife as both a fulfillment of a promise and the reminder of a prophecy. I mean, you talk about your personal life being made public. Isaiah’s son is given a name that summarizes a sermon that Isaiah has to preach. Now, Isaiah, as a name for boys has made a bit of a comeback in recent years, but I have never heard anyone name their boy the name God commanded Isaiah to name his boy. God commanded Isaiah to name his son Maher-shalal-hash-baz. Now, I’m thinking that Isaiah’s wife probably wanted to name him Bob, since every family needs a Bob. But Maher-shalal-hash-baz? Are you kidding me? Beside the obvious look of consternation by the boy’s kindergarten teacher, the other problem was the fact that his name meant, “*the spoil speeds, the prey hastens.*”

At one point in his life, God commanded Isaiah to go naked for three years, because this is what is going to happen to the people of Egypt that the Jews were trusting in. Do you see the cost of ministry?

As near as I can tell, for 60 years, this man was a mouthpiece for God. He said, "I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I (Isaiah) said, "Here am I! Send me." And then God told him to go, but that the more that he preached, the harder their hearts would get. So Isaiah asked the obvious next question – "how long" do I do this? And God said, until the cities are lie waste and the land is destroyed. In other words, you are going to preach and preach and preach, and no one who hears you is going to listen – but you preach anyway. And he did.

iii. Dying for the message

The Scriptures do not record how Isaiah died, but Jewish historical sources do. It is thought that Isaiah was executed by Manasseh, king of Judah who came after Hezekiah. In fact, when Hebrews 11.37 speaks of people of the faith being "sawn in two" it is surmised that this is speaking of Isaiah. Beloved, don't pity him. Pity those who refused to listen. Isaiah knew of the kingdom to come. He knew of the day when the lion would lay down with lamb, when swords and spears would be melted down for plows. He knew the glory and majesty of God and the power of his Word and the new heaven and new earth to come. His life, his preaching, his writing, was not in vain. His message was not a popular one, but it has proven to be true. Will you listen? Will you humble yourself and listen to the Word of God?

"Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other." (45.22)

ⁱ Taken from an interview with *The Advocate*, quoted in the Life Section of *USA Today*, 9.9.11.