

Title: Present conflict, Future peace, Present rest
Text: Isaiah 63.7-66.24
Theme: God keeps his promises.
Series: Isaiah #54
Prop Stmt: God's promise provides ballast in the storm, assuring a safe arrival in the harbor.

Read Text:

Isaiah was a prophet who lived in the southern kingdom of Judah, around 700 BC, during the time that the northern kingdom (Israel) was overrun by the Assyrian Empire. As a mouthpiece for God, Isaiah warned Israel about this to no avail. The problem was not that Israel was not aware of the military and expansionist policies of the Assyrian Empire. Israel was living in rebellion to God, and she refused to repent. What was worse, he warned that a similar catastrophe was in store for the S. Kingdom, Judah, if they did not repent of their sin and seek God. About 100 years later, Judah was overrun by the Babylonian Empire. The difference was, the Assyrians basically wiped out Israel, while the Babylonians had a different foreign policy and took the Jews (people from Judah) into exile. Isaiah did not live long enough to actually see it happen, but he knew it was coming because God had revealed it to him. But Isaiah's writings deal with more than just what was going on in Judah around 700 - 600 BC. God used that historical situation as an illustration and example of a greater reality.

Judgment pointed to a greater judgment (Captivity [circumstantial] pointed to a greater captivity [bondage to sin])

Return (from exile) pointed to a greater rescue (from sin)

A rebuilt and restored city and land pointed to a greater restoration.

Sin is more serious than we realize. God's righteous judgment is more serious than we realize. God's grace is more amazing than we realize. Our final destiny with God is more incredible than we realize.

God uses present circumstances to point to eternal realities. But, the eternal realities, which involve the fulfillment of God's promises, are so amazing that they basically defy our attempts to capture them in human language. Over and over you get this, "You've got to see this to believe it" kind of thing going on. Which, I believe is one of the enormous challenges that we are faced with when we try to figure out every detail of the future. I am convinced that if we give all of our attention trying to fit all prophecies of the future into a chart, that we will miss the point of the prophecies.

When Daniel was in exile in Babylon, he knew that Jeremiah the prophet had written that the captivity in Babylon would last 70 years. The challenge for Daniel was that he did not know when the clock started ticking, because there were three different times that Nebuchadnezzar had come and had taken people to Babylon from

Jerusalem. So, what did Daniel do? He prayed!!! That is what the promises of God are designed to do!! We are to read these promises and realize that God is going to keep his Word. Our tendency is to create charts so that we can predict when things are going to happen, so that we look smarter than everyone else, when God did not give us these promises so that we can be smug, but so that we would be humble. What happened when Daniel prayed about the 70 years? God answered his prayer and told him that the plan of God for Judah to be captive in Babylon for 70 years pointed to the greater plan of God that involved 70 x 7, or 490 years, which resulted in the incredible prophecy of Daniel 9. I see the same thing happening here in the concluding chapters of Isaiah. Isaiah is given a vision of the Mighty Warrior, whom we know is Christ (63.1-6). I believe that this vision of Christ in 63, bookends the book, since the book begins with a vision of Christ in chapter 6. In both cases, Isaiah responds in humility and confession. Isaiah sees the desperate condition of his people. It is not that they are in trouble politically and militarily. They are unfaithful to God! Over and over they have demonstrated that they cannot and will not keep the law of God! What is going to happen? This Mighty Warrior will fight for his own, but he will also fight against those who claim God, but in their very hearts deny him. This Mighty Warrior is no one's fool. Isaiah lives during a time of conflict, upheaval and looming destruction. He knows that things are not good and they are going to get worse. I want us to see how he responds. Like you, he did not want to see life unravel at the seams. He did not want to see his country self-destruct before his eyes. He delivered the warnings of God with a broken heart and a broken voice. But, he also knew, that his life was not it. There was a reality that was so much bigger than the life that Isaiah had. He was in the midst of conflict and it was going to get worse. But, he knew of the future peace that God had promised. Here is what I want you to see. I want you to understand how the promises of God about the future for his people are so certain and so sure that they provide rest and assurance for you right now in the midst of conflict. So, here you are, in the midst of conflict. How do you pursue rest, in the midst of the storm.

I. **Remember the ways of God.** (63.7-14)

Isaiah is responding to God's promise of sending a Mighty Warrior who will judge the rebellious and will rescue his children. Isaiah knows that God is serious about his plan. Things are not going to be the same. Things are going to get really messy. What do we do? We remember the ways of God. We remember that...

A. **God's ways are driven by his steadfast love.** (7-9)

Isaiah is remembering how God chose Israel to be his own. He remembers God as loving, compassionate, caring, tender, good and full of empathy. When Israel was being afflicted in Egypt, God was there, feeling the affliction himself (9). He responded personally to their suffering, because the abuse that was heaped upon them as slaves was felt by God. Why do you think that this was so important for Isaiah to do? (Great question for discussion in small groups)

B. God's ways are (also) driven by his righteousness. (10)

There are not too many passages in the Old Testament that speak of the Holy Spirit, since the doctrine of the Trinity is not unpacked in detail until the NT. But, here is a clear statement about the Holy Spirit. But notice the point. God is not a calculating Judge, distant King or unemotional Observer. This is personal, because God is personal. Rebellion against him, grieves him. He has to respond to rebellion. It may break his heart to do so, but he does. The story of the Old Testament is the story of God's unfaithful bride. Over and over she rebelled and forfeited the steadfast love of God and exchanged it for the righteous judgment of God. He, who would love her as her Husband, now fought against her as her enemy. He took no delight in that; but his judgments were designed to help her see the futility of her ways, and the seriousness of her sin.

What happened in the 40 years between Egypt and Canaan? Hundreds of thousands of Israelites died because of their rebellion. But, what was left was a generation who were serious about following God. But then, the same story repeated itself and it has been that way ever since. What hope is there?

C. God's ways are driven by his commitment to his glory. (11-14)

1. He receives glory by keeping his promises.

How does God remember? Does that mean he forgot?

2. He receives glory by sustaining his people.

What happened to Judah has been repeated and is being repeated in the church. We see the amazing grace of God in calling unto himself a people who were nothing more than rejects in the eyes of the world. You see this in God calling a bunch of illiterate slaves to be his nation, and a bunch of two and three time losers to be his disciples. The early church attracted the weak, broken, poor and needy. There were a few wealthy, educated and influential, but they were the exception. Dependency upon God and an unambiguous commitment to the gospel sent shock waves throughout the entire Roman Empire. But then, the church became a major player. It had influence, money, respect and power. The result was corruption, politics, and apostasy.

Along came the Reformation (500 years ago), and there was a recovery of the gospel that lit a flame that became an inferno. That fire came to the shores of this land and had considerable influence on the very ideals upon which our society and governance were founded. Churches, Bible colleges and seminaries flourished in this land. But today, let's be honest, the church is in decline. The message of the gospel has been traded in for a more socially acceptable message and the same tragic results are being seen. Mainline denominations are bleeding profusely and keep looking to renewal programs to staunch the hemorrhaging. Time after time they

conclude that they have a marketing problem. They believe that they simply need to convince the world that they are just like them. Which is precisely the problem! The church is just like the world. Only the gospel can capture the heart. If the church forfeits the gospel, it has no voice or message. Oh, it can make noise, carry on traditions, even put on impressive displays, but none of that captures the heart. It's the Word of God, breathed on to these pages through these men of God that speaks to, grips and changes the hearts of people. God does not need impressive organizations, budgets, slogans and advertising to attract people. He grips hearts with his gospel of grace. He has never needed a big crowd. He simply uses those who take him at his Word. That is all that God is looking for. He consistently uses the remnant who by his grace, take him at his Word.

Look at the ways of God. He alone loves with a steadfast love (7). He alone pities, redeems, lifts and carries (9). He remembers his works of grace, and demonstrations of power to rescue. He does not abandon his own, but those who are truly his own, are not the ones who simply take his goodies, but they believe his promises with their hearts.

II. **Pray the promises of God.** (63.15-64.12)

I love the passion and persistence that Isaiah demonstrates here. He is deeply concerned about his own people and he is willing to go to the mat for them. He does so by reminding God that God made a promise to love his own. From 63.15 – 64.12, there is a progression, even as Isaiah prays. He starts off complaining, and ends up confessing and submitting. Watch the progress. Watch what happens to what Isaiah as he prays. The more he talks with God and considers God, the more God-focused and self-aware he becomes.

A. **“You promised!” (the complaint).** (63.15-19)

Sometimes (most of the time, perhaps) faith is a fight. Is Isaiah accusing God of this, or is he repeating the accusations of the people against God? Perhaps both. We should not expect Isaiah to have perfect faith. But, Isaiah is saying that it looks like God does not care any more. We do not look anything like the people you promised Abraham we would be. Isaiah blames God (it seems) for their afflictions and pleads with God to respond because their circumstances do not in anyway reflect that they are supposed to be the people who are loved by God. It is as if Isaiah is saying – “hey God, what is going on here?” Well, what is going on here?

B. **“You promised!” (the appeal).** (64.1-5a)

In these verses, Isaiah is still reminding God of his promises, but the complaining is gone and now Isaiah is pleading with God to intervene. Things are a mess. The nation of Judah is in serious trouble because of her sin and she seems completely unable to break the terrible pattern of sin and stupid. Isaiah is saying, “God I know that you can fix this. You have done it before; you can do it again. In fact, when you

do show up, you do things that no one else could even imagine. Well, we are in one of those spots. If you don't show up, we are not going to make it. All of which is true, but there is more to this, isn't there? Why has God appeared to be silent? It is because of the sin of his people. They lived as if they did not need God. Isaiah's prayer, leads him to confessing sins.

C. **"You warned." (the confession).** (64.5b-7)

The tone of these verses really changes from accusatory and complaining to soul-searching and introspection. Isaiah is really having a "come to Jesus" moment here, isn't he? Instead of complaining to God for how bad life is (and it is bad), he is confessing (that is agreeing with God) about his own sins and the sins of his people.

Isaiah 64.6a is critical for you to understand, but I am warning you, that if you really grasp this truth, it will either lead to hopeless desperation or deep, abiding, humble gratitude. So, we need to stop the boat and drop anchor for a minute. Look at what Isaiah is confessing. Since Isaiah is saying these words to God, about himself and his people, it is obvious that he is comparing himself to God. That is, before God, our righteousness is like the rags that are used to wrap the festering wounds of lepers.

That is SO counter-intuitive. We think that our righteousness has to count for something, especially if it costs us something. We think that our righteousness makes God a debtor to us. If we do something good, really good, sacrificially good, then God is now obligated to us as if God needed us and we came through for Him and got Him out of a jam.

It's like this. You are driving down 696 around midnight and you see a car on the side of the road with a flat tire. You are tired from a really long day, and while you certainly do not feel like it, you stop and spend the next 20 minutes helping this person change the flat tire. Now, seriously, that is very helpful. Now, what happens? Is it not tempting to think, at least a little, good of yourself? Is it not tempting to think that perhaps God will help you out in some way? What happens, if one mile up the road – you get a flat tire? Are you not tempted to say, "Hey God, what is up with that? Is this the thanks that I get for helping someone else?"

Listen carefully. God is so perfectly righteous, so infinitely pure, that, in comparison to his righteousness, our best deeds do not count as righteous. Even our best deeds do not merit God's kindness towards us. Even our best deeds are tainted. There is still selfish ambition even in our most noble intentions. If you depend on your righteousness; if you trust in the quality and/or quantity of your goodness to earn you points with God; if you are relying upon your faithful observance of religious traditions or moral codes to gain the approval of God; then this truth is devastating. "All our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment." Now, there is more to the story, and you desperately need to know the rest of the story, but you need to really come to grips with this. Now, some of you are already putting the pieces together – aren't you? Some of you have been raised in strong religious traditions, or in homes

with strict moral codes and expectations. Some of you have towed the line and followed the rules, with that gnawing sense of wondering if what you do is ever good enough – and now you read this. Seriously, you are hoping for a guy like me to say, you are fine, and here I am confirming your worst fear. And you are feeling hopeless. I can NEVER be good enough. I can NEVER do enough. So, why bother? And the truth is, you are not and cannot ever be good enough, and that is why God sent for you, in your place, a Savior! Now, again, many of you know that Jesus came to this world. That is what Christmas is all about. Jesus was born to help us out – right? He came to show us the way. He came to tell us that God loves us. He was the Light. He came to do some miracles and other good things. Yes, that is true as far as it goes, but you need to see the entire picture.

Some of you look at your life, like running a marathon. You are doing the best you can, but you get to mile 24 and you are really running out of steam. You need someone to run with you and encourage you the last couple of miles. And that is what Jesus is –right? He runs with us and tells us to keep going, we’re going to make it, and he is so proud of us, and we’re doing fine –right? WRONG!!!! Do you see the point? Our righteousness does not count for anything good. Our righteousness makes things worse. Christ does not help us finish the race; Christ ran the race for us. He came to this earth to run your race, which is to live your life for you and to die your death for you. You could not run because your sin disqualified you from the race. Your best attempt at fixing yourself only made your disqualification even worse. Jesus ran the race for you. And when you stop trusting in yourself and trust in Him, it is as if he picked you up and ran with you all the way and then gives you the medal. He did the running, and you get the reward.

Now, when Isaiah wrote this, he did not know exactly how all of this was going to turn out. But he knew that God knew. And so, this final section of Isaiah’s prayer is marked by surrender. His confession of his need leads him to submission.

D. “Your way.” (the surrender). (64.8-12)

Isaiah has come to the end. He gives up his argument, but he does not give up his appeal. He surrenders to God (8) and pleads for forgiveness and mercy and restoration.

III. And God will respond. (65.1-16)

A. with judgment upon the proud. (1-7, 11-16)

B. with mercy upon the humble. (8-10)

Here is why your response matters so much! God is up to something that is so spectacularly grand that it will overwhelm everything that could ever imagine. Your faithfulness to God will be so incredibly worth it,

IV. **And God will restore** (65.17-66.24)