

# WEARING TRIFOCALS: RE-APPROPRIATING THE ANCIENT PULPIT FOR THE TWENTY- FIRST CENTURY PEW

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From NT times to the present, preachers have found an abundance of favorite texts for sermons in Isaiah. Other than Psalms, Isaiah's prominence in the NT and in the history of preaching from the OT is unmatched. The *Revised Common Lectionary* draws from Isaiah more than any other OT text. Nevertheless, in the midst of these rich opportunities, preaching through the entire book of Isaiah is a daunting if not an audacious task. The enterprise of understanding the text, our congregations, and the situations of our times is a three-way conversation. It is like wearing trifocals.

From a distance stands Isaiah's pulpit (his time and place within Judah and the world powers); from an intermediate distance we see our own world (with its multiple perspectives); and close-up we experience our churches (a dynamic mixture of people). Moreover, when we consider thousands of years of history, tradition, and interpretation, the task becomes even more complex.

A canonical approach to preaching Isaiah emphasizes the role the whole book plays as Scripture for the present community of faith.<sup>1</sup> Although that role may be knotty at times, I want to emphasize the sum of all the parts using a trifocal metaphor rather than disparate reconstructed pieces. The book of Isaiah sits in the pew rack as a whole. The canonical process has gathered various voices from different eras of Israel's story and woven a tapestry with several unifying themes. For example, God is the Holy One of Israel who has called Isaiah to bear witness to his purposes in history; God, as a holy and just one, uses nations as his instruments to punish and to restore; God abhors worship without

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<sup>1</sup> For a canonical reading of Isaiah see: Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), ch. 17; Ronald Clements, "The Unity of the Book of Isaiah," *Int* 36 (1982): 117-29; Ronald Clements, "Beyond Tradition-History: Deutero-Isaiah Development of First Isaiah's Themes," *JSOP* 31 (1985): 95-113; and Christopher Seitz, ed., *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

justice; and God lives in Jerusalem, Mt. Zion, and from there, salvation comes forth.<sup>2</sup>

The reader of Isaiah can utilize trifocals as a reading strategy. Trifocals are used in order to see things near and far more clearly. While reading Isaiah we can maintain a dialogical relationship between the following perspectives: The world “behind the text” consists of those historical elements that produced the text. The historical-critical lens that causes many readers to see three separate books still keeps the pulpit safe by providing preachers with boundaries that keep them from saying things that are historically absurd. The world “before the text” comprises the world that we inhabit in the present moment. The pastoral lenses that we wear in the pulpit are shaped by our walking and struggling with those we serve. The world “of the text” refers to the world shaped within the text itself. These rhetorical and canonical lenses help us to perceive the living word of God actively doing something.

As we look at the whole book, the vast history sometimes overwhelms us: from Tiglath-pileser III to Judah’s miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem from Sennacharib to the Babylonian Empire under Nebuchadnezzar to the Persian Empire under Cyrus to an emerging Judaism in post-exilic times. Times and places may change, but the message of Isaiah proclaims that YHWH will act as he has promised; as he has done in the past, so he will do in the present and future. God is the major player in the story. Words from the past, Torah, ancient words are re-appropriated throughout Isaiah to address contemporary situations in order to reframe and transform the future.<sup>3</sup>

Imagine with me Isaiah wearing trifocals.<sup>4</sup> The preacher peers through the lenses of Isaiah 1 to perceive the entire landscape of the book. The redactor uses the genre of law court disputations as a canonical introduction to the book as a whole. The flow of the pericope moves from sin → punishment → repentance → renewal; or more specifically, judgment → exile → homecoming → mission. The chapter begins as a lawsuit against Israel (Isa 1:2–20). God summons heaven and earth as witnesses to God’s regret over Israel’s behavior. At one time, Jerusalem was unique. In a world of exploitation and corruption, Israel was a place where justice and integrity ruled. However, confidence in God had been replaced by confidence in military strength, political savvy, international relations, and religious ritual. The only reason for the survival of the defendant is the mercy of

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<sup>2</sup> Other unifying themes occurring throughout Isaiah that need addressing include 1) the remnant, even though it means different things in various contexts; 2) eyes and ears; seeing and hearing; and 3) the contrast between “humbling” human “pride” and “exalting” YHWH.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> I am changing the angle of vision for the trifocal metaphor from the use earlier. Furthermore, I do not intend to imply that the eighth-century character Isaiah is the single author of the whole book.

the plaintiff. Although Israel comes to God in worship, God disapproves the defendant's insincere show of repentance (Isa 1:10–15). Through it all, God holds open his hands of mercy (Isa 1:16–20) and his desire to purify Jerusalem (Isa 1:21–31). God envisions the goal for Israel's place in the world and judges the present against that goal (Isa 2:1–4).

Through the lenses of Isaiah 1, the book could be outlined with the distant lens of reckoning (Isa 1–39) that sees the past; an intermediate lens of restoration (Isa 40–55) where God's hopeful future lies; and the near lens of post-exilic Yehud (Isa 56–66) where experience and hope collide. With the first lens, Isaiah sees the world—broken and disorienting because it describes the harshness of experience and self-critique rather than an idyllic myth. Eighth-century Judah appears wealthy. Under King Uzziah, all is well. The land is at peace, the temple cult is flourishing, and a Davidic King sits on a successful throne. We become so accustomed to seeing the world this way that we believe that God is blessing us and this is the norm. The state of the union becomes a cloudy lens that distorts our vision.

The historical events of eighth-century Judah are presented in the present tense from the death of Uzziah to the death of Hezekiah. The first lens that Isaiah wears perceives God's judgment in astoundingly new ways. God's glasses are not rose colored. Uzziah lived from 783–742 B.C.E. Second Chron 26:15 notes his success: "And his fame spread far, for he was marvelously helped until he became strong." Second Chron 26:18–21 describes his downfall: "But when he had become strong he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was false to the Lord his God" (16). Also in the days of Ahaz, the narrative continues with a threat to Judah from the coalition of Damascus and Israel 735–733. Ahaz makes an alliance with Assyria, but at what price? Judah becomes a vassal state. Briefly noted is the fall of Samaria in 722 (9:8–21). And during the days of Hezekiah Jerusalem is sieged in 701 (36–39).

Israel has become out of place with YHWH. Communion with God has become impossible. Israel, however, does not notice, and has not noticed for a long time, that Israel is immobilized and cannot respond. Throughout, there is an exalted view of YHWH who is great and powerful. YHWH's universal dominion springs forth from Jerusalem. Zion Theology (e.g., 37:33–35) emphasizes an exalted view of the monarchy; a Davidic king will always sit on the throne; Israel is divinely chosen and eternally favored; the land always belongs to Israel; and the Temple would always stand. Although Jerusalem and her king may suffer judgment, the chosen city and king will not fall. (See the Messianic hymns of 9:1–7 and 11:1–9 attesting to YHWH's ultimate favor).

When preaching the narratives in Isaiah 1–39, we should keep in mind the larger theological function of these narratives. Likewise, the content of the oracles that surround these narratives should influence our interpretation of the narratives and vice versa. The prophet addresses Israel's character displayed by her choices in foreign policy. Oracles concerning Judah's relationship with foreign powers connect directly with the historical setting (28–33). Reliance on

a world power meant a demonstration of the belief that humans and their weapons rather than YHWH determined the destiny of nations. Subservience to a nation such as Assyria meant accepting her gods and her cults. An alliance with a nation such as Assyria meant an involvement with her military operations. Therefore, Isaiah could not accept politics as a solution for it contradicts faith.

Through this lens, Isaiah addresses Israel's character by focusing on her social injustices and pride (1:4; 2:11–12; 3:15; 5:20, 25). Even though YHWH punishes Israel, Jerusalem did remain, the Temple stood, and a Davidic King ruled. Zion theology grew in eighth-century Judah. Yet the lens contains sections such as Isa 39:5–7 that anticipate exile.<sup>5</sup> Between the lenses of chapters 39 and 40 there exists a somber waiting.

Sometimes in the Bible, there are chronological gaps between two verses. Years can go by, and the biblical record does not describe what happened between those two verses. One such gap exists between Isa 39 and Isa 40. What happened in the gap? We need not speculate here at all. Between the two verses Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed and her citizens deported. Loss, suffering, and dismay loomed over the remaining refugees. Jeremiah and Lamentations tell us what happened in the gap. Lamentations begins, “no resting place” (Lam 1:3), “no pasture” (Lam 1:6), “no one to help” (Lam 1:7), “none to comfort” (Lam 1:9, 16, 17, 21; 2:13), and “no rest” (Lam 2:18). Lamentations ends with a question Israel cannot answer, a question about being “forgotten” and “abandoned” by God (Lam 5:20, 22). In the midst of their cry comes a mixture of sadness and hope; steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness (Lam 3:18–23).<sup>6</sup> And the people of Israel conclude, “My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God?” (Isa 40:27).

When the reader changes lenses, times have changed. A different lens envisions a fallen Jerusalem, a destroyed temple, a removed land, and a captured king. Zion theology has failed. The community questions Zion's place. The exiles do not wear rose-colored glasses. Rather they ask questions such as “Are we chosen?” “Is YHWH sovereign, powerful, and faithful?” “Were the gods of Babylon the only one who could act (37–39)?” “Is there life and hope after exile?” “How do we move beyond exile?” In 40:27 Isaiah asks the people, “Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, ‘My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God?’” Judah's questions about their experiences were real. In 49:14 (see Lam 5:20), a lament from the people says, “But Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.’” Again in 42:22, a description of the people states, “But this is a people robbed and plundered, all of them are trapped in holes and hidden in prisons; they have become a prey with

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<sup>5</sup> Isa 36–39 sets up several thematic tensions that are resolved beginning in chapter 40. The hinge nature of the narratives reveals the redactor's work and encourages a canonical reading.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching among the Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 5.

no one to rescue, a spoil with no one to say, 'Restore!'" Israel doubts God's fidelity and God's power to save even if he does remember (Isa 50:2; 59:1), so God questions the fidelity of Israel and asks, "Why was no one there when I came? Why did no one answer when I called?"

Israel needs YHWH's comfort (40:2–3; 43:1, 5). The long night of anguish will soon be over. Isaiah preaches comfort to a people who had no one to comfort her, yet YHWH is at the threshold of a new, decisive intervention in the life of his people and the world. And Isaiah can see it. He speaks words that contradicted everything they knew. He calls the community to a vision that is beyond their experiences. The task of Second Isaiah is to renew and restore shattered faith. Before they can be comforted, Isaiah needs to convince them that God is able and willing to save them.

Isaiah desires to renew the people's vision of YHWH as creator, redeemer, and sovereign. Isaiah transforms the word "gospel" into a theological term. In 40:9 and 52:7, the "good news" is that YHWH has triumphed over the power of exile (Babylonian gods, 46:1–4; and Babylonian power, 47:1–11). Isaiah renews YHWH's vision of them as faithful servant.<sup>7</sup> YHWH's renewal of the people will come through their suffering. Israel was to be sacramentally present in the world as a servant people for the restoration of the entire creation to *shalom*. "Israel was to be a caretaker community, a vital nucleus in the larger cell, a community that, through undivided worship and wholehearted obedience, mediated divine reconciliation and healing to the whole human family."<sup>8</sup>

The second lens moves the reader from exile→homecoming→mission by the plotline of suffering. The servant willingly suffers for the sake of the society's emancipation so that the community may enter into God's mission for the world. Israel was to embody God's justice and peace in the world.<sup>9</sup>

Some homiletical themes might include God is a redeemer of his people for the time of punishment is over (43:11, 14–15, 16–20; 46:12–13; 45:22–23; 44:23). There will be no doubt who redeems them, for YHWH will restore Zion. He can do this because he is the only God and creator of us, our world, and our community (Isa 40: 22–23; 28–29; 55:10; 43:1–4; 5–6). God will use suffering as a means to redeem the nations. YHWH's people will be a light to the nations. There is a role for all nations in YHWH's plan. YHWH commits himself to his people. YHWH will do new things never done before as his people become part of a new creation and a new Exodus. YHWH's Word will stand forever (see the inclusio in 40:1–9 and 55:6–11).

<sup>7</sup> The Servant Songs are 42:1–9; 49:1–7; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Hanson in Christopher Seitz, ed., *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah*, 97–98.

<sup>9</sup> The "servant of the Lord" does not always refer to the same person or group. Isaiah often changes identification of the servant. This is due to the fact that the Jews held the conception of "corporate personality," which means that one individual could stand for the whole group or the group could be regarded as embodied in one person.

Some scholars find it difficult to discern when Isaiah shifts his lenses to scan the present times up close. Majority opinion opts for a new lens at chapter 56. Tensions exist between the visions of renewal and the experiences of life. God's restoration seemingly included resurgence in the pagan rituals long indigenous in Israel (57:1–13). The glorious restoration envisioned comes face to face with the harsh realities of living in post-exilic Jerusalem. The people find God's promises hard to believe (60:1, 3, 14; 61:6). On the one hand, they hear "You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of our God" (62:3). On the other hand, they see "the righteous perish, and no one takes it to heart; the devout are taken away while no one understands. . . . We grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among the vigorous as though we were dead" (57:1; 59:10). The people may have often asked, "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" (58:3). Subsequently, the third lens envisions a mixture of hope and despair.

Isa 60–62, a core text revealing God's intent for his people, is bracketed by 56–59 and 63–66. In a Year of Jubilee, Isaiah announces social action (61). God intervenes in the cycles of indebtedness and poverty. Jubilee allows people to re-enter society with dignity and freedom, and YHWH will establish his people anew (62). YHWH will restore Jerusalem to its former glory but not the whole nation, only the righteous few (56–59). Ethical claims and Torah obedience are seen through inclusiveness (56:1–2), justice (56:3–8; 57:8, 11, 14, 15), meeting a neighbor's needs, which contradicts self-indulgent worship (58:6–8), and an affirmation of the humble (57:15). But through it all, there also exists adversaries who have a different vision of the community (57:1–13, 20; 59:1–8 63:18; 65:1–7, 13–14; 66:3–4, 14c–17).<sup>10</sup>

Homiletical themes abound: YHWH wants justice, not fasting (58); YHWH wants faithfulness to the covenant, not works of violence (59); YHWH wants repentance and humility (63–64); if the people respond, YHWH will restore peace (65); and YHWH will rule over the entire world (66).

Three historic situations are present, namely, pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic (a time of prosperity, a time of total devastation, and a mixed time of blessing and despair). Isaiah speaks about God during times such as these with words of reckoning, restoration, and present experience. Through various lenses, we can see as God sees. Through Isaiah's gospel, we can envision our futures anew. The holy one of Israel still reigns, and our hope is closer now than it has ever been.

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<sup>10</sup> See Charles Carter, *The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian Period: A Social and Demographic Study*, JSOTSup 294 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), for a comprehensive review of the research concerning the setting of Yehud.

### Isaiah Still Speaks

I have argued elsewhere that prophets were conditioned by the old traditions of the Torah.<sup>11</sup> They re-interpreted these traditions by applying them to their present times. Because of the new situations within which the prophets found themselves, they tailored the traditions. New situations opened up fresh possibilities of understanding old traditions. Subsequently, the message of the prophets emerged as a forging interplay of three factors: (1) the ancient covenant traditions of Israel's election and land promise; (2) God's new word for Israel today; and (3) the concrete experiences of some particular situation.

Prophets exhorted reformation not innovation, confrontation not creation, revival not change. Therefore, preservation of the tradition was central as they reapplied the covenant to new situations and re-envisioned the present in light of the past in order to insure future fidelity. The prophets saw God doing a new thing in the land. Prophets were not interested in the future generally; rather, they focused on the activity of God in the present. Torah traditions were not timeless truths abstracted out of context but expressions of God's past and future activity among his people. The new action of God in the land revolved around a restoration of his original intent for his community.

When preachers today face the pressing issues of the congregation and the larger society, they can preach a prophetic Word. Prophetic preaching has the potential to transform the lives of people as they struggle to face the everyday challenges in a swirling society. First, the sermon must be rooted in the tradition of the congregation's historic faith. Next, the message must be theologically informed. Furthermore, present issues must be interpreted in the context of faith and theology. Finally, the preacher will envision for the audience God's intended future that can be presently realized.

In order to re-appropriate the past to address the present so that the future will be re-imagined, the preacher will first listen to the voice of the congregation. Listening to the present context that presses on the lives of the congregation will cause us to ask, "What is tearing up their days?" "What is shaping the habits and patterns of their lives?" Depending on what we hear, we will choose different lenses to wear because we intend to create hope for a renewed community and focus for God's missional activity in the world. If the community has amnesia, it needs a spoken word to recreate memories. If it has despair, it needs a spoken word of hope and comfort.

Subsequently, the preacher will critically correlate the voice of the people with the voice of God by hearing the gospel anew. God's promise speaks against the way things are. A re-description that breaks the conventional paradigms allows preaching to become a situation-transforming power in the present and for the future. A word of faith speaks against perceived circumstances by describing the future that God invites us to enter.

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<sup>11</sup> Tim Sensing, "A Call to Prophetic Preaching," *ResQ* 41 (1999): 139-54.

A method of dialogic triangulation might be conceived as follows using a piece of paper with three columns:

1. List the concerns of the people in one column. These concerns come from living with and among the community of faith. Your sermon will be pastorally informed.
2. In a second column, list the concerns of the text. These concerns come from living with the text. Your sermon will be theologically informed.<sup>12</sup>
3. In a third column, imagine the future. Envision through proclamation the congregation's communal formation. If the congregation took Isaiah's vision of God's world seriously, what would such a world look like today?

Finding intersections of the three columns will suggest several sermon possibilities. For example:

**Column 1:  
Pastoral Concerns**

F. Buechner reminds us that various folks remain outside our doors knocking for entrance.

"Woe to us indeed if we forget the homeless ones who have no vote, no power, nobody to lobby for them, and who might as well have no faces even, the way we try to avoid the troubling sight of them in the streets of the cities where they roam like stray cats. And as we listen each night to the news of what happened in our lives that day, woe to us if we forget our own homelessness. . . . To be homeless the way people like you and me are apt to be homeless is to have homes all over the place but not to be really at

**Column 2:  
Textual Concerns**

Isaiah 56:1 calls us to *maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed*. God's promised comfort for all is being denied to some by the congregation. Rules of participation within community are often made that exclude some while permitting others. But according to Isaiah's gospel, all people who meet the criteria of honoring covenant and keeping Sabbath are part of God's community reconstruction process (56:4-7). But even in the midst of the tragic, God holds forth hope. He announces, "My house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples" (56:7).

**Column 3:  
Homiletical Concerns**

What will God's community look like? Who will stand next to you when the bread is broken and the cup is shared? God's call for his people to be inclusive still remains elusive. Our experiences do not correspond with God's promise. Preaching from Isaiah's third lens will juxtapose God's intention with concrete examples of our faithfulness to his mission, calling us to participate more fully in his ongoing reclamation project.

A sermon that re-appropriates the text of Isaiah 56 might have the following present tense conclusion:

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<sup>12</sup> Cadences, 118ff. Brueggemann offers "six disciplines of readiness that are crucial for the receiving of God's newness and for converting exile into homecoming." In the midst of the two options—despair or assimilation—Brueggemann desires a return to these theological commitments modeled in Isaiah. These commitments enable congregations to embrace God's glorious future.



home in any of them. To be really at home is to be really at peace, and our lives are so intricately interwoven that there can be no real peace for any of us until there is peace for all of us.”\*

For example, in a situation that directly relates to my community involves a half-way house that exists for released prisoners. Its set-up is designed to help integrate them back into society but sometimes also segregates them from our Sunday gatherings.

\* Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home: Recollections and Reflections* (San Francisco: Harper-SanFrancisco, 1996) 104, 140. Quoted in *Cadences*, pp. ix-x.

Remember, Judah had returned to Jerusalem after a long and dreary night in exile. Judah returned to God’s embrace in the land of their fathers and mothers. They returned full of joy and anticipation that God would once again redeem them to the lofty places of David, the Temple, and Covenant. But the question remained for them: Would they be the people that prided themselves in being God’s chosen people while engaging in idolatrous practices, while neglecting the needs of widows and fatherless, while fostering a legal and economic system that oppressed the poor, while following a corrupt religious and political leadership? Or would they be true children of Abraham who would become a blessing to the nations and light unto the Gentiles, a nation that would accept even the unacceptable into their assemblies?

“But even in the midst of the tragic, God holds forth hope. He announces, “My house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples” (56:7). Remember, God has embraced us to be his people who display his mercy in the world. Will we be a people who pride ourselves in being God’s chosen people while engaging in religious practices that exclude others, while neglecting the needs of widows and fatherless, while fostering a legal and economic system that oppresses the poor, while following a corrupt religious and political leadership that fosters self-preservation? Or will we be true children of God who bring blessing to the nations and light unto the least of these? The words of the prophet sound forth today, *Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. Blessed are those who do this, the ones who hold it fast* (56:1, 2).”

### Miscellaneous Suggestions

Pitfalls to avoid include allegorical or analogical readings that seek some degree of correspondence with Isaiah’s world and our world leading to self-help readings more informed by individual psychologies than by theological and communal discernment. The American need to find self-actualization has made it easy for sermons to find quick connections between the text and Dr. Phil. The hermeneutic most often abused by preachers crossing this bridge involves a reductionistic allegorical or analogical leap. The text of Isaiah is God’s story, Israel’s story, and eventually our story through Christ.

Similarly, Isaiah is more than a listing of predictive prophecies whether supported by NT texts (e.g., Isa 53) or not (e.g., Isa 2:1-4). Instead, we should

think of Isaiah as gospel proclamation more than a crystal ball. Predictive connections between the OT and the NT often led Christian interpreters to abuse Jewish interpretations of the text.<sup>13</sup>

How does one read Isaiah in light of the Christ event? It is proper to see how the book of Isaiah fed, nurtured, and evoked Christian imagination with references to Jesus and the church. However, I recommend not preempting the OT with the NT, for many such readings are far removed from Isaiah's intent. Holmgren states,

Contrary to the judgment of some of the church founders, the Israelites were not especially universally evil. *Their sins are our sins*. The prophetic word endures and speaks to human beings throughout the ages. The language is Hebrew but the message is universal. The prophetic message heard in ancient Israel is never out of date or irrelevant because the wrongs of the past are alive wherever and whenever people live in society. On this planet there exists no perfect community. However, we learn from the Israelites that if a community opens itself to critical review and takes part in self-criticism, it can be a place, despite its flaws, where people can live and find blessing.<sup>14</sup>

The pendulum can swing too far both ways. The preacher will want to resist keeping Isaiah locked in a past tense world and resist trumping the message of Isaiah with the NT. The preacher's task is to read and preach Isaiah on its own terms, letting it be one voice in a larger conversation. The NT writers heavily depended on Isaiah for interpreting the Christ event. When preaching from those NT texts, there will be ample opportunities to expound upon that interpretation. However, Isaiah primarily shows us the Holy One of Israel and how YHWH interacts with his covenant people. Isaiah supplies a major theme in the ongoing plotline of God's salvation story. Israel's self-critical honesty in the prophetic literature invites us all to reflect critically on our practice and faith. To reduce the

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<sup>13</sup> The classic example of this abuse is seen in Chrysostom but reaches its horrible climax beyond what any preacher of the gospel could imagine in the holocaust. See Fredrick C. Holmgren, *The Old Testament and the Significance of Jesus: Embracing Change—Maintaining Christian Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999): "Traditionally the church has viewed the relationship of the Old Testament to the New Testament to be one of promise and fulfillment. Recently, however, evangelical and mainline scholars have cautioned against a rigid application of this formula because it undercuts the integrity of the earlier scripture. Further, they point out that early Christians did not discover Jesus as a result of an initial study of the Old Testament. Rather the movement was in the opposite direction: that is, from their 'meeting' with Jesus Christians looked back to the Old Testament, their scripture, in order to gain understanding of what took place. . . . Christians 'knew' by experience who Jesus was, but they needed the words and imagery of the scripture . . . to articulate this 'knowing'" (13). Holmgren calls this a "believer's exegesis" or a "look-back exegesis" often practiced by the Qumran community and the rabbis, using midrash.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6.

function of prophecy to one episode of history (even one as significant as the Christ event) is to lose the complexity of God's way in the world.

When considering preaching Isaiah from the Lectionary,<sup>15</sup> we should remember that most of the choices are made to fit Isaiah into the Christian year. For example, Isaiah 59 is found on Ash Wednesday. For the preacher using the lectionary as a means to cover the Christian Year, then Isaiah would be interpreted through the lens of Christ. The OT lesson is chosen to reinforce, give background, or provide contrast to the Gospel lesson.<sup>16</sup> The Lectionary does not offer many opportunities to preach Isaiah thematically or *Lectio continua*. Yet even with the case of the Ash Wednesday selection, Isaiah's perspective may provide insights to the occasion that otherwise may be overlooked if the gospel text is allowed to dominate the discussion.

Another pitfall to avoid involves using only one homiletical form that typically reshapes the text. Isaiah is a treasure trove of rich and diverse literary genres (narratives, songs, and oracles of various sorts). Most of Isaiah is not narrative. The poetic and metaphorical nature of many of the oracles grants the preacher several opportunities to stretch the homiletical imagination. For example, Isaiah's Salvation Oracles demonstrate how God's speech makes things new in the midst of uncontrollable situations. Similarly, the "Fear Not" oracles are designed to encourage a king faced with military threat (7:4-9, Ahaz; 37:6-7, Hezekiah) followed by an address to the community so they too will be comforted (10:24-27; 41:8-13, 14-16; 43:1-6; 44:1-5). The comfort was fulfilled in Hezekiah's days when Jerusalem was delivered from Assyria and fulfilled later when the captives returned from exile. Genre form should not dictate homiletical form but function as leaven for the homiletical imagination.

How does the preacher cover the massive amount of complicated historical background material needed to understand Isaiah? The background material is available from several sources, including Abraham J. Heschel's accessible *The Prophets: An Introduction* (New York: Harper, 1962). The preacher could include a five-minute section in the middle of the sermon to give a snapshot or synopsis of the necessary background. The synopsis must correspond with the focus and function of the sermon. If the synopsis does not contribute to the flow and understanding of the sermon, then it should not be added. The synopsis should be a story rather than a listing of historical facts. Following the lead of Scripture, the preacher should use an economy of language to retell stories. Not

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<sup>15</sup> Isaiah occurs only second to Psalms in the *Common Revised Lectionary*, Year A-21 times; Year B-23 times; Year C-15 times. Fourteen texts are found in all three cycles, making a total of 87 occurrences.

<sup>16</sup> The aforementioned reductionistic use of the OT is criticized by E. Lowry, *Living with the Lectionary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), and James A. Sanders, "Canon and Calendar: An Alternative Lectionary Proposal," in *Social Themes of the Christian Year: A Commentary on the Lectionary* (ed., Dieter T. Hessel; Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1983): 257-63.

all the facts will contribute to this sermon. Otherwise, it is like trying to take a drink from a fire hydrant. Additionally, the sermon series could be supplemented with a parallel cycle in one of the adult classes or on Sunday evenings. A bulletin insert could also provide the necessary historical background material.

Finally, the language of Isaiah contains a vast array of images, word plays, and metaphors to fund the theological imagination of the preacher. The collections of word plays in 7:1–9:7 and 60–62 are just a few of the sections that allow the preacher to “play” with the language of the sermon. Metaphors for God, including “father,” “mother,” “shepherd,” “vinedresser,” and “potter,” provide the preacher opportunities to explore the life of God in concrete ways. Additionally, symbolism (e.g., “water”) that weaves throughout the book can be a wondrous way to unify a sermon series.

### Conclusion

A sermon from Isaiah will primarily be a proclaimed word that is theologically informed by the gospel of Isaiah—a word that will form community into God’s shining city set on a hill. The preached word of Isaiah will be shaped by the text of Isaiah in order to create a habitable world of God’s design. Isaiah does this, and we can imitate him, by disorienting the status quo (whether pre-exilic, exilic, or post-exilic) by addressing present issues with a Word of God so that a new orientation can be created in the lives of people. The new and future Word will faithfully represent the old Word in the turbulent present. Preachers who presume to do more or less lose their credibility if not their authority. Properly understood, prophetic preaching will be as demanding, threatening, rebuking, encouraging, and promising today as it was then.



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