

## **It's a New World Today**

### **Wet-foot, Dry-foot**

I just read a personal story in my running magazine. Glenn Stout was vacationing on St. John in the U.S Virgin Islands. One morning he went out running along a road that followed the beach and then dipped down a road that went down to towards the sea where he saw a groups of about a dozen people just sort of hanging out under a clump of palm trees. A young man in the group hailed Glenn as he ran by and asked in a heavy Spanish accent, "Excuse me, excuse me please!" "St. John?" he asked. "Virgin Islands?"

Glen answered, "Yes, this is St. John."

"United States?"

"Yes, this is St. John's Island, the United States."

"Thank you, thank you very much!" the young man said. And Glenn was about to resume his run, assuming that perhaps these people might be boaters whose boat had broken down and were wondering whether they had come ashore at St. John or the *British* Virgin island of Tortola which is only a few kilometres away.

But then a stocky older man with a big white mustache thrust out his chin and pointed to his chest and said, "I am Cuban!"

Glenn finally got it. They were refugees. And accord to the wet-foot dry-foot Cuban immigration policy of the US government, by making it to the shore, they had gained the right to remain in the United States. If they had been discovered even while wading ashore in the ankle-deep surf, they would have been returned to Cuba and most likely imprisoned. One single step onto that beach had made all the difference. For those people, it was a new world *today*.

(Runner's World Dec 07)

### **A Forward to this Series**

In this series of occasional sermons I've been taking a passage from the Old Testament Prophets and using it as a starting point to give a brief introduction to the book as a whole. This involves a bit of a history lesson and the historical setting of our text today really carries in time from that of the Book of Haggai which we considered last week, but this week. . .

### **The Book of Isaiah**

The story behind the Book of Isaiah is really just as interesting and inspiring as the actual contents of the scroll. After the exile, Judaism was looking for a new rallying point. There was no longer a true *king* in Jerusalem, only *governors* appointed by the Persian Empire. Their city and Temple needed to be completely rebuilt from ruins. The Jewish people, *many* of them at least, remained in Babylon or were scattered throughout the world. Many Jews had prospered during the exile and the last thing they wanted to do was to move to some pile of rubble in the desert. So not all returned to Israel even when that became possible.

And so what now would hold the Jews together? What would take the place of the old family connections of tribe and clan and land? The *city* would have to become the centre of Jewish pilgrimage and learning. As the returned exiles studied the prophetic traditions that had circulated among them, *the Temple became the focus of their yearning*.

They found this theme most clearly expressed in "the Vision of Isaiah the Prophet." During the exile and after, the Jews continued to re-work the original work of the prophet

Isaiah, writing new prophecies from a “what-would-Isaiah-think” perspective. Isaiah had been so obviously full of the presence of God’s Spirit and as spiritual people they continued to connect with what Isaiah’s view would have been. They continued to look for the fulfilment of his vision in *their days* and beyond. Eventually these people presented to the world the finished book.

The finished Book of Isaiah really has *three main sections*: the first part, chapters 1-39 is. . .

### **A Message of Judgement**

We can’t really escape that Isaiah is a *tragedy*: there is no happy ending to the book. This is a story in which the main characters, Israel and Jerusalem, remain blind and deaf to the words of God right to the end. “They will hear, but not listen. They will see but not perceive.” (6:9-10) They refused the word of the LORD and therefore remained unaware of his plans for them. The way *they* saw it, God should have supported *their* ideas of what the future should be like. So they always remain, at one level, under his judgment.

But the very way the book is written, it invites us as readers to take a reader-centred approach: we can take what is really a tragic story of people who didn’t listen to God as the starting point in *our* own conversation with God, and as we come to better understand the Book, and what it said to *those people* and to successive generations after, we can respond to what it says to *us today*. *The Good News in Isaiah* is that judgement is not the final word from God. So the next section, chapter 40-55, is

### **The Message of Comfort**

Carrying the precious scrolls of Isaiah, a brokenhearted people went into exile. Their situation had changed forever. Their city, rubble. They were just a few ragged survivors thrust into a overwhelming pagan culture. But as they continued to meditate on the vision of Isaiah, God began to speak : **40:1-2 . . .**

Comfort. Where would such comfort ever come from? What could possibly relieve the sense of deep spiritual alienation? What could ever restore their lost connection with God? They were now clearly subjugated citizens of pagan empire. A conquered people. They are not free. But God had a plan.

Who would have dreamed that an upstart Persian prince could mount a credible threat to Babylon? But eventually this Persian prince, named Cyrus conquered Babylon. Now, ruling a vast empire comprised of many different people who worshiped many, many gods, Cyrus, in his wisdom realized that the secret of ruling this empire would lie in giving each of his subject peoples freedom of religion. Cyrus issued decrees that restored many of the local priesthods and temples throughout his empire. This made him a very popular man. No wonder he called him Cyrus *the Great!* But this also fit perfectly with the plan of Israel’s God to restore his Temple in Jerusalem.

The exiled people could now take *comfort* that their God had a plan and was acting upon it.

But comfort can be *cold* comfort. Morphine can numb pain but not bring healing. So even has end their exile return to their land, they realize that true restoration was going to be a lot more difficult than they thought. All the government rebuilding programmes in the world, all rights and freedoms they enjoyed, could never bring spiritual renewal to their nation. That could only come from God. So after the time of judgement and the comfort of God, comes the third

section of Isaiah, chapters 55-66 which is . . .

### **The Message of Hope**

Americans often comment that we Canadians are so nice and polite. These are people who have obviously never been to a hockey game. But we in this, in this country are, hopefully, finally getting a handle on a dangerous species of humanity known as the “hockey-dad.” You’ve seen the videos: “*hockey-dads-gone-wild*”: screaming at the kid, arguing with the ref, punching out the coach. . . Complains about the rink. The place is a dump. He even hates the Zamboni driver.

Why is this guy so frustrated? Well, inevitably this is a man who is trying to vicariously living out his own hockey dream through his kid. He never had a chance when he was young, so now he is determined that his kid will. The kid just wants to play hockey, but Dad has much bigger dreams. Unrealistic dreams, thinks everyone’s out to get him. It’s all dirty politics in the Pee-Wee League! .

As the exiles got settled back in the land of Judah, a began to generation old still longing for it’s children to enter into the spiritual heritage they themselves had not been able to enjoy. They smoldered with resentment. By the time of Nehemiah and Ezra, the second wave of the returned exiles, Zerubbabel’s Temple was already close to a century old and in need of renovation and repairs. It wasn’t particularly spacious or well built to begin with. Furthermore, the city walls were still in ruins. Two rival factions within the priesthood fought it out for control of priestly privileges: competing visions of what Israel should become, it’s role in the world.

In short, Jerusalem was still not exactly a popular destination a spiritual pilgrim would long to visit. The Temple had yet to become the rallying point the scattered Jews needed if they were to survive as a people. Why would anyone visit Jerusalem? This place was a dump, a city full of grumpy, squabbling people.

O, this generation was about to leave a legacy alright, but not the one they wanted to leave. They’d become the raging hockey dad and unless they got a grip on it, God was going throw them out of the arena. And then both they and their children would lose the chance at a renewed, vital spiritual life. This is a crucial time for the nation. Something had to change. But here’s where the Book of Isaiah gives. . .

### **A Key Insight: Isaiah 54:9-10**

They are living between two ages. Just as Noah lived at the end of one age and the beginning of another, Isaiah says the same about them. The *old order* was that into which Abraham came, in which Moses worked, in which Israel conquered and occupied Canaan, and in which David built his kingdom. That age is *over*. The successors to David’s throne and the generations of people who followed those kings allowed the kingdom to disintegrate. And this led to exile. But now, *an age has come to an end* and these people living after the exile are like *Noah* on the other side of the flood. It’s a new world.

It’s a new world with new structures. They must find a new way to be the people of God within the imperial Persian rule that dominates the scene.

So the final chapters of Isaiah, present a new way of thinking. The vision recognizes that are rather like old-school hockey dads, yelling from the stands, the old school priests and teachers of the Torah are both frustrated and frustrating because they’re looking for God in the

past when God is leading *now*. He's out in front of his people, guiding revealing new truth. But they are still a people who just aren't listening. They just can't see it. Because if they did, they would understand what a great time of hope they are living in! .

Which brings us to the text we heard read today **Isaiah 65:17-25**

The new situation was so absolutely different from the old that it could only be described as . . .

### **A New Heavens and New Earth 17**

"See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what ***I am creating***. . ." (NRSV)

Note that last phrase is in the ***present continuous tense***. God is not telling them about what he will create someday" but rather what he is creating," today and tomorrow, this and next week, this and the next year. He is telling them that he is creating a new situation for them. *Today*.

This passage is not referring to some distant end-times future. Perhaps you have read this passage from that perspective. I would challenge you to re-think that. This passage describes God plans to be fulfilled in *their* days. He is just about to do this. Jerusalem is at this moment being rebuilt and refurbished to be ready to welcome pilgrims for centuries to come. It's a new world *today!*

If they could only realize that, then the sky above them would seem brand new. The soil beneath their feet would feel different and alive. It was time to leave behind the disgruntled hockey-dad mentality in which the whole world was out to get them, and things were not the way they used to be. They must now *embrace* the new, God-given place they have been given in the Persian Empire. Only then could they really become . . .

### **A Place people want to go to**

" for I will create Jerusalem to be a *delight* and its *people a joy*. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.

It would be happy place. Fun. Maybe a little more like Disneyland . . .

Last week I read a new flash that Disneyland is closing it's famous "It's a Small World" ride. Why? They have to deal with with the problem of bottoming-out boats. The cause is that people are heavier – even kids. These days the boats stall in two different spots. They've been having to ask several guests to get off to lighten the load or putting fewer people in each boat. (Disneyland has also recently redesigned costumes in larger sizes to accommodate patrons' wider waistlines. So maybe it's *not* such a small a world after all)

But one thing for sure, Jerusalem was no Disneyland. This is not a place you would want to take your kids for a vacation. But now, Jerusalem would *become* become the focus for a worshiping pilgrim people because the land which had stood for generations under the curse of blood and death is now going to have that *curse reversed*.

One of the curses on Adam for his disobedience was that he would not reap a reward equal to his toil in the soil. And throughout the Bible, whenever a people's labour becomes fruitless and futile, it's always because something is wrong that needs to be corrected so that blessing could flow.

For a long time, the returned Israelites had lived in hurting conditions. Diseases, suffering, infant mortality were commonplace. This was true in exile, and continued when they

returned. Nothing worked very well, because the land was cursed. But now God wants to bring this to a stop and proclaims in v 20

“Never again will there be in it infants who live but a few days, or older people who do not live out their years; those who die at a hundred will be thought mere youths; those who fail to reach a hundred will be considered accursed.

What would make the difference? Why would this once cursed place now be a place people wanted to go to? Something dramatic would have to happen. This would have to be a place in which the people are actively . . .

### **Waging Peace**

They would have to put as much energy into building community as was put into ripping it apart. But when they do. . .

“They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands. They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them.”

What I’m suggesting today is that the proper interpretation of this prophecy must come from its historical context. The conditions of law and order that now existed under the Persian empire would finally allow this long-suffering people to begin to recapture the agricultural productivity of the land. The conditions were right for peace. And only by waging peace could Jerusalem be made ready for the pilgrims. People would want to go there.

But there can be no peace without *justice*. And it is right here that we, come to . . .

### **The Horizon of our lives**

In our world today the pain, suffering and deaths caused by HIV/AIDS and war and poverty and other social evils are tearing at the heart of God and moving God to action. God just as concerned today about declining life spans, high infant and maternal mortality rates from preventable, curable and manageable conditions. They are a concern to God. He is expressing that concern through the prophets of our day, but are we listening? Do we see it? I can only repeat Jim Wallis’ phrase: “Budgets are moral documents.” That is to say our spiritual condition is dependent on our response to the world. What is our response? Will it bring *blessing* or a curse on the land?

Last week in the Washington Post (Tue, 11/13/2007) reported that U.S. Library of Congress has issued a new report, "*Hidden Costs of the Iraq War*," by the U S Congress's Economic Committee. If we include the hidden costs, not just of weapons and wages, but of health care and survivor benefits etc, etc, this report estimates that the costs of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2002 through 2008 will total **\$1.6 trillion**. Let’s get a picture of how much money that it is. . . [SLIDES OF MONEY]

If you wonder how much that works out to per U.S. taxpayers, according to the report, the cost averages out to \$20,900 for every family of four.

### **Here is an amount of money more easy to grasp [SLIDE OF TOONIE]**

This man lives in Bangladesh. He has a wife and three kids. He loves his children very much and works very hard to give them what they need to grow up healthy and well prepared for

life. He works in the fields of a wealthy farmer from early morning until late at night. His wife works in the farmer's house, cooking, cleaning and taking care of the farmer's children. Between the two of them, they make about toonie a day.

There are the one billion people around the world who live on less than a dollar a day. One billion people is a lot of people. That's one in every six people in our world who gets by on less than a dollar a day.

- What can \$1 buy here in Canada? A chocolate bar, can of vegetables and bag of pasta. Imagine how hard it must be to feed a family with the \$2.

- And that's just food. What about clothes, a homes, school, doctors, medicine?

In Bangladesh, all of these things cost money, even visiting the doctor or going to school. Life can be very difficult for poor families. And if someone gets sick, or if heavy rains damage your house, then you are in big trouble.

You got to ask yourself the question: How kind will history be to a nation that can spend \$1.6 trillion on war in a world like this? (\$1,600 each to the billion people living on less than a dollar a day)

Isaiah is not talking about God bring some utopia to earth in the future, but rather he is inviting us into . . .

### **The reality of God's presence today**

"Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the LORD. "

What we have here is a *poetic* picture of the dominating and predatory living harmoniously with the weak and helpless. The absence of violence. Isaiah pictures Mount Zion as an earthly spot where the reality of God's presence, his peace and joy can be experienced.

Why do human beings hunt and persecute each other? How can we be so brutal and oppressive towards our own kind? Why is there a chronic tilt towards war rather than peace? Destruction rather than construction? Human culture needs a transformation. But is a shift from war, social injustice and environmental imbalance to peace social justice and environmental balance a realistic possibility? What would bring about such a transformation?

As I said, Isaiah is not a book with a happy ending. In the last verse of the book ( 66:24) we gaze on the bodies of those who have been left out of the transformation. Some will never listen. Never see what God wants to do.

You and I may not have the answers to the great global problems facing our world. If we come back to those Cubans setting foot on that beach, the moment their ankles came out of the surf and onto the dry land, they had a new starting point for their lives. The moment that those people set foot on that beach, it was a new world.

Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and might have it *abundantly*". He brought the kingdom of God to earth. We create that kingdom wherever we go live: in our homes, in our church, our community. Our "Jerusalem", our sphere of kingdom influence, may be very small to begin with.

The question is: *are our feet on the beach, or still somewhere in the surf?*

