

Isaiah – Swords and Plowshares

After first part

I don't want to go into the history here so much I bore those who aren't big into history. But it will be helpful to know a little bit of it as we put this story into context.

As we've said, Israel was divided into two kingdoms after King Solomon died – the Northern kingdom, typically called either Samaria, or just Israel. The Southern kingdom was called Judah.

The massive book of Isaiah probably had at least two and maybe three authors. The first 39 chapters are the words of the first Isaiah. The first Isaiah prophesied during the reign of three kings in Judah.

The superpower at the time of first Isaiah was Assyria. Isaiah ranted against the two things all prophets did, which we'll talk about in a minute.

But for him, one of the biggest signs of unfaithfulness was that the kings kept making alliances with nations they thought would help them stay safe and secure.

An alliance with Egypt made by Hezekiah's father Ahaz in particular infuriated Isaiah. Isaiah kept telling the king they needed to trust God...God would protect them, not these other nations.

Hezekiah was one of the few good kings – he was faithful and pious. His actions were taken in faith. He did trust God and he didn't make alliances. But I guarantee that most military strategists of our day would have backed what Ahaz did more than Hezekiah. We all probably would have.

At this point in Israel's history, the Northern Kingdom has already been destroyed by King Sennacherib and his Assyrian army. The people have been deported and not allowed to return. The Assyrians have also captured big parts of Judah.

Sennacherib sent his field commander to demand surrender of Jerusalem. He taunts not just King Hezekiah's men, but also all the frightened Jerusalem citizens lining the wall.

He says your God can't help you any more than all the gods of the other cities we've gone up against helped them. And if Hezekiah tells you otherwise, he's a liar.

Second part

Here's how this story comes out – Assyria's power is massive. Judah and Jerusalem are not powerful. This is truly a David and Goliath match up. Isaiah must be completely out of touch with reality.

But here's the thing. Although Assyria did march on Jerusalem and may have held it under siege for a time, Assyria did not prevail. Some sort of plague struck the Assyrian army and those left alive were forced to retreat.

A later superpower, Babylon, did end up conquering Jerusalem and the best and brightest were sent into exile. But then under Persia, the next superpower, they were allowed to return. While the Northern Kingdom ceased to exist under Assyrian conquest, Judah did not. Judah remained as the remnant of God's chosen people.

Final section

So, first of all last week I said there were two things the prophets consistently railed against. Can you tell me what they were?

Right – Idolatry and Injustice – especially injustice on the part of the rich and powerful against the poor. Isaiah did as well, although it's less a part of what we're going to talk about today.

When we read the prophets, we ultimately have to deal with God's anger toward idolatry and injustice. That's never very comfortable for us who believe in the centrality of God's love. But in fact, God's anger arises out of that love.

Although I might not be comfortable with it, the prophets were pretty clear that God used powerful national enemies to punish Israel's most powerful for their unfaithfulness and exploitation of the nation's people.

For me, it's helpful to remember the sort of world God created and to remember God's intent for the people of Israel. I believe it's wired into creation that when God's people don't live by the image of God's intent for creation, war and violence are ultimately the result.

The prophets kept that vision of God's intent for creation forever in front of the people. They point out where things have gone awry. They pay attention to what's going on in the world around, and they repeatedly say, if you keep following down this path, destruction and chaos are in your future.

It's the flood story all over again. Only in the prophets, God's anger has a limit. It won't last forever. It won't totally destroy.

And typically in the prophets, the bad things that happen are seen more as a refiners fire – something that purges away the greedy, cruel, oppressive idolatry of the arrogant.

In the prophets, defeat and destruction never get the last word. Always hope does.

Next to the teachings of Jesus, I find the prophets most helpful for thinking about our own times. When you read the Bible, really from Joshua on, war is a huge theme.

When you read the history from the period of the prophets in particular, you begin to see how depressingly familiar the whole thing sounds. Swap out names of nations and you get the same story...taunting...terrorizing...threatening...and ultimately attacking...over and over for thousands of years.

Imagine for a moment someone like Isaiah speaking to Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, as they faced the dreaded communists...a fear that led us into Viet Nam.

The image that might come to mind for many of us who lived through the Viet Nam era is a photo entitled Flower Power.

It's a picture from the 1967 March on the Pentagon, a part of the protest of the Viet Nam war. The marchers were met by an armed military police battalion. In the photo, a young protestor is shown placing a carnation into the end of the barrel of an M16 rifle held by one of the soldiers. That young protestor is a bit like Isaiah. Over the years, many Christians have in fact been war protestors.

So, I obviously have to confess to very mixed feelings. The US military has been a part of nearly all my adult life.

I very much appreciate the sacrifices that have been made by those who are willing to risk their very lives for the sake of our nation.

I can't even really count the number of military ceremonies, Veteran's Day and Memorial Day observances I've been to. Some of my favorite people are in the military – including the one I'm married to.

It seems to me that reality dictates that sometimes, lethal force is the only thing that will stop a particular evil.

And yet, I can never quite get this vision from Isaiah 2 out of my head. Shane Claiborne is a founder of The Simple Way in Philadelphia. The Simple Way is a sort of new monastic community in the heart of a poor neighborhood in Philadelphia.

In reaction to a homicide rate of one per day, he began asking people to bring in their weapons. And he and his community literally forged instruments of violence into garden tools. They brought Isaiah 2 to life.

There's a Scottish ballad called The Green Fields of France. It was originally written by a Scotsman named Eric Bogle but my favorite cover of it is by Dropkick Murphys, an American Celtic punk band.

It begins at the graveside of young Willy McBride, who was only 19 when he joined the great fallen of 1916, dying on a bloody battlefield in France.

It's a haunting ballad whose words dance on the sorrowful strings of all war protest songs.

Here's the last verse:

and i can't help but wonder oh willy mcbride
do all those who lie here know why they died
did you really believe them when they told you the cause
did you really believe that this war would end wars
well the suffering, the sorrow, the glory, the shame
the killing and dying it was all done in vain
oh willy mcbride it all happened again
and again, and again, and again, and again

Isaiah 2 probably seems to us like something that will only happen after Christ's return and the fulfillment of God's Kingdom. And maybe that's right. At least as long as fear has such a powerful sway over us, we are not likely to change things.

But I can't help but wonder, what could happen if we really believed Isaiah's vision was possible?

