

I know that very little in my life will change just because the calendar says 2014 and not 2013. I also know that ringing out the old year and ringing in the new reminds me that some things in my life ought to change. I know that I have set out to introduce you to the Prophet Isaiah. I also know that seven sermons on Isaiah effect the barest of introductions to one of the 16 most important books in the Bible. Every Christian ought to read and reflect on Isaiah once in a lifetime, even if it took two years to do it.

These shards of my knowledge about the milestone of a new year and the message of a prophet that is still relevant to our lives got all mixed up with the emotional intensity of Christmas and the last ten weeks, and out came the following sermon.

It is a reflective sermon, as is appropriate to year's end and to my personal mood. It is tinged with awe at the Prophet Isaiah's ministry, at the unexpected meaning for us I found in his message, and at the God who then and now guides His people through the jungle of life. I hope you find some good take aways today.

Prophets and Kings

Let's start with Isaiah's awe-inspiring ministry. God gave Isaiah a message at his commissioning as a prophet. **“Go and tell this people (the people of Israel): ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”** (Isaiah 6:9-10)

God charged Isaiah to deliver that message **“until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged. Until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste.”** (Isaiah 6:11-13) May God deliver us from such a fate!

The presence of the biblical prophets meant that matters had reached a tipping point. The prophets still called for repentance. People could still repent; but if they did not, a terrible deafness stole across their understanding, an encroaching blindness made it harder and harder to see the truth, and a stony crust increasingly formed, encasing and crushing their capacity to respond to the love and goodness of God.

You could understand why some people would not want to be in the presence of a prophet. A story from the life of Elijah and a story from the life of Jeremiah can help you feel this revulsion toward the prophets.

King Ahab in a cowardly act of raw power stole a vineyard from one of his subjects, even though the king could have had his pick of many vineyards. He not only stole it but also authorized the execution of the rightful vineyard owner. 1 Kings 21:17-21 tells memorably the confrontation between prophet and king.

Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: “Go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who rules in Samaria. He is now in Naboth's vineyard, where he has gone to take possession of it. Say to him, ‘This is what the Lord says: Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?’ Then say to him, ‘Dogs will lick up your blood – yes, yours!’”

Ahab said to Elijah, “So you have found me, my enemy.”

“I have found you,” he answered, “because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord. I am going to bring disaster on you. I will consume your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel – slave or free.”

The book of Jeremiah, like the book of Isaiah, is a large collection of short speeches and brief memoirs from Jeremiah’s career. We know that Jeremiah had a secretary named Baruch, who collected those speeches and memoirs. On one memorable occasion in Jeremiah 36 the prophet dictated to Baruch a message for the King of Judah. The heart of the message said: **“Perhaps when the people of Judah hear about every disaster I plan to bring on them, each of them will turn from his wicked way; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin.”** (Jeremiah 36:3)

The scroll bearing Jeremiah’s message made its way to the king, and Jeremiah 36:20-23 records what happened. **After they put the scroll in the room of . . . the (King’s) secretary, they went to the king in the courtyard and reported everything to him. The king sent (a servant) to get the scroll and (he) brought it from the room of . . . the (King’s) secretary and read it to the king and all the officials standing beside him. It was the ninth month and the king was sitting in the winter apartment, with a fire burning in the firepot in front of him. Whenever (the servant) had read three or four columns of the scroll, the king cut them off with a scribe’s knife and threw them into the firepot, until the entire scroll was burned in the fire.** He could have said to Jeremiah as easily as Ahab said to Elijah: **“So you have found me, my enemy.”**

The Prophets and the Nations

Isaiah and Jeremiah spoke primarily to their own people, Israel. Both also delivered messages about other nations. The book of Isaiah contains multiple messages for his own people. It also contains messages, sometimes multiple messages about at least eight other nations. Isaiah 13-14 preserves one of his longer messages about one of the superpowers of his age: Babylon. Babylon ultimately invaded and destroyed Jerusalem and the Jewish state. It is worth a closer look.

These two chapters foretell the coming destruction of Babylon. In verses 6-8 Isaiah expressed memorably the psychology of warfare. **Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty. Because of this, all hands will go limp, every man’s heart will melt. Terror will seize them, pain and anguish will grip them; they will writhe like a woman in labor. They will look aghast at each other, their faces aflame.**

In verses 19-21 Isaiah expressed memorably what the social and political collapse of a mighty kingdom would be like in the eyes of the rest of the world. **Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms, the glory of the Babylonians’ pride, will be overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah. She will never be inhabited or lived in through all generations; no Arab will pitch his tent there, no shepherd will rest his flocks there. But desert creatures will lie there, jackals will fill her houses; there the owls will dwell, and there the wild goats will leap about.**

We don’t know if Isaiah’s message about Babylon ever came to the attention of the Babylonian authorities. If it did, I wonder if they thought it was a hoot. It’s a little like an obscure soothsayer of Venezuela railing against the United States. He knows, and we know that we could squish him like a bug if we chose. He knows we won’t do it. We

know we won't do it. The Babylonians had far fewer restraints on their uses of power and vengeance. In Jeremiah's lifetime they squished Jerusalem like a bug.

That tragedy raises questions? Who did Isaiah write his prophecy against Babylon for? What purpose did it serve? Why did people keep this message about Babylon after Babylon destroyed Jerusalem? Why didn't they conclude that Isaiah was deluded and destroy everything he wrote? I have more questions than I have answers.

But I can tell you one reason for sure why many people are glad the Jews preserved Isaiah's prophecy against Babylon. It contains a profound analysis of the spiritual rot that ate away the heart of Babylon and, to Isaiah's way of thinking, put Babylon in a disastrous confrontation with the God of Israel.

Isaiah put his profound analysis in a few short lines, and they shall never perish from the earth. Isaiah 14:13-15: **How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! (He was talking about Babylon in her glory.) You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High."** Babylon succumbed to the oldest temptation: **"You will not surely die . . . you will be like God."** (Genesis 3:4-5)

Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall. (Proverbs 16:18) It is hard to govern with humility. It is nigh impossible to attain high office, if you're humble. With the reins of power in your hands it is easy to forget God. With God forgotten, it is easy for ambition and the exercise of power to morph into pride.

Does Isaiah Have Meaning for Us?

This is where Isaiah started messing with my head. Does Isaiah 13-14 have meaning for us? I'm not ready to say that the spiritual rot that ate away the heart of ancient Babylon has eaten away the heart of Modern America. There is a lot of arrogance in our public life. There is a ferocious effort to gain and hold power. But I don't sense in American life the dominant attitude that says, **"I will make myself like the Most High."** But there are troubling signs.

35 years ago, the Nobel Prize winning Russian author, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, spoke at Harvard University. He said, "You have forgotten God." Any time people forget God, something takes the place of God, and it shows up in public life. Surely, it says something about America's vanishing awareness of God that the federal government has sanctioned the destruction of 50 million Americans by abortion and the treatment of human embryos as if they were laboratory mice. It says that American pride is on track to be a match for anything Babylonian. It also says that American culture has a diminishing moral foundation on which to build its public life. God is not pleased. Public life is not working so well just now.

And that's as much as I want to say for now. I don't have authority from God to say more. Also, Isaiah 13-14 suggests other meanings that have a more direct bearing on our faith and our mission. I don't want you to miss those meanings.

Here's one of them. We have read enough of Isaiah's oracle in these two chapters to know that he foretold the destruction of Babylon. It's important to remember that his prediction of destruction was an act of faith. He believed that Babylon was the enemy of

God, and God would bring Babylon to judgment. He was right, but here's what stops you in your tracks: the destruction didn't happen for another 200 years. Maybe I don't know God as well as I thought I did.

Suppose God shares our moral outrage about abortion and the destruction of human embryos for scientific research. Suppose He waits 200 years to put a stop to this violent injustice. God is wise. He sees the end from the beginning. His apparent delay in justice cannot be fickle. What goes on in the mind of God that we need to know and to adjust to? What does adjusting to the mind of God require of us? Surely, we don't change our minds about abortion and the destruction of human embryos. We can't be silent. Do we just need to calm down and slow down? Is it possible that our evangelical flirtation with political party power for the past 30 years been ill advised? Does some greater good require our time and energy?

In this painful turmoil the following scripture took me inside the mind of God: **Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you towards repentance?** (Romans 2:4) Does God wait so long to pass judgment, because He cares that much for people, who don't care for Him? As soon as I asked that question, I knew the answer was Yes.

I reflected further on the intemperate language and behavior that evangelicals have shown the last 30 years in the culture wars, and another scripture spoke loudly to my uneasy conscience. **Man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.** (James 1:20)

Take Away

In many quarters I get the sense that evangelical Christians are toning down the rhetoric and trying to go a different way. Here's what I sense as a promising path forward for BVBC in the face of an aggressively secular world. Our task in the next decade is not to win arguments; it is to bear faithful and sacrificial witness to the truth of Christianity without a trace of self-righteousness.

In my formative years as a young pastor, I increasingly heard the message from people I trusted that evangelical Christians cannot abandon politics. Over the ensuing decades I watched powerful Christians, evangelicals and Protestant liberals, work to shape the politics of America: the World Council of Churches, the Moral Majority, Focus on the Family, and Concerned Women for America. They failed. If you want an infallible measure of how they failed, try expressing your disapproval of same-sex marriage in your workplace and watch what happens to you.

Let me refine my proposal. Christians can and should be involved in law and politics. It is an honorable calling. But the task of the Church in the next decade is not to win arguments in the political arena; it is to bear faithful and costly witness to the truth of Christianity without a hint of self-righteousness. I will explore this with you throughout 2014.

We will do it with Isaiah's confidence that God is wise and just and sovereign. He will hold the unrepentant accountable, but He will also leave abundant room for mercy. That is part of the truth we bear witness to. He will also keep His chosen people, Israel and the Church, as the apple of His eye.