

Read also Romans 12:1-2. Check out the service at www.fpcd.org.

A prophet is hypersensitive to spiritual things. They are able to step out of this world to see the big picture. They are intense about God's purposes for the nation. They have dreams and visions and are sometimes whisked off from place to place. Prophets do not necessarily tell the future.

There are true and false prophets. False prophets tell people what they want to hear. People like those prophets. True prophets plead God's cause and hold people accountable.

Sometimes the real prophets pointedly tell the state of things and the potential consequences. They are less-than-popular because their words seem judgmental, and perhaps they are. Their words seem alarming because the prophet is sensitive to the delicate relationship between God and humans. Prophets recognize the ups and downs of our relationship with God and call us to faithfulness.

Thus studying Isaiah might be a challenge for you. It is for me. It came about because we often read passages from Isaiah during Advent that point to Jesus. Yet if we only read Isaiah 7 and 9 and 11 and 25, we really don't know the context of those beautiful passages. So we are going to hear the context in preparation for Advent.

Isaiah begins with the description of a series of visions. He has been made aware of a problem in the nation. Emotion, hurt, pain, and anger fill the visions as Isaiah conveys the problem. You sense the personality of God and the nation of Israel. Isaiah uses strong and rich similes and metaphors to help us understand the problem. Isaiah invites us in. He wants us to see because seeing the truth about ourselves helps us change.

Along with the discussion of the problem runs a silver thread of hope. We will look for that thread in the midst of a nation which has lost their way.

Sometimes people say, "I don't like the God of the Old Testament. He's harsh and judgmental. We will encounter harsh talk. It's hard to take in a world that demands love and grace. But we need truth and accountability. We need the whole package to grow and mature.

Israel had begun somewhat by a wing and a prayer. Abraham left home, traveled to Canaan, old and barren and became—at God's will—fruitful. Each descendent had to believe for himself: Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and on. The small family of faith became a nation.

They were enslaved in Egypt but God freed his young nation in mighty display through Moses. God gave them the law. First Commandment: LOVE GOD with all your heart. Then, LOVE GOD'S WAYS, through commands two through ten. They agreed to follow it.

Moses wrote the story down—Genesis through Deuteronomy. Take a look at what we have been given (slide 27). Our God is Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, all nature, abundance, animals, food, variety, bounty, friends, family, new life, old life, long life, love. A most diverse world. What more do you need?

God provided. God built. God rescued and saved. God brought Israel to a land and conquered.

This journey on which God's people embarked was not without problems—just like for you and I. We stumble, sin and lack of faith sometimes gets the best of us; but God stuck with them like God sticks with us. They settled and built their nation. Two hundred fifty, maybe 300 years passed from Israel's first king until when Uzziah ruled. The nation had begun to get unstable.

Nations are not static. They are living organisms. They change according to the decisions of the people. If you live a long time you begin to see it. Little by little Israel stepped away from God. They went to church, but Monday through Friday they resembled everybody else around them in the unchurched world.

This distinct people of God who were supposed to LOVE GOD with all their heart, LOVE GOD'S WAYS were just putting on a worship show and their daily lives were far from God. Hear the vision: Isaiah 1

^{NLT} These are the visions that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. He saw these visions during the years when Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah were kings of Judah. ² Listen, O heavens! Pay attention, earth! This is what the LORD says: "The children I raised and cared for have rebelled against me. ³ Even an ox knows its owner, and a donkey recognizes its master's care-- but Israel doesn't know its master. My people don't recognize my care for them." ⁴ Oh, what a sinful nation they are-- loaded down with a burden of guilt. They are evil people, corrupt children who have rejected the LORD. They have despised the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him. ⁵ Why do you continue to invite punishment? Must you rebel forever? Your head is injured, and your heart is sick. ⁶ You are battered from head to foot-- covered with bruises, welts, and infected wounds-- without any soothing ointments or bandages. ⁷ Your country lies in ruins, and your towns are burned. Foreigners plunder your fields before your eyes and destroy everything they see. ⁸ Beautiful Jerusalem stands abandoned like a watchman's shelter in a vineyard, like a lean-to in a cucumber field after the harvest, like a helpless city under siege. ⁹ If the LORD of Heaven's Armies had not spared a few of us, we would have been wiped out like Sodom, destroyed like Gomorrah.

Notice the words: "My children." "I raised them." "They don't recognize my care." "My children have abandoned me."

Do you hear the grief?

Isaiah goes on. Their worship is empty. They give sacrifices. But God doesn't want sacrifices. God wants consistency between life and belief. Here's the problem:

- They are tearing people to pieces
- They don't fight for the rights of the widow
- They let people be oppressed
- They don't defend the cause of orphans
- Their leaders are rebels and love bribes and demand payoffs

Isaiah tells us of the Monday through Friday injustices. "You have blood on your hands," he says.

Their enemies had attacked and won. Their cities were damaged. The attack was great. Isaiah says it's because God's people had turned away from devotion to God to living unto themselves—worshipping the idol of “what I want.”

Sounds pretty bad! They were in trouble. But I assure you:
People in our own nation are equally as oppressed.
Widows are not looked out for.
Foster care system is strained.
Leaders—well, let's just say they have significant problems.

And, we continue to be attacked in our nation, too! Should we see a correlation? Have we, too, abandoned God and his ways? This is a question we must face collectively, for our nation. To ignore it is foolish.

Let's look at it on a smaller scale. Let's say you go to the dentist and you have ten cavities. Your dentist says you are not flossing. You must floss and brush, and then you will not have cavities. What if your dentist said nothing except ‘I love you; you are doing great!’ Truth helps!

Along with Isaiah's message of truth, along with the judgment and punishment that came, there was also a silver thread. Did you hear the silver thread? *God spared some of them and they weren't wiped out.*

With God, there is always a way out of a problem. God spared a remnant.

Here's another silver thread:

¹⁸ “Come now, let's settle this,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool. ¹⁹ If you will only obey me, you will have plenty to eat. ²⁰ But if you turn away and refuse to listen, you will be devoured by the sword of your enemies. I, the LORD, have spoken!”

Isaiah ends the chapter by showing the purpose for the nation which calls GOD the LORD. The purpose of discipline is to remove our “slag,” to correct our drift. If they turn and listen, God promises to restore good judges and wise counselors and get rid of the ones who insist on rebelling.

Isaiah was a prophet who was sensitive to God's concerns and the state of the nation. We all can benefit by being held accountable once in a while. How is your worship? Does it last on Monday through Friday? Examine yourself and be restored by embracing the silver thread.

AMEN