

A Child is Born

Abraham Heschel was a Jewish scholar from the 20th Century. He was born in Poland and educated in Berlin. He escaped the Nazis when he received an academic position at a Jewish college in Cincinnati. His mother and sisters were killed by the Nazi regime.

His book, *The Prophets*, is one of his most influential works among both Jews and Christians.

In many ways, his life mirrored that of the prophets about whom he wrote. Active in the American Civil Rights movement, he was often a controversial figure. Not unlike the Old Testament prophets about whom he wrote.

Heschel coined the term “divine Pathos” in relationship to the work of the prophets. He noted how the prophets often spoke God’s words of not only anger, but also sorrow and heartbreak at the unfaithfulness of Israel and Judah. The divine pathos represents God’s feelings of anguish.

A good example comes from the first chapter of Isaiah:

I reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.

They have forsaken the Lord;
they have spurned the Holy One of Israel
and turned their backs on him.

When we have to deal with the difficult topic of God’s anger, it’s helpful to keep in mind what is behind it...basically the same thing that’s behind any parent’s anger at their children’s self-destructive or cruel behavior. The emotions rise up...anger, shock, fear, sorrow. That’s exactly what was going on between God and God’s chosen people.

In reading Heschel’s chapter on Isaiah, I found myself lost in the historical weeds. Judah and Israel were small nations caught in the middle of conflicts between the superpowers surrounding them. After reading it, I found myself in pretty much the same boat I do when I read about conflicts in the Middle East today. It’s hard to keep it all straight.

I don’t want to drag you into the weeds with me, but there are some helpful historical facts that can help us grasp Isaiah’s main message, and what today’s reading has for us.

Isaiah covered three distinct time periods. In the first we hear words from the original prophet named Isaiah when Assyria was the threat.

The second part, or so-called second Isaiah, is made up of words directed to Judah in exile in Babylon. And the third part covers the post-exile period.

Like all the prophets, the book is a mix of scathing judgement and beautiful passages of comfort and hope, like this one. Like the other prophets, Isaiah proclaims God's judgment against idol worship, hypocritical worship, injustice to the poor, and complacency in keeping the covenant.

Today's reading comes from so-called First Isaiah.

Assyria was the dominant superpower in the region. Assyria had already destroyed parts of Israel. For protection, Israel allied itself with anti-Assyrian nations. This anti-Assyria coalition was a huge threat to Judah.

King Ahaz was the king of Judah and Isaiah's warnings are primarily directed at him. King Ahaz figured the best way for him to protect Jerusalem and what remained of Judah was to form an alliance with Assyria.

At the beginning of Isaiah's prophetic career, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was already doomed. Strengthened by their alliance with Judah, Assyria subsequently attacked Israel and in a brutal takeover, destroyed cities, deported many of its people, killed leaders and impaled their heads on stakes for all to see. Samaria – a remnant of Israel – remained for a time.

But when the king refused to pay tribute to Assyria, it too was destroyed. Many were deported and other deportees brought in.

Israel as a nation ceased to exist, and the people of Samaria became a people of mixed ethnicity and religious practices.

Isaiah warned King Ahaz of Judah not to make this alliance with Assyria. He counseled Ahaz to trust God for protection. Isaiah knew that these kind of alliances resulted in idolatry. And indeed, Ahaz did place a shrine to Assyria's God in the Temple.

But politically, Ahaz's alliance was brilliant. At that time, it saved Judah.

Everyone else was awash with praise for Ahaz for making such a smart alliance.

Isaiah was completely out of step. He prophesied that the Assyrian alliance would end in disaster. He prophesied that Assyria would fall, and with it Judah.

Nobody wanted to hear that. But Isaiah could see the writing on the wall...it's just how things went when the kings and the people they led turned to human power and military might to save them.

Making alliances with more powerful nations presumed that war would be how things got solved. Isaiah tried to convince them otherwise.

His main message was that politics and political maneuvering were not the answer to their problems. Politics were always tainted by arrogance and injustice. Political solutions depended on swords and spears.

Isaiah instead pointed to a day when God's peaceful kingdom would reign...a time when the nations would turn their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks and they would learn war no more.

In those days of threat, it was a completely impractical message.

But at the heart of Isaiah's message was the idea that the political situation was the surface appearance of a deeper problem. The heart of their problem was the state of their spiritual life. The state of their covenant relationship with God was completely in tatters in Israel, and badly frayed in Judah. The political life of both Israel and Judah reflected their inner moral and spiritual decay.

Even when things were prosperous and peaceful, their idolatry and exploitation of the poor were rampant. The arrogance of the rulers led them to trust in their own strategic brilliance and power.

In the time of Isaiah, it all came crashing down. The people were indeed walking in a time of great darkness.

Into that darkness Isaiah speaks the words we heard today...words of hope and promise. Promise that a new ruler will be born who will bring that peaceful kingdom Isaiah promised. This is a messianic prophecy – a prophecy that God will anoint one who will set things right...God will send a ruler who will rule in peace and justice.

Many scholars believe that King Hezekiah, Ahaz's successor might have been who Isaiah was first talking about.

But in the end, all human kings and rulers disappoint. King Hezekiah did listen to Isaiah. He did not form an alliance with a more powerful nation like many told him he should. But in the end he disappointed too. Assyria did fall eventually to Babylon. And nothing any of the kings did could stop Judah's defeat by Babylon.

That really ends up being at the heart of Isaiah's prophecy – political solutions necessarily rely on human power...in some cases even violence. No political ruler will be our savior. No human political leader will usher in God's peaceful kingdom.

We as Christians now see the birth of Jesus as the fulfillment of this prophecy. Jesus proclaimed a kingdom – a kingdom of God that sounds very much like the visions Isaiah proclaimed. A kingdom where instruments of war are transformed into tools that feed people...where enemies live side by side in harmony.

Into every time of darkness in human history, it is that hope to which we cling and that vision towards which we work.

It's difficult to completely translate the words of the prophets into our own time when it comes to politics. We have a very different form of government that is not a theocracy.

But there are still ways the prophets' message is for us. Our inner spirituality...our inner faith will impact how we live. That includes our political lives. Our political choices will reflect what's in our hearts.

You maybe have heard people raise concerns about Christian nationalism. It's a longer conversation than we can have in this sermon – and I've actually preached on it before.

Christian nationalism begins with politics and power and then tries to make religion fit. That is the same mistake Israel and Judah's kings...and to be honest sometimes even their religious leaders made.

What the prophets repeatedly called the rulers, and the people to, was a life in which the politics reflected their covenant with God...where politics reflected God's vision of the peaceful kingdom.

The prophets remind us of that divine pathos... the hopes and dreams God has for the world. The prophets invite us to live in the peaceful kingdom God desires for us.

And Isaiah invites us to place our hope and our allegiance, not in political figures, but in that child born to a peasant couple 700 years after Isaiah...the one who would ultimately rule in endless peace.