

A Sermon for DaySpring
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“A Press Conference with Dr. Isaiah”
Isaiah 58: 9b-14
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It's always important... as you envision a text in the Bible, to give some consideration to the backdrop hanging behind it. In other words,
some story is being told
or sermon preached....
or song sung...
or argument made...

And behind that drama hangs a backdrop that allows you to make sense of what is going on, on the stage of scripture. It helps you interpret.

There are a few backdrops that fly in and out... and it's good to let them do that. They are the big scenes of scripture. Biblical cinematography.

The Garden of Eden, would be one. Adam and Eve in their knowing nakedness, hiding behind “fig leaves” and finding themselves at the end of the story... outside Eden, outside of joy. That's a big backdrop.

The Exodus is another. When this one flies down you see a people, enslaved due to no fault of their own and being delivered due to no merit of their own. You see Moses and his staff out in front, leading them into freedom but also into the desert to wander.

There's the Garden backdrop... Estrangement.

There's the one with Egypt in the background... Exodus.

And then, there's Exile.

That's a really prominent backdrop and often you need to be reading scripture with Exile hanging behind all the action and poetry and prose.

Remember... the whole “Promised Land,” “Light to the Nations” thing fell to pieces. And Israel/Judah, who'd had a few glory years, was overrun. All the leaders, the best and the brightest, were carried off to Babylon where they lived for a long time. It's like the NCAA death penalty to a nation.

So on this backdrop there are people... people out of place... living with a sense of homelessness. Longing for the past... longing for the future... to be back home. Living with the questions “what went wrong” and “how would we fix this if we only had the chance?”

On this backdrop, folks are looking south, trying to see a way back home... hoping... praying... dreaming.

In a way... the three backdrops aren't so different. God's children with an awareness that things are not as they are supposed to be... something has been lost... and they know they've got to get it back.

I was listening to Eva Cassidy a few weeks back... She sings a version of a song I'd grown up hearing but never really heard. Written by Joni Mitchell, you baby boomers

would remember Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young's version of it... Woodstock. It was good rock with all the great harmony of that band.

Well, Eva slowed it down and I finally heard some of the words.

*I came upon a child of God, he was walking along the road
and I asked him, "tell me, where are you going"...this he told me.
Said I'm going down to Yeskers farm, gonna join in a rocking roll band.
Got to get back to the land and get my soul free.*

*Can I walk along beside you, I have come to lose the smog,
and I feel like I'm a part of something turning round and round.
And maybe it's the time of year, maybe it's the time of man...
and I don't know who I am but life is for learning.*

*We are stardust... we are golden
and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden.*

I think Joni Mitchell had seen a bit of the Biblical backdrop. Of course, like any good poet she'd seen the backdrop of her own life and of mine and yours too.

We've all been estranged from Eden... that essential, joyful core.

And we've been in all sorts of Egyptian bonds... enslaved.

And we're certainly no stranger to Exile, either.

When Jesus, in Luke 15, tells the that Prodigal Parable, we all nod when he gets to the part about the son who wanders off into a far country... where things are not as they ought to be.

We know about exiles... chosen and not chosen... about not being home and about that sense of being made for more, "we're stardust... golden... and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden."

That's the longing which is the backdrop to Isaiah 58. And, again, just like last week, we have a different sort of drama playing itself out. ...A different delivery of Gods' message.

In chapter one... Dr. Isaiah is pounding a pulpit and pretty much in the face of the nation.

In chapter five, Isaiah is dressed up like James Taylor, singing folk songs down at the temple in order to sneak up on those who need to hear.

Today's text, is different all together. It's not set up as a sermon or a song but really more of a press conference.... a fairly heated press conference, with Isaiah being the press agent for Yahweh.

The question came earlier in chapter 58... (the part we didn't hear.) An angry and cynical reporter from the Jerusalem Times raised his hand and asked in effect, "**Dr. Isaiah, we've been fasting our brains out and haven't seen an increase in the GNP at all. The entire nation has humbled itself and we haven't seen any improvement in our circumstances.**"

That was the question put to God and to Isaiah... and remember the back drop... Things aren't as they're supposed to be. And the backdrop doesn't just have scenes of the Exile on it but now there are some scenes from the time after the Exile.

So... the fancy word for this backdrop is "post-exilic." Everyone's back in Jerusalem... but things are sort of pathetic. They are this little, "do nothing" nation...

Economy was bad

No jobs.

Military couldn't march straight.

And they'd tried to rebuild the temple and it wasn't even a shadow of it's former self. Haggai tells the story... They work and work and work and finally on move-in day, they stepped back and look and one of them says, **"It's pretty much nothing, huh?"**

So... that's the backdrop... Things aren't like they once were, like they expected them to be or like they were meant to be.

And the folks had been really trying. Doing their part. I mean, back in Babylon they used to say, **"Man if we ever get back... if we ever do... we'll fast like crazy. And we won't be messing around with those other gods... no more idols for us. We're going to mind our P's and Q's and never, ever skip church."**

And that's what they did, they got good and religious and they started watching the stock market and they said they're prayers and they watched their bank statements... They were doing their part and any day now, Yahweh would get busy and things would be like they were supposed to be.

But that didn't happen. So, when the quarterly press conference rolled around, folks were there... and there with some attitude.

"What's the deal Isaiah...

why is God ignoring our good behavior?

Where's the payoff?"

Isaiah's initial response... went something like this.

"Yes, you fast but you still basically do as you please.

You're exploiting workers...

you aren't getting along...

you aren't feeding the poor...

or taking care of strangers and homeless."

You do some religious stuff and think that works like magic in your lives. That's nuts. That's not the way it works or what God is looking for.

"Now... if you fast from oppressing folks and condemning people and fast from talking behind each other's backs... fast from that and see what happens."

"Take the Sabbath seriously and then maybe things will be different around here."

Now... it's not in the story... but in my imagination the press conference didn't end there. The same hand went back up... **"Dr. Isaiah, may I ask a follow up?"**

"Of course."

“So... what you’re saying is that if we’re nice to the poor and if we quit squabbling... and if everyone obeys the Sabbath... then good things will happen to us. Can we quote you on that?”

“No... because that’s not what I said... I said... ‘If you do away with the yoke of oppression and if you do away with pointing fingers and if you get rid of your malicious talk...

**If you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry...
And satisfy the needs of the oppressed...
Then your light will shine’.”**

Another hand went up... **“So you’re saying that if we create some fair practices in the work place and quit talking bad about each other... and start a food bank... then God’s going to restore us.”**

“Did I say that? No... are you listening? ‘I said if you can do away with yokes... and fingers pointing in judgment... and words that hurt... And if you can give yourselves away in making things right others... Then your light will shine... and your night will become like day.’”

“Dr. Isaiah?”

“Yes, you there, in the back.”

“You mentioned the Sabbath... Would you comment further on that? Are you proposing that we create some Sabbath laws? Don’t you think that’s what we need? And some Sabbath patrols to police this? Is that when God’s going to bless us.”

Isaiah looked down obviously frustrated... with patience running low. **“I believe what I said is... ‘If you can honor and take delight in the Sabbath, then you will find your joy in God’.”**

The room erupted with more questions... **“Are you certain this new moral program will put us on the track to recovery?” “Dr. Isaiah... is the inheritance of Jacob just ours or do the Samaritans take a share?” “Who’s going to get the rebuilding contracts?”**

Well, those questions weren’t in the text but we know from Israel’s story and from our stories that these are the kinds of questions that get posed.

Perhaps you’d ask something similar if God’s spokesperson were here. Or maybe you have in some darker moment.

“God... I’ve been good...

I’ve done right...

What’s the deal?

Why can’t you give me a break.”

We do live with this “tit for tat” faith don’t we? It’s in us... and certainly all around us. Where folks assume their good fortune is not only from God... but from God in response to who they are.

We just seem born with an inner ledger... and we always work to balance the books, even with God.

“God, I’ve made some pretty righteous deposits... Now, no bad health, right? No vocational trouble... not for me... not after the investments I’ve made.”

It’s an age-old conversation... Remember Job... God says, **“Would you look at that Job. What a fine human being.”** And Satan says, **“Ah... you know it’s only because you’ve given him lots of stuff, don’t you.”**

It wasn’t a bad presumption because we live in a world of payoffs... and benefits... And it’s a world where I’ll scratch yours if your scratch mine. And we tend to take that way of being and thinking and project it on to God... And we do our faith with all sorts of expectation of what ought to happen in return... it’s an immature faith. We all go through it, but it’s still immature.

And we probably grow up some... Maybe we move from, if I do life right then...

The red light will turn green for me...

To... I’ll be a success...

To... my family will be protected...

To... I’ll have a great sense of meaning and happiness.

We may adjust our expectations... but they’re expectations none-the-less... And we keep looking for rewards. **“What’s the consolation? What’s the prize, The Pearly Gates? I’ll say yes... if...”** Faith... for something... that’s the way we tend to be. We live that way but it isn’t a way that will get us home.

I believe that the way of Jesus is different than that... And Paul says that the center that was in him needs to be in us... The Mind in Christ, in us. And that he emptied himself of everything. He teaches us a different way... a way of letting go... which really is what the Sabbath is all about. Jesus embodies Sabbath rest. The poor in spirit... spiritual poverty.

The way of complete surrender...

Complete emptying...

Complete trust.

Into thy hands I commit my spirit... Even as he feels abandoned by God.
“Why have you forsaken me.”

No payoff. Not even a warm fuzzy.

One of my teachers says, the cross isn’t some set up to resurrection. The cross is there because the willingness to “give it all away is itself the original and ultimate creative act from which all being flows.” This is what God was always up to, even in the beginning. (Cynthia Bourgeault) The only one who finds a self is the one who has lost it... The last... is first. The way to have life is to let go of it. No possessiveness. The only way back to the Garden is to quit banging on the gate of it.

This is the teaching of Jesus and it is the truth of scripture... Only, we miss it. We read it for what we want out of it. We want to get back to the garden... But we’re mistaken about what that garden is... and we’re mistaken about how to get there.

Even though Jesus is telling us... as is all the witness of scripture. It's like the bible is God's press release and we aren't capable of reading the depths of it. Probably, because it means giving up too much... in particular our understanding of who we think we are. All of our ideas and images and even our warm fuzzies.

So, we don't hear what is being said. We do faith watching for the returns... We haven't heard what's being said. We're like noisy reporters, anxious with our agendas and expectations.

But we can... if we grow up.

If we develop eyes to see and ears to hear.

We can hear the Word being spoken.

So... would you listen again? Listen this time with Christ as the backdrop. That, that cross, is the backdrop of our lives. So listen again... through his way of deep surrender, total trust and letting go. Listen to these words with Jesus behind you... and may God give us ears to hear.

If you do away with the yoke of oppression...(not remove...destroy that which binds and burdens)

If you do away...

with the pointing finger...(not put it away... break it off)

with malicious talk...

*If you spend yourself in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,*

Then your light will rise in the darkness,

and your night will become like the noonday.

The Lord will guide you always;

he will satisfy your needs... in a sun-scorched land,

You will be like a well-watered garden,

like a spring whose waters never fail.

Your people will rebuild...

They'll raise up...

You will be called Repairer... Restorer.

If you keep your busy, driven, feet from breaking the Sabbath,

If you call the Sabbath a delight...

(delighted to let go and rest/be)

Then you will find your joy in the Lord....

The mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Or as we like to translate that... "The word of the Lord for God's people...

Thanks be to God."