

Session 2: 1st Isaiah

Welcome

In our first session together we were introduced to some basic Biblical study methods, as well as the basic history of Israel/Judah. We met all three Isaiahs. Today, in our second session we will focus on 1st Isaiah and his prophetic ministry that spanned 40+ years. Trusting that God remains faithful to God's promises isn't easy during times of radical change and threats to our existence. For 1st Isaiah it was:

- the war between the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and its ally Samaria, and Judah (the Southern Kingdom)
- the invasion of Israel by the Assyrians which led to the fall of Israel
- another invasion by the Assyrians almost 30 years later which led to the destruction of almost all of Judah

For us it has been 9/11, followed by almost constant war, and now COVID.

1st Isaiah's response to the challenges of his time will be our focus in our time together.

Opening Prayer

Trustworthy God, you promise to be with us even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We give thanks that through your prophet 1st Isaiah you have given us a clear picture of how to live faithfully in times of crisis. Bless our conversations and empower us to risk imagining new ways to live as your saved people. Amen.

Opening conversation

When Isaiah began his ministry in 742BCE, things appeared to be going well for Israel and Judah. Think back 40 years either in your personal life or the life of your congregation. Yes, that means all the way back to the 1980s. Tell of a time when things worked out very well.

Meeting 1st Isaiah

While Amos and Hosea (two other 8th century prophets) were speaking truth to power in Israel, 1st Isaiah did his ministry in Judah. He apparently had access to the kings and his oracles preserved for us in the first 39 chapters of Isaiah spoke to both political/national concerns as well as personal ethical choices the average Judahite would make.

He directly challenged the rich and powerful, who were living very well indeed. The gap between the poor and the rich was immense. He demanded that they treat the poor, powerless, widows, orphans and immigrants with justice. He proclaimed that excellent worship was not a smokescreen that could blind God's eyes to the injustices built into the very fabric of the country. If the injustices continued, 1st Isaiah prophesied the downfall of both Israel (which happened during his lifetime in 722BCE) and Judah (which would happen over a century later).

He also counseled king Ahaz and later king Hezekiah to put their trust in "The Holy One of Israel" rather than alliances with the Assyrian kings. Some of the best known oracles in 1st Isaiah (chapters 7,9,11) were his attempt to show the kings that if they ruled justly and trusted in God, God would stand by them. Building his message on the Zion tradition and the promise to David (2 Samuel 7), 1st Isaiah proclaimed that Jerusalem would not fall to the Assyrians.

Despite his warning of the downfall of both nations, his words that God would preserve Jerusalem for the sake of the temple and the Davidic house at his time (Isaiah 37:33-35), led to the belief 100 years later, by the time of Ezekiel and Jeremiah, that Jerusalem would never fall, no matter how unjust the political system and society had become.

Engaging 1st Isaiah:

There are a number of pathways through the garden of 1st Isaiah. Here are some your group might wish to explore:

- *“Word Cloud of Names in Isaiah”*
- *“Names of God in Isaiah”* – document or Word Cloud
- *“Worship Prophetic Style”* – document
- Work through the passages assigned in Session 1 to prepare for Session 2. Some of these are among the most recognized passages in the OT! Use Janelle Thompson’s image *“Worship as a Smokescreen”* to highlight Isaiah’s call for justice in Isaiah 1:1-23. Use Janelle Thompson’s *“Peaceable Kingdom”* to help the group imagine the radicalness of 1st Isaiah’s image of God’s preferred future! Compare this vision with the second creation account found in Genesis 2-3. What is being reversed? How might this vision empower you and your congregation to lean into God’s preferred future?
- Use the image *“Isaiah’s Call”* from Janelle Thompson to engage with the call of 1st Isaiah, recorded in Isaiah 6. As Lutherans we believe that our baptism is our call to be God’s servants in the world. Isaiah’s call led him to champion those that the rich and powerful mistreated. How has your baptismal call led you to champion those whom our society ignores or treats unjustly?

Questions for Discussion

1. What words from Isaiah impacted you? How are they challenging you to live in our own challenging times?
2. Were you surprised when you worked through the prophetic measuring stick of all societies: namely, how we as a nation treat the poor, powerless, widows, orphans and immigrants? How might this impact your own congregation as you rebound from COVID?
3. Often it is said that churches should stay out of politics? How might the work of 1st Isaiah and his messages to king Ahaz and king Hezekiah challenge you and your congregation to reconsider that claim?
4. What surprised you when you read 1st Isaiah?
5. What more do you wish you knew about 1st Isaiah and his message?

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, you weep when you see the ongoing effects of injustice in your world. We pray that the words of 1st Isaiah may empower us to live out your intent for your people and your creation in all the arenas of our lives. Amen.

Assignment for Next Time:

If time permits, read all of 2nd Isaiah (chapters 40-55).

If your week is overwhelming, then it will be helpful to read Isaiah 40 and Isaiah 55, which form bookends of this portion of Isaiah.

In addition, the four famous “Servant Songs” can be found here:

- Isaiah 42:1-4
- Isaiah 49:1-6
- Isaiah 50:4-9
- Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12