

Time Travel

Isaiah 42:1-9

TIME TRAVEL

My husband, Garrett, is a superhero fan; he's also a movie fan, so we have every movie, ever made, about every superhero ever. One of the important questions in our house isn't "what's the meaning of life?" it's "if you had a superpower, what would it be." I usually say flying, but another cool one is time travel. What would it be like to go back and see the universe at its very beginning or see dinosaurs roaming the earth? ... from a safe distance, of course. What would it be like to meet Abraham and Sarah at the beginning of the Israelites' history? Or to see Jesus feed the 5,000?

SCRIPTURE THROUGH TIME

We have that ability to a certain extent through reading the Bible. The Bible as a living document: it doesn't just speak to one audience during one time in history. It has the potential of speaking to everyone in all times. The most fascinating ways of interpreting scripture is to read it while holding several times in your mind. In a way, your mind is a time travel machine that allows you to honor the meaning of scripture during many times at once. The scripture we'll be looking at this week was a prophecy spoken by the Prophet Isaiah 600 years before the birth of Jesus, yet Jesus quoted it during his ministry – interpreting it to refer to himself as the promised Messiah. We know this because the authors of the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke wrote this in their accounts of Jesus' ministry – interpreting Jesus' words for their own communities decades after his crucifixion and resurrection. Finally, we come to our own place and place. When we read the Bible, we interpret it to find the good news for the world today with the hope that what we learn through scripture allows us to fulfill our part of God's will right here and right now.

SCRIPTURE

I invite you to hear today's scripture with the richness it provides in all places and times. It comes from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 42, verses 1-9:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations, he will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard on the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, Who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols."

See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

WHAT WE'RE USED TO

As I said, this scripture was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, who lived about 600 years before Jesus was born, but we as Christians are used to thinking about his words as prophesying Jesus' role in God's plan. This isn't surprising considering we're used to hearing these words from Jesus' mouth as recorded by the author of Luke, chapter 4, verses 16-21:

¹⁶ When [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Today's scripture can be fulfilled in our hearing as well, but to truly understand it, we must travel to Isaiah's time and hear it as best we can with the ears of the Israelites living in Jerusalem over 2,500 years ago.

ISAIAH'S CONTEXT

The Prophet Isaiah lived during the time of the Babylonian Exile when the people of Israel had been divided into two groups. One group, made up of the educated, talented, and most privileged, was taken from their homeland to live as captives in Babylon. The other group was made up of people deemed worthless by the Babylonians: ones who wouldn't survive the forced march, the old, the sick, the poor, and those who lacked valuable skills. These were the ones who were left behind, and it was to them that Isaiah prophesied.

Even though these people still lived in Jerusalem, their homeland was unrecognizable to them. During the three-year siege before the Exile, the city experienced a severe famine which by the time the Babylonians breached the city walls “there was no food for the people of the land” (2 Kings 25:3). The Babylonian army then took every valuable item of worship from the Temple and then burned it to the ground. The Temple was believed to be the home of God among the people. Without it, the people believed that God had abandoned them. They began to question whether God was truly loyal to the covenant, whether God still loved them, and whether God would provide for them. Isaiah’s job was to replace the people’s despair with hope. Isaiah’s message that the Lord was the one true God, a loving God, faithful and loyal to the covenant. Isaiah emphasized God’s power to create and to save. He illustrated the uselessness of worshiping idols by giving an example of a Babylonian using half of his wood to cook his food and warm himself and the other half to shape into an idol to worship; he asked the people, “Shall we fall down before a block of wood??” Isaiah also spoke of God’s love for the people and God’s intention of restoration and justice. He encouraged the people to cling to their faith and return to the traditions and faith of their ancestors. In short, he gave them hope.

WHO IS THE SERVANT?

In one way, the servant Isaiah prophesied about was himself. He was empowered and called by God to strengthen the bruised reed and add fuel to the dimly burning wick of the Israelite people living during the time of the Exile. In another way, Isaiah is referring to the people of Israel as the servant of God, the people in whom God delights, the ones God has filled with the Holy Spirit and charged to bring justice to the nations. If Isaiah’s prophecy refers to Israel as God’s servant, then God’s covenantal relationship with the Israelites would be the light to the nations, all nations – including Gentiles.

During his life, Jesus embodied the servant of God in bringing forth justice and caring for those who despaired. During Jesus’ time, the dimly burning wicks and bruised reeds were the poor, the sick, and those cut off from faithful community. He fed these ones and healed their diseases. Yet these weren’t the only ones he served. Jesus went out of his way to find people who were considered beyond saving – despicable ones like tax collectors and prostitutes – and release them from the prison of sin. Jesus also extended God’s love and healing to the enemies of his people, including a Roman Centurion who pled for Jesus to heal his servant, and a demon-possessed man who couldn’t even ask for help. Jesus lived as the servant of God, filled with God’s spirit, and following God’s call for him to be the light of all people.

The ones who followed Jesus during his earthly ministry and those who had come to faith soon after believed that Jesus would return within their lifetimes. The ones who were familiar with Isaiah’s prophecy may have been thinking of verse 4 of chapter 42 when Isaiah said that the servant “will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth.” By the year 70 CE, when Rome had crushed Jerusalem and destroyed the temple, it looked like that wasn’t going to happen. The new believers’ faith began to flicker, and they were desperate for a word of hope. The gospel writers interpreted Isaiah’s words through their accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry, reinforcing the message that the believers themselves couldn’t just wait for justice to be established but had to live it out and spread it to all corners of the earth.

2,000 YEARS LATER

Isaiah’s words remain relevant today, over 2,000 years after Jesus’ birth. We are still waiting for Jesus’ return and the establishment of justice. While we aren’t living in Jerusalem under foreign rule, the world seems to be crumbling around us. Our places of worship haven’t been physically destroyed, but the way we have to be the church has changed radically in this year alone. Many of us are struggling to remain both faithful and hopeful while we live in uncertainty. We look into the future and see darkness, yet we are the ones who are called to servants of God, to bring light to the nations, to release the prisoners, and establish justice.

Does that job seem daunting to you? Maybe it should, especially if you see only the work that lies ahead and not what makes it possible. Our establishment of justice isn’t a duty or responsibility hanging over our heads; our servanthood is a *result* of being upheld and chosen by God. We can bring strength and hope to others because God delights in us and fills us with God’s spirit. We embody God’s promise of salvation because God has called us in righteousness, holds us by the hand, and keeps us close. We must rely on what God has given us if we are to live as the servants God has called us to be.