

The God of Isaiah
Isaiah 6:1-8; 11:1

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In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Is. 6:1

Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany in January of 1933. That summer Karl Barth wrote a paper saying what he thought the church should be doing as a result. What did Barth say he was going to do now that the Nazis were in control? Barth said he was going to go on “doing theology and nothing but theology . . . as if nothing had ever happened.”¹

Barth did not mean by his statement that he was going to bury his head in his books and ignore current events. He meant the near opposite. He meant he was going to look to the heights and rally people to the highest and the best in a threatening and turbulent time.

It is no partisan political statement to say we are now living in a threatening and turbulent time. It is no partisan political statement to say many of the threats and much of the turbulence is of our own making. It is no partisan statement to say the threats and the turbulence are our own perpetuating.

There was just such a threatening and turbulent time in the Old Testament, and one of the psalmists said that right then and there in the midst of all the confusing disarray God set up a banner for people to rally around (Ps. 60:4).

Now that is just what this fall’s course of sermons aims to do. I do hope you are watching them and following each sermon’s teaching about God. I am opening various books of the Bible one by one and showing how God is portrayed in each book. I am doing theology with you in this grotesquely turbulent time as if nothing has happened, and by that I am lifting up a banner for you to rally around because this time is so grotesquely turbulent and severely threatening.

Our subject today is the God of Isaiah. The Book of Isaiah is 66 chapters long as it sits in the Bible. Old Testament scholars, both conservative and liberal, recent and dated, are under the impression that perhaps as many as three separate Isaiahs were involved in making this material over a long period of time. To keep to manageable limits, this morning I will focus only on the part identified by scholars as First Isaiah, and even at that I will touch only on a few bits from Isaiah 6 and Isaiah 11.

Who then is the God of Isaiah?

The God of Isaiah is a God who rules in a volatile time.

¹ Frank Jehle, *Ever Against the Stream: The Politics of Karl Barth, 1906-1968*, tr. by Richard and Martha Burnett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 13.

Isaiah dates our text. He says the experience he describes happened in the year King Uzziah died. We do not need to haul out the calendars of antiquity to figure out what year that was. It is enough for us this morning to take in what a date like that suggests about the instability of the situation Isaiah was going through. The king had just died. That meant this was an age of political transition tainted with uncertainty and fear.

Isaiah's people had already known in their history the nightmare that can come when a king dies and another takes his place. The Book of Exodus opens with a watershed moment like that. Exodus 1:8 says, "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." The old king welcomed the Hebrew refugees into Egypt when they were escaping starvation in their homeland. It was a time of favor. The new king had nothing to do with the old policy of welcome and made the Hebrews his slaves instead. It was a time of ruthlessness. A new king arose and life came crashing down around the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

Now, centuries later, a young Isaiah is in the temple, looking for hope and help from God. His king, a relatively good king, has just died. The transitional period between kings is riveted with uncertainty and rocked with instability. I can very well imagine that Isaiah is wondering what is going to happen next. Will what once happened long ago happen now? Will a new king arise who does not know Joseph? Will the new king be a blessing or a curse?

God appears to that young man saying his prayers in the temple. God comes to that man who is praying for his nation on the brink. And look how God appears! A king has died, leaving Egypt's throne empty. But heaven's throne is occupied by the God of yesterday and today and forever. God appears to Isaiah significantly – there is no accident here – "sitting on a throne, high and lofty." Who is in charge in a volatile time? Who is in control when the whole nation is on edge? Whose rule is sure and unbreakable? God! Look, Isaiah! Look, you troubled nation! The throne of heaven is occupied!

Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God

the Almighty reigns. (Rev. 19:6)

That's not just the music of Handel. That's the word of scripture, the revelation from heaven. God rules in and over even the most volatile times.

The God of Isaiah is a God larger than anyone can imagine.

Our text has one of the grandest word pictures in scripture. "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple." The *hem* of his robe filled the temple!

The temple in Jerusalem was a magnificent complex of buildings. The most magnificent of them all was the temple proper, the place of worship. It was large and ornate. Yet for all its size and beauty it could not hold the fullness of the glory of God. Here let "glory" mean "the outshining of God's goodness and grace."² That throne of God is no rickety chair. The royal robe of God is no cheap costume. The goodness of God and the power of God's goodness are not

² Andrew W. Blackwood, "The Minister's Workshop: Sermons about the Deity of Christ," *Christianity Today*, October 11, 1963.

outmatched by any human cunning or conniving. The hem of God's robe – just the hem of it – filled the whole temple.

We have got to get this element back into our faith. God is more alive and glorious than we can imagine. Pick out your finest words. Align them into your finest descriptive sentences. Collate those sentences into the richest and most wonderful paragraphs you can devise. And still those words, sentences, and paragraphs will lie like dry bones, lifeless on the open page when it comes to describing how wonderful God is.³ This is the God of yesterday and today, and this God is bigger than any virus, or division, or hypocrisy, or gridlock, or racist evil, or trouble that you face. Is God able to be of any help today? Can God meet the test of these troubled times? Of course! Washington can hold but the hem of God's robe, and Moscow only a thread of it!

We have said so far that the God of Isaiah is a God who rules in a volatile time and is bigger than we can imagine. That much is from Isaiah 6. There is more to find in Isaiah 6, but just now come ahead into Isaiah 11 for one more aspect of the God of Isaiah that I want to show you.

The God of Isaiah is capable of doing what looks to be impossible.

God says, "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse" (Is. 11:1). Later images, ones from Second Isaiah, are going to speak of the desert blossoming (35:1), the sand becoming a pool (35:7), and a root sprouting from dry ground (53:2). The images all mean that in the hands of God empty possibilities yield living realities.

As for the emptiness of the possibilities, look with care at the image from Isaiah 11. "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse." It doesn't come from the stump of Solomon, the king rich and wise. It doesn't come from the stump of David, the greatest and most revered of the Old Testament kings. It comes from the stump of Jesse, an otherwise insignificant farmer from Bethlehem long before Bethlehem ever thought of being famous. Solomon was cut off. David was cut off. The whole kingdom was cut off. The present day was bleak and the future was bleaker still. But God could go back to the stump of Jesse, the father of the royal line long before there was even the hope of a royal line, and cause a new shoot to grow. Take everything away and God still sees and creates possibilities.⁴

The Old Testament is rich with this theme and the New is richer still. The New Testament shows you can take truth and love and goodness and light and nail it to a cross, you can pierce its side with a sword, you can put a heavy stone in front of its tomb. You can do all that until truth and love and goodness and light and justice are cold with death. And yet God can and does bring new life.

Never count this God out! Though life is a stump there can be a new shoot. Though the ground is dry and barren a field can grow and a harvest be reaped. Though there be a cross of suffering and a grave of death, love and justice, peace and righteousness, truth and joy will

³ This image of words too dead to describe God is inspired by John Henry Jowett, *God – Our Contemporary* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1922), p. 13.

⁴ Joseph Parker, *The People's Bible*. Vol. XIV (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, nd), p. 331.

nonetheless prevail at the hand of God. There is always – now as ever before – hope in this God of yesterday and today.

I began with a quotation from Karl Barth. I will end with another. The first was written in Germany in 1933. This second one was spoken, I believe, in 1962 here in the U. S. when Barth was in this country for his first and only time. The line is often quoted but it is without citation. My impression is it came almost off-the-cuff in a question and answer session after Barth gave a speech. In any case, the line is that we preachers should always do our preaching – that is, construct our sermons – with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Let me expand that to apply to more than just preachers, and say that we Christians should do our believing with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. That is not to say we should be political in a partisan way in our preaching or believing. It is to say, rather, that we should be sure to enthrone God over all of life and every current event. Whatever the situation you face, bring God into it.

Let us all remember that as we are worshiping in this way far from ideal and in a nation dangerously at loggerheads with itself and stalled and stymied by a deadly virus. The God of yesterday – the God of Isaiah – is the God of today and is still ruling, still larger than anything we can put in God's way, still and still able to do what seems impossible.