

**Josh Mangelson 00:17**

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

**Karin Peter 00:34**

Welcome to Hebrew, the Project Zion series that reduces Old Testament bitterness through explanation, exploration and experiencing the Old Testament text. Our guides through the Old Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures, are Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith, and I'm your host, Karin Peter. In today's episode, we are looking at the book of Isaiah, specifically chapters 1-39 is what we'll be talking about. But the focus scripture, we could paraphrase as, "The Prophet Gets Naked", which I'm looking forward to that conversation. So, I was really caught up in reading 1-39, especially in the very first chapter, as all of the sins and trespasses of the people of Israel are listed. I mean, there's just an extensive list of sins and trespasses. And then after that, in verse 27, it says, "Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness." So, as I understand what I read, by righteousness, we're not talking piety. So, I'm hoping as we go along, you can clarify for us what Isaiah is meaning by the words, "justice" and "righteousness". That'll be my interest as we go on, along with all the other fun things that we're going to talk about. So, let's get started.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 02:02**

Right? Now, so, we want to start by mentioning that chronological fulcrum for making sense of the Hebrew Bible, and that is the exile, the Babylonian exile, and Charmaine is going to pull up our slide here. So, it's just really important to know that the period from 587 to 538 BCE is the, like, pivot point for the whole story of the Hebrew Bible. And not only is it the pivot point, that is the era in which most of what we are reading in the Old Testament reach some kind of literary form, then and after. There was not what you would call an Old Testament before then. In fact, I'm using the term Old Testament, which is Christian language. There was not a Hebrew Bible before then. There are traditions and stories, some written texts, but not a lot, and all kinds, you know, poetry, genealogies, things that are passed down in various strands of tradition. It's not until the exile, when the Judeans have lost everything, they've lost Jerusalem, they've lost the temple, they've lost their homeland, they've lost, they're in danger of losing their identity, when those Judean exiles finally decide, in Babylon, we've got to do something to preserve our identity. And it turns out that writing, turning these traditions into written texts, was the best way to do that. So, the Babylonian exile is a, kind of a, measuring stick for how we can understand the book of Isaiah because the book of Isaiah is multiply-authored. We can identify at least, not just, but at least three authors for the book of Isaiah. The one we're going to cover today is Isaiah of Jerusalem whose ministry is, traditionally we give it the dates of 742 to 701 BCE, so he's in the eighth century, before the time of Jesus. And the eighth century BCE is considered the era of classical Hebrew prophecy. So, we refer to Isaiah of Jerusalem as preexilic, and that means that he's writing, ministering, being a prophet in the period, in this case quite a lot, quite a ways before the Babylonian exile. Chapters 1-39 generally come from him. I don't want to go into the fine details there. There's, there are sections of it that surely come much later, but generally, we can say chapters 1-39

can be attributed, in some sense, to him. Then, Isaiah 40-55 is from a figure, an anonymous figure, we call Second Isaiah. And he was ministering as a prophet during the exile. So, in Babylon, sometime between 587 and 538, generally scholars think the latter half of that period.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 04:59**

And it's really interesting because you can see the difference in the tone and in the content of those chapters. So, whereas what we'll cover today, Isaiah of Jerusalem, the preexilic prophet, there's lots of warning, encouraging people to change their ways so that they are more attuned with God and with each other. But this one, the Second Isaiah, this written during exile, there's encouragement, there's, it, reminding people how much God loves them and to hang on and that they've not been deserted. And, it's so, it's just completely different tone. And you can, once you can, kind of, read big chunks like you did, Karin, you can get a sense of that. So then on to the Third...

**Karin Peter 05:49**

Yes, I so appreciate the choices of chapters 1-39, we'll do a whole First Isaiah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 05:55**

So, then there is a, definitely a third voice. And we refer to that third voice as Third Isaiah, not very creative, but that's how we do it, another anonymous prophet, this time working after the exile, when the Judean exiles have been allowed, those who want to, to go back to Jerusalem and Judea. Judah, pardon me. The Persian Empire has, in the meantime, conquered the Babylonian Empire. The Persians were, kind of, very generous about stuff like this. They let exiles go home. That creates loyalty to the Persian Empire. And so, Third Isaiah is functioning back in Jerusalem once there's a new temple, a temple being rebuilt, once life is, they're trying to reconstruct life together. And so those chapters, 56-66, reflect that period. So, definitely three distinct voices, three distinct time periods. This is not just an idle theory. This is now the way to understand this composite book. In some ways, the book of Isaiah is an anthology. Second Isaiah and Third Isaiah, who were they? We don't know. They did not identify themselves. They apparently were in a tradition that was preserving Isaiah of Jerusalem's material. And so, in the midst of preserving that material and editing it, they individually are called to be prophets too. So, that's what we know about the book. This really matters for interpretation. If you try to read Second Isaiah as though it were written before the exile, you're going to totally miss the mark on what it means. Same with Third Isaiah. You really, context matters infinitely in how we interpret these texts. And you will not be able to make sense of, you know, Isaiah 40-66 if you try to read it as if it came from before, well before the Babylonian exile. So those are some things to think about in terms of the book of Isaiah and Isaiah of Jerusalem. So, we should probably then go on to Isaiah of Jerusalem. What can we know about him? The answer is, not much. These prophetic books, we're fortunate in some cases, where there's a little, a little snatch of autobiography or biography in the book. In the case of Isaiah of Jerusalem, there is in chapter six, there's a dramatic story of his call to be a prophet, that takes place in the temple in the year that King Uzziah died. And then we should have mentioned that Isaiah of Jerusalem is a prophet in the tradition of Nathan, right? Nathan was a prophet who was King David's counselor, and then subsequently, Bathsheba and then Solomon's counselor. Some Hebrew prophets function in that role. They work closely with the monarch. And Isaiah of Jerusalem was the counselor to four different Judean monarchs. This is a position fraught with danger. It's a very delicate political position. But it's interesting that that classic Hebrew prophecy reaches its height during the monarchy,

and that, one way to understand that is that there are a lot a lot of traditions in ancient Israel that thought the monarchy was not maybe a good idea. And you could see that the prophets are God's way of keeping a watch over the over the monarchy. So, to be...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 09:19

Accountability partners.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 09:21

Exactly, exactly.

**Karin Peter** 09:22

I was going to say babysitter, but we'll go with accountability partner.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 09:25

So, Isaiah of Jerusalem has this honor with four different Judean kings, and I said it's a dangerous position because other nations that had prophets or prophet-like figures who were associated with monarchs, you were basically the king's yes-man. And there are plenty of cases in the Hebrew Bible of prophets that functioned, they're mentioned in passing, that function as yes-men for different kings. But a legitimate prophet in the Hebrew Bible is one who was not just going to be a yes-man for the monarch, but was gonna call them out when necessary and Isaiah of Jerusalem, like Nathan, is quite willing to do the dirty work of calling the king out when the king needs calling out. So, that's kind of a little, his ministry lasts a long time. You know, compared to an Amos or a Hosea, who's ministry seemed to be short, kind of, flashes in the pan, Isaiah of Jerusalem, he apparently had job security as a prophet. And so, he, you can kind of trace through chapters 1-39 of Isaiah, the struggles of Judah in this period. Oh, yeah, that reminds me one thing we need to say. So, the original united monarchy divides into two monarchies at the end of Solomon's reign when Solomon dies, roughly 922 to 921 BCE. And they have a northern kingdom called Israel, with its capital city of Samaria, and a southern kingdom of Judah, with its capital city, Jerusalem. And these two kingdoms, though they are related by stories, traditions, language, and so on, they, and occasional alliances, they, kind of, are going their own way. So, Isaiah of Jerusalem has the distinct honor of being a prophet who, whose ministry lasts from the last couple of decades of the northern kingdom through its demise. The Assyrians destroyed that kingdom in 722, 721 BCE. And his ministry goes all the way down to the, kind of, the height of the Assyrian Empire around 700, 701, 700 BCE. So, he would have been there in Jerusalem when refugees came from the north bringing various oral and written traditions that were further woven into those texts that are now part of the Hebrew Bible.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 11:58

And it also gives us a bit more of a sense as to why Isaiah's voice sounds so urgent, because he's just seen the northern kingdom, he's seen Israel fall. And so, there's a real tension about, how do we make sure that doesn't happen to us. And of course, it's not just Isaiah who's concerned about that. The king, whoever the king in power at those points, would also have been a heightened sense of tension and fear. And so, if you can put that into your hear, your ear, as you're hearing his voice, you get a sense of the added drama that he employs as he's trying to share what he senses as God's message to the people. And this is actually a really great book as, it's an example of, kind of, how we're choosing to

approach scripture, which is to say, we see scripture as people's stories of their encounter with God or their understanding of God in their time and place, with advantages and disadvantages of language and culture and all of those things that they had. And so, we'll be looking, you know, at the fact that there's probably, he's, probably Isaiah is looking at God in very different ways than we might. But also, that there's some of the things, ways in which Isaiah is looking at things that probably do translate today as well. So, just wanting to kind of put that into, Isaiah's situation is very particular to that time, and that theological view. So, to let that be that, but then also to see what we overhear in the process.

**Karin Peter 13:55**

So, there's some tension when you do that, though. So, in reading through this, the first part of this, of Isaiah, being this long list of sins that he's calling people out for, and you know, the rational side of biblical scholarship, you go, "Oh, yeah, he's speaking to his context." But when you're reading it, you're, kind of, going, "Oh, ouch." I understand he's speaking to his context, but unfortunately, it has a lot to say in, kind of, a universal voice as well. So, I'm hoping you can help us keep that balance.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:40**

Because that's the kind of thing that gets misused. You know, people pull out those proclamations against, and then say, "Listen to what the prophet said about this. And if you're doing this or this or this, then obviously you, you're not in, you know, you're not in line with God." Yeah, it's that's a, I'm really glad you raised that.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 15:03**

So, a way to help with that is, let's do just a little bit more context on Isaiah of Jerusalem and especially when we come to those sins, let's let the text help us understand what they mean, and I'll say more about that when we get there. So, let's talk about the Assyrian Empire. So, I'm saying "Assyrian", not "Syrian". In this time and place, the Syrians, they're, so, you've got Judah in the south, Israel in the north and Syria, which is frequently called Aram or Arom in the Hebrew Bible, the Arameans. They're right about...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 15:39**

Just north of that.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 15:40**

And these people are all, they're all ethnically related, right? They're all Semitic peoples. And then above them you have the empire which the Hebrew Bible calls Ashur, Assyrians. And so, we have to be really careful because we're going to talk about the Assyrians, not Syrians, and the Assyrian Empire, at the start of Isaiah's ministry, the Assyrian Empire is, they've got internal issues. They're trying to get their stuff together, but because they're dealing with their internal issues, that leaves Syria (Aram), Israel and Judah, they've got this kind of 20 year, like, time of freedom. And what happens is when there's a trade route that goes through here, and so these places are just having, like, enormous, we'll call it economic growth, we'll use our language, economic growth in this period, because Assyria is not yet on the move.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 16:39**

It's distracted.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 16:40**

Right. And so, then as now, economic growth was typically economic growth for the 1%, the top, the richest people, and what's happening first in Israel, but also in Judah in the south, is that it's the endless story of the rich getting richer at the expense of, and the exploitation of, the lower classes. And that's how, that's part of Isaiah of Jerusalem's context too. Only for him, it's happening, we'll say, in the urban core, whereas for somebody like Amos and Hosea, it's happening in Israel, and it's affecting the countryside there too.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:21**

So, this would be Jerusalem, primarily, that we're talking about in Judah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 17:27**

So, you've got this big Assyrian Empire up north. And here's the thing about the Hebrew prophets. Um, this is not mystical or mystery. The Hebrew prophets were astute observers of their political situations. They were highly attuned, highly sensitive to the possibilities of a giant empire to the north, that when it did get its stuff together, it had one way to move and that was west or south. That was through their territory there. They're paying attention to that. Their country folk are not paying attention to that. So, that's really important. So, if you start reading Isaiah 1-39, you can really begin to pick out what sin it means for this prophet. And this is really important because we have so much historical baggage overlaid on terms like sin and righteousness, that when we start reading these books in English translation, we're gonna overlay our baggage on that and assume that's what they're talking about. But if you start reading the text very carefully, you'll figure out right away what Isaiah means by sin. So, from chapter one, "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices says Yahweh. I've had enough of burnt offerings of rams and a fat of fed beasts. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs or goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts, no more, no more." The Prophet is launching out against worship. He's being really hostile against, well, it's a prosperous period. The churches are full. Everybody's like, "Ooo, God is on our side. It's so amazing."

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:08**

Offerings are up. Well, it is.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 19:12**

That's right.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:13**

It's like, God is saying, Yeah, you're giving all this stuff, *but* where's your heart?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 19:20**

And what's happening? What are you really doing? So, he says, "... bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation-I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have

become a burden to me. I'm weary of bearing them." God's like saying, I am just so tired of your worship services. "When you stretch out your hands, I will..."

**Karin Peter 19:45**

I have so many comments I could make there but I'm gonna, I'm keeping them to myself.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 19:51**

It's like...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:52**

We can just have fun imagining where you might have gone with that.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 19:55**

It's like, oh, God feels my pain. "...your hands are full of blood." When you open your hands to me, Isaiah is saying, your hands are full of blood, right? "Wash yourselves; make yourself clean...learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the widow, plead, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." Ah, now we're getting down to what sin is for the classical prophets. Sin here is not about smoking, dancing and chewing. Sin here is what, about what we would call social injustice and abuse, especially abuse of those who are vulnerable in society, orphans, widows, the oppressed, the poor, Isaiah 3, the prophet says, "Yahweh enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people." Ah! Yahweh's entering into judgment with the upper class. "It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses." All right now, we, it's easy to imagine what's going on here. The wealthy are using the justice system, such as it was, to take over lands, the lands of the poor, to take poor people's stuff.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:17**

To evict them, to take their land and their resources.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 21:23**

And the prophet, in Yahweh's name, says, "What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?" Right. So, let's, we're contextualizing what Isaiah means by sin. Isaiah tells us what he means by sin. It's how you are treating the underclass in this period of prosperity. It is how you are grinding them, and humiliating and abusing and oppressing them. That's sin. And then, I'll come to this one a little later. This is Isaiah 5. It's the song of the vineyard. Go ahead, Charmaine.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:57**

I'm not sure if I'm going to say it quite right, but it, implied too is that sin is ignoring your behaviors, and thinking that giving bigger, better offerings is what matters. That's, it's implied that that's sin as well, thinking that God doesn't see or care, but that what your great displays of generosity in your sacrifices is what matters. That is sin, as well as the pretending.

**Karin Peter 22:33**

Well, we have a term for that where we say, “\_\_\_\_\_ covers a multitude of sins.” Right? So excess generosity covers a multitude of sins, if we use it in that colloquial way. That's kind of what's going on here.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:46**

And in this, Yahweh would probably disagree with that one. Yeah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 22:51**

So, the people of Judah, they're not irreligious. They're hyper-religious, right? Worship, worship, worship, worship. Praise Yahweh. Praise Yahweh. Praise Yahweh. Let's go exploit a poor person and take their stuff. Praise Yahweh. Praise Yahweh. And the prophet is saying, no, doesn't work that way. And God is calling them out on that. That's the sin that Isaiah is talking about and if you miss all these contextual clues, then you're going to overlay, “Oh my gosh. Somebody was drinking. Somebody was chewing. Somebody was smoking. Somebody's not showing up at prayer service. Somebody...” It's like, it's stuff like that.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:27**

Or whatever the list of the local congregation or the denomination might be, that, then we think, “Oh, well, this is God's list, right?” And this, these, if we're not doing these things, then that's the kind of thing Isaiah is talking about. Well, it's not at all.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 23:43**

Yeah, so, you know, there's one more, but there's so many good ones in here. Chapter 5, “The vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; He expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry! Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of your land! The Lord of Hosts has sworn in my (Isaiah's) hearing; Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitants.” Ah, we know what this is. This is called gentrification. Right? In other words, Jerusalem, this fairly good-sized city, adding house to house right, taking over the houses next door, taking over the houses next door, kicking the poor out, gentrifying them. The same thing happened in the ancient world. And so, as well, apparently the wealthy were able to take over land holdings of poor people out in the countryside, creating a class of homeless and further destitute and vulnerable people as they're on their way to worship Yahweh in the temple. So,

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:56**

Full day, busy day.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 24:57**

It is a busy day. It's, you know, the upper crust have got very busy days, Karin, and so, and Isaiah is calling them out here. By the way, Amos calls out the same thing in the northern kingdom. This is not an isolated case in the prophets here. So that's Isaiah's context. And one other piece of his context, that's important to know, is that Isaiah is a counselor to the Judean monarch. The Judean monarchs are in the line of David. And when we, in our last podcast about David and Bathsheba, we talked about that covenant God made with David, where God's says to the Davidic house, I promise there will

always be one of David's heirs on the throne. And even if he messes up, I will preserve the monarchy. Nothing's ever bad gonna happen to the monarchy. He, there'll be consequences if you mess up but there's always going to be this monarchy. That unconditional covenant created all kinds of moral dilemmas for Judean monarchs, and for prophets whose job was to speak to them. Isaiah is a prophet in that David tradition but he also is a prophet who's, like, remember that justice and righteousness stuff that goes all the way back to the exodus? That still applies here. So, he's got to call out and warn Judean monarchs who's, who are working with this sense of covenant protection, right? Yes, he needs to warn them that, don't think that God is now a prisoner to that covenant, right.

**Karin Peter 26:38**

So, it's a sense of entitlement that the kings in the tradition of David, or in the house of David, have a sense of entitlement. So, we don't need to worry about this other.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 26:51**

Right. So, that's, kind of, that's Isaiah of Jerusalem in his context. He, he's there to watch as the Assyrian armies do lay siege to Jerusalem, around the year 701 and the siege fails. They pull away for whatever reasons and we don't hear much from Isaiah of Jerusalem after that. So, so, cool. So that's what's, that's what's going on with this figure in his context. So now we can go on to exploring.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:21**

All right.

**Karin Peter 27:22**

Oh, how fun, sin and hypocrisy. Now, let's explore it further.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 27:27**

Exactly. Let's get good at this, right?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 27:31**

And you are so glad you read those 39 chapters.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 27:35**

So, let's take a look and see what some of these terms are that we're using.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 27:42**

Alright, so we need to deal with the question of what is a prophet? What does it mean to call Isaiah a prophet, Nathan a prophet, Amos a prophet? And this is another place where we've got centuries of baggage overlaid on the term. So, in the Hebrew Bible, the primary Hebrew word for a prophet is the word, "*nāḇī*" or you can pronounce it na-**vi**, depends on which style of Hebrew you pronounce navi'. Hence, we are in that part of the Hebrew Bible right now, the second unit, called the Nevi'im, the prophets. The word, in Hebrew, refers to someone who has been called, a divine summons, a divine calling. So, *nāḇī* means the called one. So, centuries after the time of Isaiah, when many, many Jews no longer spoke Hebrew, but spoke Greek, these, their ancient texts were being translated from Hebrew into Greek. At first, the Torah and then the prophets were translated. And when the Greek



translators of the prophets wanted to find a good Greek word for a *nāvî*, they decided on the Greek word “profitis”, prophet. I mean, it comes directly into English from Greek, profitis. And here's where it gets interesting. In Greek, a profitis is one, there's two possibilities with the word profitis, and the verb, profimi, that it comes from. It means someone who speaks on behalf of another. “Prof” means “for”, someone who speaks for another.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 29:26

In this case, God.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 29:27

Right. And that would have been good, except the problem is that the word had another meaning. Someone who predicts things, a foreteller.

**Karin Peter** 29:37

Okay, I can see where we're going now. This is...

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 29:39

You can you see where we're going now? And so that word “prophet” carries with it a sense of prediction as a possible meaning, predicting the far-off future. And so, what happens, then, in subsequent Christian tradition later, is it just becomes commonplace to think of the prophets as predictors, as like crystal ball gazers, who are predicting far-off distant futures. And as interpreting sacred texts is, becomes divorced from anything like literary historical context, these texts, then, are read as collections of predictions, and Christians are reading them as all kind of collections of predictions about Christianity, and what's being missed there is what the prophets actually said, and who they said it to, and why they said it. So, the problem is that, in the Hebrew Bible, the Hebrew Nevi'im, the Hebrew prophets, once in a while they spoke about the future. The future they spoke about was seldom far off. The future they spoke about was a future of consequences, ethical consequences that they discerned, based on their experience with God in the covenant. That is, you, if God is just and we are treating the poor of the land unjustly, there are consequences that will unfold from that. And the prophets were especially attuned to what those consequences might look like. So, the Nevi'im spoke of near futures, sometimes of the far future, but primarily spoke to their own time. They were called to speak for Yahweh in their present circumstances, giving...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 31:26

Giving to the people who needed to hear it in order to either be encouraged or to change and grow in their relationship with God and each other.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 31:36

Yeah, absolutely. So, censure, rebuke, in some cases, praise, you're doing this, right. But their primary focus is what's going on in their own context. And at least in classical Hebrew prophecy, whatever futures they talk about, are not predestined. There's very strongly, in classical Hebrew prophecy, the sense that the future is conditional. If you do this, this is likely to happen. If you do this, this may happen. Even...

**Karin Peter** 32:06

So, that goes back to what you said before, though, about Isaiah and other prophets being keen observers, of what was happening politically, socially, religiously, that were all intertwined. There weren't divisions in those things. So, prediction, in this sense, is simply observing what happens to others who fall into this pattern. This is what will happen to us, if we fall into this pattern?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 32:32

There would certainly be some of that cause and effect. But there would also then be the sense of God cares about the poor, about those who are in the lower echelons of society. And so, there's an emphasis on that, because people in power, typically, they may know that there's cause and effect internationally, you know, among other nations, but they may not always remember that there is cause and effect as far as uprisings within your own people, inter-fighting, demoralizing and starving the lowest in the most vulnerable, in such ways that it will have a long-term effect on stability, on productivity, on all kinds of parts of the kingdom's functioning. And so, it is partly that bigger cause and effect. But then, there's also, in lots of ways, God is an advocate for those whose suffering isn't seen as a consequence, and brings that to the fore, brings that to the attention of the people who have some pos-, some control over that.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 34:04

And the classical Hebrew prophets always hold out some hope that there may be a different future. Thus, they love this word, the word "shuwb" in Hebrew means to repent. It means to turn. Teshuva is turning. And you can avert, the people of Israel, or Jews, they can avert consequences by turning back to the practice of justice and fairness, living as the covenant called them to live, right? It appears in both Israel and Judah, there was this tendency among the religious to want to hide behind the covenant traditions and say the covenant just covers everything. You know, we're, look how good we're doing. God must be on our side. And the good they're doing is based on evil they're doing and God's like, no, don't align me with that. This is not me. This is you. And this is, this can't end good for you. So, this is really important for us to understand, righteousness, and justice, and integrity, different concepts we'll come to in just a minute in the Hebrew Bible. So, yeah, so, the next thing we wanted to deal with here was, alright, who is God for Isaiah?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 35:24

What's this God like?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 35:27

And this is, kind of, this is somewhat difficult. We have to fish this out of the text, but we can come up with a picture of who God is for Isaiah of Jerusalem. And so, one of the words we want to we use first here is integrity, and the related term. Looks like we don't have there, but justice, justice and integrity. So, justice is a key concept in the Hebrew Bible. Again, we have to be careful about overlaying our concepts on it. For us, justice almost always is, we always think of it in terms of retribution. But in the Hebrew Bible, justice, the primary term is "mishpat", the primary term justice in the Hebrew Bible, is a communal value that upholds the idea of equity, fairness, sharing, and I have compassion. It's how, it has to do with how we treat each other. And the related word, you can translate it, integrity, sometimes it's translated righteousness, "tsedaqah". If you're thinking, isn't there a guy named Zedekiah? Yeah,

there's a guy named Zedekiah. Zedekiah in Hebrew means "Yahweh is my righteousness", right? So, justice and integrity both are communal values. They have to do with how we're treating each other in the social order. They have much less, even little to do with how religious we're being, because religiousness, the Hebrew prophets see through religiousness. Religiousness almost always masks some kind of larger social ill or social evil, that the religious are perpetrating or involved in. So, this, these terms, justice, righteousness, they've gotten overlaid with centuries of pious kinds of meanings. When in fact, here in the Hebrew Bible, they're generally terms about how we're treating each other, *especially* the vulnerable classes of society. In the Hebrew Bible, it's not justice, and it's not righteousness to go to church a lot, and then go steal poor people's stuff, or take them to court or rig the court system against them. That's not justice and righteousness. So, the God of Isaiah is a God who wants integrity and justice. And that will be measured by how people treat the widows, the orphans, the poor of the land. So, Isaiah of Jerusalem, likes to title God, "the Holy One of Israel". And again, holiness here in the Hebrew Bible has to do with the incomparable nature of God. God is not like anything we know. God is not just a dude in the sky, only bigger. God is utterly different, distinct from, separate from whole, wholly, W-H-O-L-L-Y, wholly different from our realities and can't be simply reduced to anything we're like, anything human beings are like. Isaiah likes to use this term. And I think Isaiah likes to use this term for God, because it's a reminder that the God of Israel who made the covenant with David is not David's mascot, right. Right. God is not somehow the private possession of Israel who's going to, you know, guarantee that Israel will be just fine, no matter what they do. So, the Holy One of Israel means that God is different from everything else. And thus, what we're doing is measured by that divine holiness, right? Isaiah's God is a God of peace. Isaiah does have some images, some far off hopes, like in chapter 2, of a time when violence will stop, when injustice will stop, when the world will be at peace. That's Isaiah's hope. That, that's quite aligned with other parts of the Hebrew Bible which see violence as disorder and disarray, as not part of the created order. It shouldn't be part of creation. So, salvation and judgment, well, two concepts here. Isaiah's name, Yesha'yahu in Hebrew means, "Yahweh is our deliverance". Again, salvation. Oh, gracious, we got a lot of baggage with that term. The Hebrew word means deliverance, being delivered from political, social, personal ills. There also is a sense in which salvation is this future state of peace and blessedness that Isaiah is hoping for. God is a God who wants to make and bring about well-being in the world. Judgment, this is a hard word for us, but judgment in Isaiah's message, God is a God of judgment, because God is a God of mishpat, of justice, and judgment. There are consequences for social injustice. That's what judgment is about. Isaiah, the prophet, the prophets are there to say to Israel or Judah, you guys have got a lot of spinach between your teeth. Alright, it's time to clean up. God wants to reveal for you, so you can see it clearly, how you are not living up to mishpat, tzedakah, to peace, to integrity, to all these things, and instead are hiding behind what you think are pious actions. So, that's Isaiah's God. And the final thing about Isaiah's God has to do with faith and faithfulness, right? There's this great line, Isaiah 7, where Isaiah says to one of the kings who's trying to figure out how he's going to manage a crisis he's facing. Isaiah says to him, "If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all". But the God Isaiah represents is a God who calls God's people to trust God, and not trust all of their carefully devised schemes and plans and so on. Faith and faithfulness are two sides of the same coin. Faithfulness then, takes you back to justice and integrity. Trust God. Act, in this situation, like God is real and wants to establish the best for us. So, that's a lot of stuff that's going on in this awesome book.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 41:58**

So, any other questions that come to mind, Karin, that would be helpful for the listeners?

**Karin Peter** 42:05

Well, I think just to build on the faith and faithfulness. When we start reading, especially when we just start at the beginning of chapter 1 and start going through, it gives the impression, if you're not looking at things for context and meaning, if you're just allowing your preconceived notions, or maybe your King James Version to, kind of, guide what you believe. It looks like, in biblical prophecy, that getting wiped out by your neighbor was because you became lax in your covenant with God. It's punishment. Getting wiped out is punishment. But what I'm hearing and what you're sharing is that it's more of an issue of when people put their faith or faithfulness in political alliances, or accumulation of wealth, or ways to control, or have power over others, that breaks the covenant. So, what does that, I mean I understand about historical context, but these are some universal concepts about God's nature. What does that say to a reader reading it today? Because we could just be dismissive and say, "Oh, yeah, that was Isaiah just speaking to", but then there's no point to have it in the canon of Scripture. So, what do we do with that?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 43:30

Well, I think there's several things that we can do with it. I mean, with, I think, with much of scripture is what we overhear that matters as much as what's actually there. And if we can overhear that what one of the things God is most concerned about, is how we care for each other, how we make room for peace for each other, and sharing of wealth, and, you know, and bringing equity. Then that has something very specific to say to us. We also need to recognize that, yes, probably Isaiah is dealing, one of the kinds of theology that affects him is the theology of retribution, the idea that if you do good, you get good. If bad things are happening, then it's maybe because you did something bad. But he's tying it to the bigger picture as well. And so, sometimes that is the case. Sometimes the things we do have consequences. And so, he's so, that kind of, you know, that's the logical part of that theology of retribution. So, he is drawing on that theology. It's one of the theologies of his time that prophets would point to, to motivate people. So, you know, I think that's good to recognize that that's part of his theological toolbox that he's working with as well. But it's not just saying, if you are, if you do everything right, I, you know, if you pray right, if you do your sacrifices right, I'm going to protect you from your neighbors, from the military intent of your neighbors. That's, he's, you know, he's saying what is it that God wants to happen among you. And actually, Second Isaiah, the Isaiah who speaks to them when they're in exile, carries that theme through, is that God is with you whatever happens politically. You know, whether this was your fault or not that you're in Babylon and have lost everything, God has not left you and God is still trying to teach you how to live most fully together for each other and with God. So, it's, you can see a number of different kinds of theology at work here.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 46:16

And it's in the exile when Judean thinkers also begin to raise questions about that theology of retribution, right? Theology...

**Karin Peter** 46:26

So, when we fall into it, we're falling into some things that have been overlaid on it to the point where we have a hard time distinguishing what's happening.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 46:36**

Right, right, we do that...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:38**

We think there's a single theme and there isn't. There's multiple themes.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 46:43**

And we fail to take note of where an idea is in the story, the long story of the Hebrew Bible, that an idea that's articulated, you know, 1000 BCE, that idea is subject to change as it develops. And so, during the exile, a Judean thinkers begin to recon-, some of them begin to reconsider that theology of retribution, because it's like, now the punishment doesn't seem to be fitting the crime here. And so, they're wondering about that. And it's obvious that it's not always true, that if you suffer, it's because you did something wrong and so, and Ezekiel will raise the question of whether there is such a thing as generational punishment. He will say, no, that's, we might have said that once. We need to stop saying that. What happens to you happens to you not because of your father, grandfather, great grandfather. It's your responsibility. So, there's development, questioning change, all at, the constant is relationship with God, but new circumstances help ancient Israelites and Judeans rethink their theology. I think there's a lesson for us in that. So, another thing too, is, we've mentioned this before, just in, I'll just mention in passing, until the exile, most thought in Hebrew Bible works with an idea of purely ultimate causes, right? That everything that happens must be directly caused by God or a god. That changes later to an awareness that there are secondary causes, right? A tiny city-state facing a massive empire is not going to, in terms of secondary causes, is not going to survive, right? So, we have to...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 48:29**

A volcano erupting is not necessarily God's wrath, but a geological happening. You know, these other reference points come into play as, over the longer term, and affect people's theologies and their way of understanding who God is, where God is at work, and it's, kind of, strips away the whole idea that somehow God's main job is to make us comfortable. And the theol-, you know, some of the liberation theologies of today that emphasize, and it fits really well with this story of the exile, a God who suffers with us, who is willing to come with us into the darkest places, and let us know that we are known and loved. And in effect, that is what God is doing in Isaiah's time. He is going to those who are suffering most. He's letting them know, through Isaiah's words, that God is aware of them and speaking for them. And so that's not changed. You know, that's a theology that we can, you can, kind of, trace back through the Old Testament as well, the Hebrew Scriptures.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 49:48**

So, are we ready to experience the text?

**Karin Peter 49:51**

I think we're ready. I think [inaudible] on that. Let's see where you take us.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 49:57**

So, where we decided to take you is to, let's see, there we go, to chapter 20, partly because it's a very short chapter. So, it's kind of all encapsulated, but it's also very interesting. And so, again, how are we approaching scripture? We're approaching scripture as coming from human writers, their experience with God in their understanding that they're trying to pass on to others, and that their writing is shaped by their historical and cultural settings, and the nuances and limitations of the language they have, and their worldview. And so, we want to keep reminding people that these are human beings who are writing these scriptures and telling their story. And that there may be, as we try to get at the human part of these writers, we hope that there'll be some things that you will understand, that will kind of resonate for you, connect with you in some way. But if they don't, that's fine. But you might find some interesting things out as we are talking about them. And so, we've picked a scripture that we figured probably doesn't get used in the lectionary and that people might not be familiar with, so, but it's a really great example of prophets, in this age that we're, we've been looking at, in the segment of the Hebrew Scriptures called the prophets. So, Isaiah 20:1-6. I'm just gonna go ahead and read it to you, and then we'll explain it a little bit. "In the year that the commander-in-chief, who was sent by King Sargon of Assyria, came to Ashdod and fought against it, and took it," meaning it destroyed, they destroyed it. "At that time, the Lord had spoken to Isaiah, son of Amos, saying, 'Go and loose the sackcloth from your loins and take the sandals off your feet.' And he had done so walking naked and barefoot." So, here's the image here, the king's prophet, walking around town, Jerusalem, the big city, naked and barefoot. And people are gonna ask, sorry, excuse me. People are gonna ask, "So, what does this mean? If this is God speaking to us, what is it?" So, then the Lord said, "Just as my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Ethiopia, so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptians as captives, and the Ethiopians as exiles, both the young and old, naked and barefoot with buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt. And they shall be dismayed and confounded because of Ethiopia their hope and of Egypt their boast. In that day the inhabitants of this coastland will say, 'See, this is what happened to those in whom we hoped, and to whom we fled for help and deliverance from the king of Assyria. And we, how shall we escape?'" So, lots of names and places, and obviously there's all kinds of political, international negotiations going on here. So, here's the context. Assyria, as Tony talked about earlier, is the big bully on the block, and is kind of encroaching, taking over nations one by one, and they've just picked off Philistia in the previous chapter, and everyone's saying, "Uh oh, am I next?" basically. And so, Egypt and Ethiopia, are wanting to, are asking Judah to join them to, kind of, take military actions, or at least to consolidate their strength to either attack Assyria, or at least defend against Assyria. And basically, this is one of Isaiah's jobs is to say, what does God say about this? And basically, God's saying, "Trust me. Don't try, don't trust your schemes, and your alliances and figuring out how you're going to make war." So, trust God, rather than wading into war. The Allies you are considering will be defeated by Assyria so, this is not far distant predictions. This is really close. These are, you know, things that will happen soon. And people will remember that, what it was that Isaiah did to say Egyptians and Ethiopians, they're going to be walking around naked as they're marched out of their lands by the Assyrians. And so, for three years, apparently, Isaiah wanders around Jerusalem. At least he didn't have to spend a lot of time thinking about what he's gonna wear for the day, you know. It's like, just think how simple that would make life. Anyhow, so, this is just one of those places where we see that part of the role of a prophet is to live out the message of God. And that's often called prophetic symbolic acts, and you'll see it with various of the prophets. Hosea marrying a prostitute to represent how God feels like Israel is not being faithful, is not being faithful to relationship with God. So, these are our common acts for prophets. So, being naked

and barefoot symbolized the humiliation that Ethiopia and Egypt would experience but also as encouraging the king who, I mean, here's your right-hand prophet here, wandering around saying, "Don't you be making these alliances that you're thinking about", very public. I mean, this again, would put the king in a rather awkward spot.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 56:25**

And there's no human resources for the king to complain to about Isaiah's behavior, because the king is human resources. So...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 56:33**

So, this is about seeking God for security, rather than, you know, political military machinations. So, where I wanted to take this, because it's like, okay, where do we take this, and applying it in our own lives, if we don't live in a nudist colony. So, it really took me to the place, you know, Community of Christ feels that we are called to be a prophetic people, but we don't always ask, what does that mean? What might that look like? And if you think about, what did Isaiah have to do in order to mentally get into the space to live out the message of God? We ask ourselves, what concerns about how others think of us, will we have to get over in order to really be prepared to be a prophetic people? So, that's a place that might make a nice conversation or discussion about, what are the things that get in our way, that we are concerned that others will think of us, that might get in the way of hearing a prophetic call to speak for justice and peace? So, a personal question or a community question to ask of the church. How are we going to live out the message of justice, and peace, and love of all, that we hear God calling to us, calling us to? And, what might that look like? And in this passage, it's a very definite picture that gets painted for Isaiah. And I just think...

**Karin Peter 58:12**

And again, we're not taking this literally, Charmaine. So, not everybody has to go wander around three years, naked and afraid, but we're talking about a different way of what that might look like.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 58:22**

We're gonna go there. We're gonna give us some options here. So, you know. Though, I actually, this was really interesting, because it reminded me of a group in, pacifist group that immigrated to Canada. And when faced by some injustices by the Canadian government in court, what they did was, they undressed. So, they became naked in front of the judge in the courtroom to show the injustice and the vulnerability that this cost them. So, that, the option's still there.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 59:03**

But don't tell risk management we're talking about this, Karin.

**Karin Peter 59:06**

I won't, definitely.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 59:07**

All right. All right. So, Isaiah used his body as the way of sharing God's message. And, you know, we don't have to think back that far to think about the civil rights movement and the active nonviolent

resistance of putting your body in a place, whether it's a sit-in or whether it's choosing to walk or to carpool, rather than to ride a bus, you know, the bus boycotts, as they marched across bridges. And I think those are some ways that we can begin to imagine this in our time, is that there are still ways in which we use, we can use our bodies to point to God's justice and love. So, some other, I mean, and I'm just, there's some, I just want to talk about marches for a minute, because that's become a thing again, in the last while. I mean, it's always been, but I think the effects and the effectiveness of it has been re-realized. And I think there's a few reasons why, and one is that the effect, there's an effect on the marchers themselves, because they have found a way to speak and to be heard and seen, and for their message to be out there. The second is, it affects those who see. Because whether or not they agree with whatever it is the marchers are marching for, they can't avoid seeing that here's some people who believe deeply in something, or have been deeply affected by something. And so that's a second effect. And then a third effect is that marches affect a whole population's awareness. We're awfully good at, as human beings, at ignoring the things that make us uncomfortable. And if we can just pretend they're not there, and we're really quite good at that, whether it's in the way we construct our cities with those areas, and the other areas, you know, the rich areas and the poor areas, we can have that luxury of not seeing. And so, marches make whole populations aware of the concerns, the injustices, or the need for a conversation. So, I just think there's still, there's still a lot of power in this letting our bodies be a way of speaking about justice, and about God's will for all people. And so, the questions for reflection: But what other ways can we broadcast God's love and care for all people? So, to actually start creatively thinking, what are some other ways we can do that? Maybe in marches, maybe in some other concrete ways, making it visible? How can we make our bodies the canvas of God's message of trust and peace? And in the cause of justice and peace, what kind of a billboard am I willing to be? Just some interesting places to go on a spiritual, personal level as we, as we let Isaiah's time and context and commitment to God's justice and peace, shape how he was and where he went?

**Karin Peter** 1:02:50

Thank you, Charmaine, for bringing that close to what we're experiencing in our own context, our time and place. So, a lot of connections for me as you ask the questions, and I'm sure for our listeners, as they experienced that, as well. As we bring our episode here on, I keep wanting to call it "The Naked Prophet", but as we keep our...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 1:03:17

Go ahead.

**Karin Peter** 1:03:18

Our focus on this, I just want to revisit the scripture that I shared at the beginning, which is from the 27th verse of the first chapter of Isaiah, where it says, "Zion will be redeemed by Justice and those in her who repent by righteousness." So, keeping that in mind, when we talk about a prophetic people living the message that God is sharing, there's a hymn in *Community of Christ Sings*, it's number 386. I think the title is "The Cause of Zion Summons Us", I think that might be it. But I think it speaks to what you are saying, Charmaine, that when we talk about being prophetic, or prophesying as people, we're talking about living into what the future can be, and that hope. So, here's verse three from that hymn. "The cause of Zion prophesies the future yet to be, when men and women everywhere shall walk in dignity. We now anticipate the day when pain and tears shall cease, when humankind shall live as one



in righteousness, and peace.” So, a very Isaiah, a very First Isaiah message there. And so, with that, I want to thank you again, Tony and Charmaine, for enlightening us in our He’brew exploration of Old Testament scripture, and also sharing with us some of the more lighthearted ways that we can, we can break the tension as we read some of this together. So, I hope our listeners will use those questions in your own discipleship formation, and think about those in your own life. And until next time, I’m your host, Karin Peter, with our wonderful facilitators and guides through the Old Testament, Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith. Thank you so much for listening.

**Josh Mangelson** 1:05:33

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