

Sermon December 17, 2023
[Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11]

An Interview with Isaiah
Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you and peace, from God the Creator, and from God's Son, Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

So, the following sermon began as a prompt to ChatGPT. I wanted to know "what an interview would look like with Isaiah the prophet." And so, the title of today's message: "An Interview with Isaiah." Chat GPT gave me a starting point. However, what became today's story morphed and changed considerably from the initial data I received.

Here we go:

The last thing I remember before falling asleep was turning off the lamp on the nightstand next to my bed. It had been a long day.

When I awoke, still groggy, I heard something strange – not exactly distinct voices, but murmurs. Then someone whispered into my ear.

"Well, welcome, Rabbi," she said gently.

"Rabbi?" I replied, still not sure if I was awake or dreaming. Everything remained dark.

"Are you not a rabbi?" she asked quizzically.

"I think there's been a misunderstanding," I replied, somewhat unsettled. "I mean, a few people in the congregation I serve call me their *resident rabbi*, because I enjoy teaching, but I'm not officially a rabbi. I'm a Lutheran pastor.

The murmuring in the background stopped. Apparently the correction I offered concerning my vocational identity came as a surprise. Then the woman's voice whispered again into my ear. "So, you have no idea where you are?"

"No," I answered, with some frustration. "How can I know where I am if I can't see anything?"

"We'll have to send him back," another voice said, this one male.

"Wait," I replied. "Can't you at least tell me where I am?"

"You have entered the Messianic era," the woman replied, "the future destiny for which our people, the Jews, have longed for over two millennia. Here we have no war, no violence, and no sorrow. Here God has conquered death, and wiped the tears away from our eyes."

I was awestruck. I was no longer among the living. I was somehow now in the age to come, the future age, the Messianic era, the life of the world to come. What a welcome contrast to the terror that raged across the world I left, the kind that, even in the midst of privilege, made me feel hopeless.

“Why can’t I stay?” I finally demanded. “Why do I have to go back?”

“Because God hasn’t figured out yet what to do with the Christians. Their dead remain as you are; asleep.”

“I assume that includes Lutheran Christians?” I grumbled.

“Oh, they’re the ones holding everything up!” she replied, with a hint of exasperation.

“One of our prophets says that even *God* can’t figure them out! Especially the ones at Queen Anne Lutheran Church! You have to go back.”

Suddenly, I could feel the onset of fatigue.

“No way,” I pleaded. “I want to stay! Must I return to the land of the living?”

“Yes.”

“Can’t I at least talk to a few people here before I go?”

“Like who?”

I paused, desperately trying to bring to mind a few names of people in the Jewish faith.

“I’d like to meet Steven Spielberg.”

“No, he’s still alive.”

“Sandy Koufax.”

“No, he’s too obscure.”

Then it hit me.

“You mentioned one of your prophets,” I said.

“Yes,” she replied.

“May I speak with him?”

Silence gave way to murmurs, as if the question I asked was not only unexpected, but somehow...forbidden. Then came another voice, this one much louder than a whisper:

“We will grant your request” it declared, in a voice sounding like Orson from “Mork and Mindy.” “The Prophet will see you, but since no living mortal can enter through these gates, the Gates of the Age to Come, you will not see the Prophet. You will only be able to *hear* the Prophet.”

I felt a hand gently sweep across my eyes, turning my sight from visible darkness to darkness itself. Huh—I couldn’t believe it! They were actually going to let me stay! And I would get the chance to meet one of the greatest prophets of the Jewish faith. How amazing! What an opportunity!

Time passed. The murmuring I heard dissolved once again into silence. I wondered who would greet me. Would it be Zachariah, who would explain his visions, or maybe Amos, who spoke of justice for the poor “rolling down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Or maybe it would be *my* namesake, Daniel, who could

teach me how to read dreams and roam with lions. Then came a voice, more audible than a whisper, but quieter than a roar:

“Pastor Dan?”

It was a woman’s voice.

“Pastor Dan.”

“Yes,” I said, becoming mildly impatient. “When do I get to meet the Prophet?”

“You’re talking with her.”

“Who are you?”

“I am the Prophet Isaiah.”

“Oh, wait a minute! The prophet Isaiah was a *man* who lived in the eighth century BCE. His was a time of great change, when the prophets functioned less as private counselors and critics of kings, and more as public figures, through their pronouncements in the temple courts and in other public places.”

“You’re right. That was one of many difficult chapters for my people, the Jews. At that time, prophets like Amos challenged lackluster religious practices and condemned the social injustice that accompanied the increasing urbanization and centralization of State power that was characteristic of the eighth century.”

“I see. It sounds like prophets took on a new role. They spoke truth to power.”

“The Isaiah *you* have in mind lived in the shadow of the growing Assyrian Empire, one that was known for its brutality. We came to fear them greatly, and with good reason. By the end of that century, they had scattered and destroyed 10 of our 12 tribes.”

“So, you are not *that* Isaiah?”

“No. I heard *you* are a Lutheran pastor. Don’t you remember anything they taught you in seminary?”

“Of course,” I suddenly recalled. “Isaiah was written in three parts: The first appeared in the eighth century, as we just discussed.”

“The Second Isaiah, chapters 40 to 55, appeared several centuries later. It addressed the Babylonian exiles, when Cyrus, King of Persia conquered Babylon and freed the Jews to return to their homeland.”

“That’s the part *I* wrote!”

“Okay, now I remember! Some scholars argued that a *woman* wrote Second Isaiah, given the consistently positive way it speaks of and to women.”

“Yes, let’s just say, my male colleagues at the time were not up to the task. So, I took up the mantle and declared the Word of God to a people hungry for hope.”

“Of course! I *was* paying attention in seminary! You had to persuade the exiles in Babylon that God was behind the events taking place; that God sent Cyrus to liberate them and to encourage them to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.”

“Yes, and let me tell you, it wasn’t easy. My successor, the man who wrote the remaining chapters of Isaiah, had it difficult as well. He addressed our people *after* they returned to Jerusalem, speaking dramatically about how they shall build up the ancient ruins, raise up the former devastations and repair the ruined cities.

“That’s fascinating. Your successor not only proclaimed a word of hope, regarding the restoration of Jerusalem and its temple, he also predicted the future!”

“Wait a minute, stop there. You’re thinking of the way people understand “prophecy” in *your* time, not mine.”

“Can you say more?”

“Biblical prophecy is not ultimately about foretelling or predicting the future. Granted, that can be one part of a prophet’s job description; unfortunately – and I’m quoting here from one of your Lutheran scholars, a man named Terence Fretheim – ‘the word *predict* does not help. Words such as *announce* or *proclaim* would serve better, for the prophets were seldom specific about the future of which they spoke.’”

“Yes. I remember now. The Hebrew prophets were intermediaries who spoke on behalf of God to the people. The purpose of “predicting” the future was to change the present.”

“Exactly. Think again of Isaiah 61, which I quoted earlier. In the first part of what I hear you Lutherans call “the First Reading,” the Prophet shares with us his commission, his calling, his credentials. God has chosen to speak through him. In the second part, he engages in the act of prophecy itself. He speaks on behalf of God to the people.”

“Listen to him:

‘For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing. I will faithfully give [my people] their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant [or contract] with them.’” [Isaiah 61:8]

“That’s it. The calling of a prophet – and I remember the origin of the word for *prophet* in Hebrew means “to call” or “to be called” – is not to predict the future the way Nostradamus would centuries later. It’s to call out injustice as that which undermines our relationship with God.”

“But it’s more than that.”

“Yes, it’s also to speak a word of hope, and my world needs hope now more than ever. Our addiction to fossil fuels constantly takes precedent over the survival of our

species. Cain continues killing Abel, spilling the blood of innocent people everywhere from Myanmar to the Sudan, from Ukraine to the Middle East.”

“Indeed, your time sounds grim. That’s why it needs to hear a word of hope again. Isn’t that what the Christian season of Advent is all about?”

“It is. One of my parishioners summarized it perfectly. This is the time ‘where we wait for the light,’ she said, ‘which always comes at the darkest hour.’

Both of us fell silent, pondering the sacred depths of these words.

A few moments passed. Then I realized something.

“I have to go back,” I blurted out.

“Why? Don’t you have more questions for me?”

“Absolutely! If I had time, I’d love to know what it was like to be the only female prophet in the entire Hebrew Bible.”

“Well, that one I can answer quickly. I *wasn’t* the only female prophet. In contrast to the priesthood which was exclusively male, both men and women could be prophets. Don’t you remember Deborah in the book of Judges? She was a prophet.”

“How could I forget? And in the Christian faith women prophets were also active in house churches during the time of Paul. He even ranked them with apostles and teachers as leaders of the faith.”

“That’s interesting. I’m willing to bet your congregation knows that.”

“They know everything! And speaking of my congregation, that’s why I must return. God calls Christians, like the prophets of old, to be a *people of hope*, to declare to others that light is about to enter the world, that it will ‘shine in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it.’

Suddenly, I started to hear the murmuring once more. Light began to return to my eyes. Then a voice whispered in my ear. “Time to wake up...”

May this season be the season of hope for us all, and may we be, as the prophets of old, a people of hope – and may we bring that hope to others.

In Jesus name.

Amen.