Unwavering Faithfulness

Pivotal Moments in the Book of Isaiah

Walter Brueggemann and Brent A. Strawn

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"Isaiah is a book of such large scale that it can be hard to come to grips with it. Walter Brueggemann and Brent Strawn offer here a great gift: a compilation of pathways into its grandeur by way of key moments. One could hardly ask for two guides with more knowledge and wisdom about the Bible, and it's a particular blessing to hear Brueggemann's voice now that we have lost him."

—Christopher B. Hays, D. Wilson Moore Professor of Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary

"When I think Brueggemann, I hear, 'The gospel is fiction when judged by the empire. The empire is fiction when judged by the gospel.' Breathtaking truth. Crisp, clear, poetic, prophetic, more than most of us can imagine. Dangerous, like the gospel itself. This book does not disappoint. Brueggemann and Strawn's prose brings Isaiah's fierce prophecies to life in this time and for all times. You want to preach truth to power? You want to teach your lay leaders how to be prophets for the reign of God? Run to this book, with tools for you and your community."

—Jacqui Lewis, Senior Minister and Public Theologian, Middle Church

"Few books of the Hebrew Bible have had a greater influence on Christianity (already evident in the New Testament) than the book of Isaiah. What a privilege, therefore, to have two of our finest Old Testament scholars leading a study of key texts from this powerful, prophetic work. Here we benefit from a fascinating collaboration between Brent Strawn and (in one of his last projects) Walter Brueggemann. In fact, it would be hard to think of two finer navigators for a voyage through the book of Isaiah. In sum, this study guide isn't merely helpful, it matters."

—Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, Professor of Old Testament Studies, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles

Pivotal Moments in the Old Testament

Brent A. Strawn, *Series Editor*

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Delivered out of Empire: Pivotal Moments in the Book of Exodus, Part One

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For Tia and Holly,
for putting up with the full sixty-six chapters (and then some!)

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Series Foreword

Pivots in Scripture

Not long after arriving in Atlanta for my first tenure-track job, still very green in my field and profession, I somehow found the courage to invite Walter Brueggemann, who taught a few miles away at Columbia Theological Seminary, to lecture in my Introduction to Old Testament course. To my great delight he accepted, despite the fact that the class met at eight o'clock in the morning and Atlanta traffic is legendary. (Those who know Walter better than I did at that time know what I discovered only later: that such generosity is standard operating procedure for him.) I either offered, or perhaps he suggested, that the topic of his guest lecture should be Jeremiah. And so it was that a few weeks after the invitation was extended and received, my students and I were treated to eighty minutes of brilliant insight into Jeremiah from one of the masters of that biblical book, not to mention the larger Book to which Jeremiah belongs.[1]

Even now, more than twenty years later, I remember a number of things about that lecture—clear testimony to the quality of the content and the one who gave it. In all honesty, I must admit that several of the things I remember have made their way into my own subsequent lectures on Jeremiah. In this way, Walter's presence could still (and *still can*) be felt in my later classes, despite the fact that I couldn't ask him to guest lecture every year (alas!). One moment from that initial lecture stands out with special clarity: Walter's exposition of a specific text from Jeremiah 30. I suspect I knew this particular text before, maybe even read about it in something Walter had written, but as I recall things now it was that early morning lecture at Emory

University in 2002 that drilled it into my long-term memory banks. The text in question was Jeremiah 30:12–17:[2]

> [12] For thus says the LORD:
> Your hurt is incurable,
> your wound is grievous.
> [13] There is no one to uphold your cause,
> no medicine for your wound,
> no healing for you.
> [14] All your lovers have forgotten you;
> they care nothing for you;
> for I have dealt you the blow of an enemy,
> the punishment of a merciless foe,
> because your guilt is great,
> because your sins are so numerous.
> [15] Why do you cry out over your hurt?
> Your pain is incurable.
> Because your guilt is great,
> because your sins are so numerous,
> I have done these things to you.
> [16] Therefore all who devour you shall be devoured,
> and all your foes, every one of them, shall go into captivity;
> those who plunder you shall be plundered,
> and all who prey on you I will make a prey.
> [17] For I will restore health to you,
> and your wounds I will heal,
> says the LORD,
> because they have called you an outcast:
> "It is Zion; no one cares for her!"

The passage is striking for a number of reasons, but what Walter highlighted was the remarkable shift—or better, *pivot*—that takes place in the space between verses 15 and 16. Prior to this point, God's speech to Israel emphasizes the incurable nature of its wound: "no healing for you" (v. 13)! Israel's wound is, on the one hand,

> the blow of an *enemy*,
> the punishment of a *merciless foe.* (v. 14)

On the other hand, the blow is also and more fundamentally *God's own doing*:

for *I have dealt* you the blow (v. 14)
I have done these things to you. (v. 15)

Like the original audience, contemporary readers are left no time to ponder this double-agency since immediately after the second ascription of this wound to the Lord's hand, the text pivots both suddenly and drastically. From verse 16 on, we read that those whom the Lord used to punish Israel will now themselves be punished; we also learn that what had before been a terminal illness turns out to be treatable after all (v. 17a). The reason for this dramatic shift is given only in verse 17b: God will cure the incurable wound because God will not stand by while Israel's enemies call it "an outcast," claiming that "no one cares for Zion."

Now in truth, what God says to Israel/Zion in verse 13 sounds very much like "no one cares for you," but as Walter memorably put it in his lecture, while it is one thing to talk about your own mother, it is another thing altogether when *someone else* talks about your mother! God, it would seem, claims privilege to say certain things about Zion that others are simply not allowed to say. If and when they ever do utter such sentiments, God is mobilized to defend and to heal. Zion, it turns out, is no outcast, after all; there is, after all, One who still cares for her.

The space between verses 15 and 16 is a *pivot*, explained most fully in verse 17. This, then, is a turning point that changes everything in this passage—a passage that can be seen, more broadly and in turn, as a pivotal moment in the larger book of Jeremiah, coming, as it does, early in a section that shifts decidedly toward consolation and restoration.

And Jeremiah 30:12–17 is not alone in the Old Testament. Another remarkable pivot takes place in the space between the two lines of Psalm 22:21:

Save me from the mouth of the lion!
From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.

In the first line, there is an urgent plea for immediate help: "Save!"; in the second, testimony to past deliverance: "You *have rescued* me." Something drastic, something pivotal has taken place here, in between two parallel lines of Hebrew poetry. Before this pivot, the psalmist

knew only of *God-forsakenness* (v. 1). But after it, the psalmist is full only of *God-praise* (vv. 22–24) that extends to the most remarkable and unexpected corners of the world and underworld (vv. 25–31).[3]

Spiritual writer and humanities professor Marilyn Chandler McEntyre has written recently of "pausing where Scripture gives one pause."[4] She comments on memorable biblical phrases like "teach me your paths," "hidden with Christ," and "do not harden your hearts." Phrases like these, she writes,

> have lives of their own. Neither sentences nor single words, they are little compositions that suggest and evoke and invite. . . . They are often what we remember: "Fourscore and seven years ago" recalls a whole era, triggers a constellation of feelings, and evokes an image of Lincoln. . . . In the classic film *A Bridge Too Far*, one soldier, rowing for his life away from an impending explosion, repeats again and again a fragment of the only prayer he remembers: "Hail Mary, full of grace . . . Hail Mary, full of grace . . . Hail Mary, full of grace . . ."—and somehow we believe that such a prayer at such a time suffices.[5]

So it is that key phrases are "powerful instruments of awakening and recollection for all of us."[6] McEntyre goes on to note that the spiritual practice of meditative reading known as *lectio divina* encourages readers to pay attention to specific words or phrases:

> Learning to notice what we notice as we move slowly from words to meaning, pausing where we sense a slight beckoning, allowing associations to emerge around the phrase that stopped us is an act of faith that the Spirit will meet us there. There is, we may assume, a gift to be received wherever we are stopped and summoned.[7]

Pivotal moments in the Old Testament like the ones in Jeremiah 30 and Psalm 22 aren't exactly the same thing as the practice of pausing commended by McEntyre, but the two seem closely related nevertheless. Pivotal texts are precisely the ones that arrest us, demand our attention, change everything:

- Suddenly, *healing*—Jeremiah 30:16–17
- Suddenly, *deliverance*—Psalm 22:21b

Of course, the pivots found in Scripture are not always so benign. One may think, alternatively, of these:

- Suddenly, *trouble*—as in 2 Samuel 11:5, Bathsheba's report (only two words in Hebrew) to David: "I'm pregnant."
- Suddenly, *judgment*—as in 2 Samuel 12:7, Nathan's statement (also only two words in Hebrew) to David: "You're that man!"

Now one could, especially in a more skeptical mode, wonder just how many pivotal moments, how many *suddenly*s like these, might actually exist in Scripture. But before we assume that the list is quite finite—more of a curiosity than a persistent call to attention—and take our leave to attend to some piece of distracting drivel on our electronic devices, we should stop and remember the Gospel of Mark, which makes a living on *suddenly*s. Jesus is always doing something or having something done to him *suddenly* or *immediately* (*euthus*), and the same is often true for those gathered around him.[8]

What Mark shows us is that, in the end, *suddenly* can aptly describe an entire Gospel, an entire life lived toward God—indeed, a life lived most perfectly toward God. The same may be true for the gospel of God writ large, across both testaments of the Christian Bible. And so, along with the practice of pausing where Scripture gives us pause (McEntyre), the practice of pivoting where Scripture itself pivots has the same effect: it turns us toward something new, something deeper, something *transformative*. These texts are places where the Bible, and we who read it, may pivot toward another world—another *divine* world—that can change our own world for the better, forever. In contrast to McEntyre's pauses, which anticipate that the Spirit will reach out to us through the text, these pivotal moments in Scripture are not acts of faith but *places* of faith, established sites where the Spirit has *already* met the faithful. They are gifts *already* given, though they seem largely still waiting on us to receive them. The goal of the present volume, and this series dedicated to pivotal moments in the Old Testament, is to mediate those gifts.

With the present work on Isaiah, the Pivotal Moments series comes to a close. It is hoped that the kind of approach modeled in its volumes may be practiced by others in the other nooks and crannies

of Scripture with its countless pivots. Professor Brueggemann has admirably set us an example to emulate in his two-volume contribution on Exodus, which inaugurated the series, and then in his subsequent volume on Jeremiah.[9] I consider it one of the great honors of my life that Walter invited me to complete this last volume on Isaiah alongside him. While we have not identified which of us composed which entry—not least to protect the lesser of the two authors (yours truly)—I am confident that readers will be able to quickly make such discriminations, identifying which entry, for instance, is "authentic Brueggemann" and which "merely (secondary) Strawn"! I am equally certain that Walter's invitation to join him in this work on Isaiah is just the latest installment in a countless series of kindnesses that began way back when, in an early morning class about the book of Jeremiah one spring in Atlanta. And so I can end the foreword to the present volume as I have the previous ones in the series: We (here meaning *me*) are fortunate to have Professor Brueggemann lead the way . . . — . . . and, now, to conclude the way with this final volume in the Pivotal Moments in the Old Testament series. Once again, I consider it a high point in my career that Walter entrusted the completion of *Unwavering Faithfulness: Pivotal Moments in the Book of Isaiah* to me, and together we hope our volume helps readers encounter this great—dare one say pivotal?—prophetic book in meaningful, even transformative ways.

Walter Brueggemann passed away early on Thursday, June 5, 2025. Though he was unable to respond, I spoke to him by phone only two days prior, eagerly reporting that I was reading the copyedits of this joint volume that very week. Far more importantly, I used those last precious moments to try to convey how thankful I was for him and for our friendship—how much I loved, admired, and respected him. And of course, I still feel that way, as so do millions of others who have encountered his words over his long, illustrious, and prophetic career. Walter's voice will continue to resound, if only we have ears to hear, in his many publications, including this one and a few others that must now appear posthumously. The paragraphs above recounts

one instance of Walter's generosity—that guest lecture way back when—but his innumerable gifts to me begin with his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, which I read as a college freshman. Coauthoring the present volume is thus just the latest installment in a history of blessing he bestowed on me. I know those blessings will continue, as I continue to return to his numerous writings. I hope *Unwavering Faithfulness*, along with Walter's many other publications that testify to his way and work among us, will be a blessing to you as well.

Brent A. Strawn, *Series Editor*

Preface

The book of Isaiah is exceedingly complex; it is also especially important in Christianity and thus to Christian readers. The complexity of Isaiah is due to the fact that it is a poetic articulation of the history of the city of Jerusalem that was many centuries in the making. That history stretches from the time when Jerusalem was a "faithful city . . . full of justice" to being described as full of "murderers" (1:21), through its profound dislocation in exile (see 40:1), and to its restoration as "a joy" (65:18). According to most biblical scholars, this long and complex poetic work—some might go so far as to call it a musical *oratorio*—was generated by a series of poets, most of whom we do not know by name, but all of whom (eventually) flew under the flag of "Isaiah."[1] For centuries, it has been a common critical judgment that at least some of the material now found in chapters 1–39 of the book may be traced back to the work of a prophet named Isaiah, Amoz's son, who was active in the eighth century BCE (see 1:1). But it is obvious that chapters 36–39 are largely appropriated from 2 Kings 18–20, and it is equally clear that the oracles against the nations found in Isaiah 13–23 are highly stylized and belong to a recurring genre found elsewhere in the prophetic books. These factors, among others, complicate any easy assignment of all of chapters 1–39, the so-called First or Proto Isaiah, to the eighth-century prophet by that name.[2]

It is commonly agreed, further, that the middle portion of the book (chaps. 40–55) reflects the moment when (or slightly before the moment when) the displaced exiles in Babylon were permitted by the Persians to return home to Judah. Finally, it is also typically held that the last chapters of the book (56–66) reflect the resolve

and struggle for Jerusalem's restoration after its demise at the hand of the Babylonian Empire—a restoration financed in part by the Persian Empire. These two parts are commonly called "Second" or "Deutero" and "Third" or "Trito" Isaiah, respectively.

There is, in brief, a rich diversity of poetic voices in the book of Isaiah that corresponds to (and emerges from) an equally rich diversity of historical circumstances. Despite that fact—or better, these facts—it is nevertheless possible to identify a coherent perspective for this entire many-splendored book. That perspective is the conviction that Jerusalem is both *beloved of God* in generous ways and *accountable to God* in uncompromising ways. However many "Isaiahs" there may have once been, there is in the end *only one biblical Isaiah*.

The biblical Isaiah has been particularly important for Christians because the narrative accounts of the life of Jesus offered in the four Gospels make frequent appeal to the book in order to situate Jesus amid the hopes of ancient Israel. A glance at the Scripture index of Richard Hays's landmark work *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* is suggestive of the numerous ways the Gospel writers appealed to the book of Isaiah.[3] The links between the text of Isaiah and its use in the Gospel accounts are once again—as Hays makes abundantly clear—complex and variegated. It is clear, in any case, that Isaiah was indispensable in shaping the imagination of the early church concerning the person and work of Jesus, so much so that one early church writer, St. Jerome, called Isaiah both "evangelist and apostle," making the book of Isaiah "The Fifth Gospel."[4]

There is not space in the present brief treatment of Isaiah to even begin to capture the richness of this book within itself or within its reception and use in Christian faith and practice. What we *can* accomplish here is to offer a series of expositions in the hopes that when readers are finished, they will have newfound appreciation not only for the complexity of Isaiah but also for its beauty, wonder, and importance for faith. We have selected specific texts that we believe will guide the reader through the book—passages that we deem, moreover, for one reason or another, to be *pivotal* (see the series foreword). Our expositions are intentionally brief and designed for study in local congregations and small groups. It is our

hope that these expositions give access to the main claims of the texts under discussion. Following the form of other volumes in this same series, each exposition is oriented around a specific verse, but with due attention paid to the immediate context of that verse and to the wider context provided by the larger book of Isaiah. When it has seemed clear to us to do so, we have not refrained from suggesting traces and points of connection to contemporary biblical faith. Contrary to outward appearance or commonplace assumption, serious textual study of the Bible is neither easy nor obvious, especially at the start. But as one leans into it with patience and alert attention, one is quickly and easily drawn into the imaginative drama traced out by the poets. When that is done well and rightly, one is never the same again. We have found that true throughout our careers and with many biblical texts, not least in this joint work on one of the true treasures of Scripture.

In our offer of these expositions, we are greatly indebted to a host of Isaiah scholars. The format of this series limits extended engagement with them and their work, but it is important to recognize that the essays presented here are done with and only possible because of the help offered by a great cloud of witnesses.[5] In addition to biblical scholars, we have also kept in mind other key members of the interpretive community—most especially the faithful clergy and churchgoers for whom this book is primarily intended. In the end, we hope that our joint exposition will serve the purpose of any and all study of Scripture, which we deem to be a, if not the, primary source for Christian nurture and empowerment for wise, courageous, and faithful living in these days.

One further point that might prove helpful: The book of Isaiah, like every other prophetic book, comes to us in a form that, despite the general contours sketched above (chaps. 1–39, 40–55, 56–66), is not always clear—especially within chapters or smaller units. It is customary in scholarship to believe that some, maybe much, of the present form of prophetic books is *by design*. Even if we can't be sure that such design was intended by author(s) or editor(s), various insights about order can be recognized—perhaps better, created!—by readers after the fact. But *readerly construction of order* is not the same as *author/editor–intended design*. Indeed, many scholars of the prophets would posit that, at least in some

cases, the biblical books were put together with *no* discernible order (at least for stretches). This no doubt is what makes prophetic books so hard to read: it is not always clear why one part leads into another, and there is no guarantee that the parts appear in any thematic let alone chronological sequence. As a result, best practice is to focus on identifiable units within the prophets, often called *oracles* by scholars or, more simply and frequently in the pages that follow, *poems*.[6]

It must be admitted that determining where a poem begins and/or ends is not always easy. As a result, most readers will likely depend heavily on established translations of the Bible in English, which often use stanza breaks or headings of various sorts reflecting decisions about such matters. For present purposes, we wish simply to underscore that the oracle or poem is the basic unit of prophetic speech. In the chapters that follow, we sometimes discuss more than one poem—especially to provide further context or setting—but the focus is often and resolutely on one particular unit. In a lengthy book like Isaiah (or the Bible for that matter), there is always more than just one particular unit. But we are convinced that readers of Scripture would do well to focus as much as possible, even if only for the duration of the chapters that follow, on the unit at hand. It is important to listen to the singular witness of each poem. Each has something to say and contribute and should not be confirmed, critiqued, or chastened too quickly by other poems, let alone other books of the Bible. The chapters that follow show that we have no problem making large connections within Isaiah, as well as across other books of the Old Testament and New Testament. Such larger connections are part, at least, of what it means to construct a biblical theology or think about the Bible as a whole. It is nevertheless clear that some of what we say is only sayable because we have done our best to remain—again, at least for a moment—under the spell of the particular poem at hand. We invite readers to do the same, lingering with us in the wild witness of these poems, without domesticating them too quickly by other things we know (or, even worse, by things we *think* we know).[7]

A final word of thanks is offered to the good people of Westminster John Knox Press, especially Julie Mullins, for assistance, care

with production, and patience. We are also grateful to Tia Brueggemann, Isabel Packevicz, and Caleb Punt for their help with the preparation and editing of the manuscript. Finally, the dedication of the book to our two wives is *beyond* deserved.

Walter Brueggemann
Traverse City, Michigan

Brent A. Strawn
Durham, North Carolina
Second Week of Advent 2024

Suggested Sessions for Study Groups

Week 1	=	Chapters 1–2
Week 2	=	Chapters 3–4
Week 3	=	Chapters 5–7
Week 4	=	Chapters 8–10*
Week 5	=	Chapters 11–12
Week 6	=	Chapters 13–14
Week 7	=	Chapters 15–16
Week 8	=	Chapters 17–19**
Week 9	=	Chapters 20–22***
Week 10	=	Chapters 23–25****
Week 11	=	Chapters 26–27
Week 12	=	Chapters 28–30

*Chap. 25 might be profitably read alongside chap. 9.
**Alternatively, instead of chap. 19, chap. 20 could be read this week.
***Instead of chap. 20, which could be read the previous week, chap. 19 could be included here.
****Chap. 9 might be combined with chap. 25 (see week 4)

Chapter 1

The Vision of Isaiah (Isaiah 1:1)

The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

Scripture Passages for Reference

Isaiah 1:1
Isaiah 6:1–13
2 Kings 15:1–7, 32–38
2 Kings 16:1–20
2 Kings 18:3–6

This opening verse of Isaiah is an editorial introduction to the book and to the *geopolitical* and *historical* location of the prophet. Geographically, the prophet Isaiah is situated in the city of Jerusalem, a royal city dominated by royal ideology that was regularly reinforced and legitimated by temple liturgy. The book of Isaiah thus amounts to nothing less than a prophetic, imaginative construal of the city of Jerusalem, favored by divine privilege and promise, as it faced the vagaries of the historical process characterized by economic and military reality. The actual history of Jerusalem is not difficult to trace for the time of Isaiah. The prophetic, imaginative portrayal in the book of Isaiah, however, is something quite different, as we will see.

Given this geopolitical location, it was inescapable that the prophet must deal with royal reality. Indeed, we are able to see that the prophet Isaiah was an intimate of kings and had ready access to royal power. This introductory note identifies four Davidic kings from the time of Isaiah. The first, *Uzziah* (also called Azariah), had a long and prosperous reign (783–742 BCE; 2 Kings 15:1–7). He is mentioned only once in the book of Isaiah, in his famous "call narrative" (Isaiah 6:1–13). Uzziah is named only as a chronological marker for the prophet, so he does not really figure in the book. The second king named in our verse is *Jotham*, son of Uzziah (742–735 BCE; 2 Kings 15:32–38). His was an inconsequential reign; he is not mentioned in the book of Isaiah beyond this editorial notation. He is included only for the purpose of dynastic sequence. The third king to note in our introductory verse is *Ahaz*, son of Jotham (735–715 BCE; 2 Kings 16:1–20). According to the narrative, Ahaz's rule was dominated by foreign policy crises. He had to deal with the immediate threat of the minor states of Northern Israel and Aram (Syria). In the face of what turned out to be a minor threat, Ahaz, in his great fear and anxiety, appealed to the superpower Assyria (located in present-day Iraq) for aid against his lesser enemies. This appeal to the superpower was a measure of Ahaz's fear and, according to the biblical perspective, a measure of his failure to trust the promises of YHWH. As a result of this foolish appeal, Ahaz was drawn into the sphere of aggression by the Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser III. In his attempt to suck up to the power of Assyria, Ahaz replicated an Assyrian altar and undertook the worship of gods other than YHWH. Such an effort of accommodation to Assyria was, of course, ineffective. In the long run the effort failed. Ahaz was forced to dismantle his elaborate altar and send the valuable objects to Tiglath-pileser in tribute (see 2 Chronicles 28:21). In the book of Isaiah we have a report of a major confrontation between King Ahaz and Isaiah. According to the prophet, appeal to Assyria was an act of loss of faith in YHWH. For Isaiah, the defining issue for the king is his inability to trust the promise of YHWH to defend the city and the people of God.

The fourth king in our introductory verse, *Hezekiah* (715–687 BCE), is the other king with whom Isaiah interacts extensively. Unlike his father Ahaz, Hezekiah is reckoned to be one of the two most faithful kings in the long Davidic dynasty (2 Kings 18:1–20:21):

> He did what was right in the sight of the LORD just as his ancestor David had done. He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan. He trusted in the LORD the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him. For he held fast to the LORD; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that the LORD had commanded Moses. (18:3–6)

Unlike his father, Hezekiah is portrayed as a model practitioner of faith who trusted YHWH even in dire circumstances. Specifically, he was confronted, as was his father, with the threat of Assyrian aggression, but he trusted in YHWH, and so, as a result, the text asserts, the city of Jerusalem was saved by the protection of YHWH (19:35–36). In the midst of the threat from Assyria, the prophet urges the kings to place trust in YHWH; Hezekiah dares to do so! Thus in this encounter the issue is once again faith or unfaith, as it was with Ahaz. This "faith," however, has nothing to do with abstract theological proposition. It has to do, rather, with the practical matter of refusing to make decisions in fear, as though YHWH were not active in the life of the world. Thus in the horizon of Isaiah, the two kings, Ahaz and Hezekiah, father and son, come to embody models of faith and unfaith. Isaiah is identified as the one who calls kings (and the people of God) to trust in YHWH in the midst of great danger.

It turns out, however, that the editorial introduction of our verse is incomplete. It is incomplete because the book of Isaiah extends as a prophetic witness in long centuries after the person of Isaiah. It turns out, moreover, that the vexed historical experience of Israel continued long after the Davidic timeline was exhausted and had come to an end.

Thus we may imagine that the editorial timeline offered in our verse might be continued with a list of foreign kings not of the Davidic line. Such kings are cited in the book of Isaiah and become a convenient way to understand the historical sequence of the book. Specifically we might construct a timeline continuing our verse: ". . . in the days of Tiglath-pileser, Sennacherib, Merodach-baladan, and Cyrus." Such an extended royal timeline will help us locate the extended work of the book of Isaiah.

Tiglath-pileser III, the great Assyrian king (745–727 BCE), is not mentioned in the book of Isaiah. Nonetheless, he constituted a great threat to Jerusalem (2 Kings 16:7–10; 2 Chronicles 28:20). A second Assyrian king, *Sennacherib* (704–681 BCE), implemented the threat posed by Tiglath-pileser and figures prominently in the Isaiah tradition. It was he who mounted a most formidable threat against the city of Jerusalem, wherein the city was saved only by the return of Sennacherib to his own country, an event credited in the tradition to "the angel of the LORD" (Isaiah 37:36).

We have only one mention of the Babylonian king, *Merodach-baladan*, who became a "friend" of King Hezekiah (Isaiah 39:1). In the time of Hezekiah, Assyria was the dominant superpower in the north of the Fertile Crescent. At that time Babylon was a modest state with great ambition. For that reason, the Babylonian king sought an ally in Jerusalem, surely to gather strength against Assyria. We can imagine that Hezekiah was drawn to seek an alliance with Babylon as a way to resist Assyria. We hear no more of that alliance in the eighth century, except to notice that the prophet Isaiah judged Hezekiah to be overly eager for such an alliance at the risk of national security. Babylon will figure more centrally in the later part of the book of Isaiah.

The fourth king in our imagined royal timeline is *Cyrus* of Persia (550–530 BCE). It was he who led to the demise of the Babylonian Empire in 540 BCE that gave breathing space to the deported Judeans in Babylon. For practical reasons of policy, Cyrus was amenable to the hopes and needs of Judean deportees, permitting them to return home to Jerusalem (see 2 Chronicles 36:22–23). Given that generous policy toward Jewish exiles, the latter part of the book of Isaiah was to regard Cyrus as a deliverer sent by YHWH to save God's people.

Thus in sum we have a very broad sweep of Near Eastern history that is the horizon of the book of Isaiah. That sweep includes four Jerusalem kings, plus four more from the expanded timeline: two from Assyria, one from Babylon, and one from Persia. All of these kings figure, in specific contexts, in the destiny of Israel. For that reason, all of them are rendered, in prophetic imagination, according to the purposes of YHWH.

In our verse the very first word of the book of Isaiah is "vision." The book of Isaiah is a prophetic act of imagination wherein the

prophet "sees" and articulates what a more mundane royal history could not. What the prophet "sees" is the transcendent rule of YHWH over all the nations, a rule that poses, in every generation, the deep issue of *faith or unfaith*, the question of the ways in which the rule of the holy God is at work in, with, and under historical reality.

An awareness of historical specificities is essential. Beyond these specificities, however, the book of Isaiah continues to raise the decisive question of *faith or unfaith*. It turns out that amid the daily vagaries of history, this God has "got the whole world in his hands"! Imagine: in God's hands are the Jerusalem kings as well as Tiglath-pileser and Sennacherib of Assyria, Merodach-baladan of Babylon, and Cyrus of Persia! Safe hands indeed!

Questions for Discussion

1. How is faith or unfaith still a key question for today?
2. Is prophetic vision different from other kinds of vision? How so?
3. What do you find significant about ancient Near Eastern kings being included in the vision of Isaiah?

Chapter 2

Afterward . . . (Isaiah 1:26b)

Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.

Scripture Passages for Reference

Isaiah 1:2–26
Isaiah 55:12
Hosea 2:4–5

The first word of our lines, "afterward," is a welcome and abrupt surprise. The word *afterward* evokes the wondering "After *what*?" To answer this question, we must read back behind our lines to the beginning of this poetic unit (1:21–26). We may read even further back from our focus verse, 1:26 (specifically its second half), to verses 2–20. In these earlier verses, the prophet offers a characteristic prophetic indictment of Jerusalem—namely, that the city has behaved like Sodom and Gomorrah in complete contradiction to the purpose of YHWH (v. 10). The upshot of the harsh indictment is that, in characteristic prophetic fashion, Isaiah "sees" that the disobedient city has suffered and will suffer grievous wounds (vv. 6–9). The prophet concludes, moreover, that the usual redress of worship and piety will be of no avail (vv. 11–15). With an intense urgency the prophet issues imperatives of reparation (vv. 16–17), but these

possibilities for amendment of life hold little hope for the city. Thus verses 2–20 culminate with a devastating anticipation:

> If you refuse and rebel,
> you shall be devoured by the sword;
> for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.
> v. 20

The will of YHWH cannot be outflanked by willful recalcitrance. The "sword" in verse 20 is an anticipation of foreign invasion, for Judah lived among many threatening neighboring states.

Drawing closer to our lines of "afterward," we may consider the more immediate poem of verses 21–26. There are two ways in which we might reflect on this sequence of verses. First, we might consider that these verses line out the *historical experience* of Judah and Jerusalem. Read historically, verses 21–23 present a summary of prophetic indictment of the covenantal failure of Jerusalem. There was a time, according to verse 21, when Jerusalem was full of justice and righteousness, permeated with neighborly well-being and covenantal fidelity. That ideal moment, however, is immediately interrupted by the searing verdict, "prostitute." In the tradition of Hosea (see Hosea 2:4–5), the covenant with YHWH can be imagined in a marital metaphor; Israel has forsaken true love for YHWH and has "slept around" with other gods. The specificity of such promiscuity is evident in disordered social life. That disorder is reflected in violence (murder) and a mismanaged economy. Social life is skewed because the leadership (princes of the royal family!) traffic with thieves, economic predators, corner-cutting bankers, exploitative landlords, and all manner of oppressive operatives. Everything and everyone is up for sale to the highest bidder. The economy is skewed toward ruthless power. The inevitable result of such disorder is that those "left behind"—widows and orphans who lack a male advocate in a patriarchal society—are bereft of viability. From a prophetic perspective, that is the scene in Jerusalem, a city far removed from the covenantal requirements of Mt. Sinai.

That harsh rendering of the city is followed in verse 24 by the characteristic "therefore" of the prophets. Such wayward policy and conduct do not go unnoticed in a world where YHWH governs. The "therefore" identifies YHWH, the sovereign, the one who occupies

prophetic imagination, who is committed to neighborly urban economics. Verse 24 heaps up titles for YHWH so that we do not miss the claim that Israel's history is fully occupied by the Lord of history. This divine occupation yields an "ah," which means, "Alas! Big trouble is coming!" The big trouble that is coming is because the Lord of the covenant does not take lightly the violation of the covenant that intends neighborly economics. YHWH is presented through the image of a "smelter," who by hot fire will sort out the waste of the people of Israel in order to preserve the few elements of value. The poem anticipates a reduction of the population of the city to those who have not participated in the economic violence of the leadership. The smelting process will be painful and costly, and many will not survive. The image serves the anticipation of coming divine judgment of the city. Indeed, the entire king-temple order will be swept away, and the city will be returned to premonarchal simplicity managed by "judges" who have none of the accouterments of power and pride that are so precious to the royals (v. 26a).

It is in the wake of this harsh denunciation and this costly judgment that we get the "afterward" of our verse. When we trace out the sequence historically, we can see that (a) the indictment pertains to *the royal history* of the city that stretched from David (ca. 1000 BCE) to the exile (587 BCE); (b) the season of wrath pertains to the *deportation of exile* (587–520 BCE); and (c) the "afterward" refers to *the return of the faithful remnant* of deportees, a remnant included in the movement of Ezra and Nehemiah in the fifth century BCE. It is anticipated that the returnees (without monarchs) will return to a city that is "righteous" and "faithful." Its righteousness will be a practice of neighborly well-being in which all share social resources. Its faithfulness will be a practical acknowledgment of the rule of YHWH in the city. Thus verses 21–23 bespeak royal Jerusalem, verses 24–26a reference deported Judea, and verse 26a anticipates a returned faithful remnant.

A second way to read our verse is *literarily*. Thus the early Isaiah of *chapters 1–39* reflects the time of the historical prophet. It turns out that Jerusalem under monarchy, especially under Ahaz and Hezekiah, is a failure in terms of covenantal fidelity (vv. 21–23). Verses 24–26a match up with the middle section of *chapters 40–55*, often termed "Second Isaiah." That hope-filled poetry is addressed to the

Babylonian exiles. And while hope-filled, it nonetheless concerns those who now suffer, in the horizon of the prophet, from the disobedience of the royal centuries. The "afterward" in our lines also prefigures the third part of Isaiah, *chapters 56–66,* in which the faithful remnant of returned Jews sought to reorder the city. That faithful remnant, without kingship, understood authentic worship to be neighborly care (58:6–7), and that worship in the restored temple was intended "for all peoples" (56:7). Thus the restored community made an effort to embody in its order and practice the markings of righteousness and faithfulness.

In sum:

read *historically*—
vv. 21–23: royal history
vv. 24–26a: deported Israel
v. 26b: restored Israel as remnant
read *literarily*—
vv. 21–23: First Isaiah (1–39)
vv. 24–26a: Second Isaiah (40–55)
v. 26b: Third Isaiah (56–66)

While this pattern may help us make clearer sense of the literary structure and movement of Isaiah, and may help us better understand the complex history reflected in the book, we should not miss the main point of this passage. That point is that YHWH, the Lord of history—the one deeply offended by fickle, prostituting Israel—nonetheless wills a good future for Jerusalem beyond its disobedience. That anticipated "afterward" came to *historical fruition* in the emergent Judaism under Ezra. That afterward came to *literary expression* in Isaiah 56–66 after the grand procession of return to the land of promise:

For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
55:12

Notice that the "afterward" here anticipated cannot be derived from what has gone before. It cannot be extrapolated from the exilic community. Nor can it be extrapolated from the earlier chapters in the book of Isaiah. The afterward comes only from the determined will of YHWH to create a future for Israel that, by itself, had no claim on any future. Israel of itself has no reason to expect a better future. It is all a fresh initiative from YHWH. It turns out that for all the recalcitrance of Israel and all the disappointment of YHWH, the future is still in YHWH's hands. YHWH wills a newness; that is the thrust of the book of Isaiah. That newness is beyond human capacity to create or even any human capacity to imagine. As we read this verse 26, we should notice that after the first two lines the poetry makes a big leap to "afterward." "Afterward" as an element of gospel faith is always achieved by a big leap from what has gone before. It is a leap made possible only through the powerful fidelity of the Lord who wills and gives newness in the midst of sordid failed history.

Questions for Discussion

1. How is Isaiah's "afterward" present in the rest of the book?
2. Do you agree with the literary and historical readings of Isaiah 1:21–26? Why or why not?
3. How do you see the future as being in God's hands?

Chapter 3

Promise Post-Judgment (Isaiah 2:4)

He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

Scripture Passages for Reference

Isaiah 2:2–4
Isaiah 39:5–7; 65:25
Micah 4:1–5
2 Kings 19:6–7, 15–19
Jeremiah 31:31–34

The first interesting matter to notice concerning this familiar divine promise in Isaiah 2:2–4 is that it is placed immediately after the speech of judgment (and the "afterward") in chapter 1. We might not have expected that—after the hard declaration of 1:2–26a—we would receive a promise from the mouth of the prophet. That, however, is how the canonical editors arranged the text, and we may take their arrangement with great seriousness. Thus the juxtaposition of *judgment and promise* becomes a clue about how to read the book of

Isaiah. In the first extended segment of the book (chaps. 1–12) we get four *oracles of promise*, each of which is preceded by an *articulation of divine judgment*. Thus:

2:2–4 follows after the judgment of chapter 1;

4:2–6 follows after the harshness of chapter 3;

9:2–7 follows after the declaration of distress, darkness, gloom, and anguish in 8:21–22; and

11:1–9 follows after 10:1–4, an announcement that God's anger has not yet turned aside.

Every such prophetic speech of judgment is sober and severe. It turns out that such judgment, however, is not finally absolute; the God who *judges* is the God who *makes promises* of an "afterward." Moreover, we can see that this same dramatic movement from judgment to promise shapes the entire book of Isaiah. In rough outline, Isaiah 1–39 consists of *divine judgment,* whereas Isaiah 40–66 concerns *gracious restoration* after judgment.

We are not told how the literature can make this abrupt reversal of utterance. It is certain that the literary reversal intends to be reflective of the reversal of God's own intent. The God of Israel is capable of harsh intention, even against God's own chosen people. This same God, however, is equally capable of moving beyond anger to fresh restorative resolve. The text of 2:4 is a first embodiment of that fresh resolve on the part of YHWH according to the tradition of Isaiah. That fresh restorative resolve is delivered with both urgency and confidence. The poet does not know when the actual lived reversal will occur, though he is certain such a reversal is in the works. There is, however, no timetable; thus the introductory formula "In days to come" is a standard rhetorical trope for a reliable assurance that lacks a predictable schedule. It is a dependable future, but not one subject to timetables.

We do best by appreciating the dramatic and complete contrast between the *new future* promised by God and the *present tense* of Isaiah in eighth-century Jerusalem. We can identify both *internal and external* elements of contrast whereby the newness of God will overcome the toxic present tense of Jerusalem.

First, concerning *the internal life* of the city of Jerusalem, it is clear that Torah instruction in the coming time will be effectively front and center, not only for the nations but for Jerusalem as well. (This is congruent with the anticipation of "the new covenant" in Jeremiah 31:31–34 wherein all will gladly embrace Torah.) It is precisely Torah instruction, understood in a very broad way, that will provide the clue to socioeconomic well-being for the city. Because the Torah tradition of Deuteronomy is the liveliest expression of Torah, we can imagine that the Torah teaching of Deuteronomy on doing justice is likely in purview here. That is, Jerusalem (and the other nations) will together be instructed in the neighborly management of the economy so that the resources of the economy are generously shared with all members of the community. While such an insight toward well-being is not the entirety of the Torah's message, there is no doubt that such instruction matters decisively for Israel's Torah and for the God who gives Torah.

This *Torah-shaped practice* in the future is in sharp contrast to the *Torah-defying regime* in Jerusalem with which the prophet had to contend. On the one hand King Ahaz receives a flat-out negative verdict for his indifference to Torah practice:

> He did not do what was right in the sight of the LORD his God, as his ancestor David had done, but he walked in the way of the kings of Israel. He even made his son pass through fire, according to the abominable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. (2 Kings 16:2–3)

The readiness of the king to imitate the "abominable nations" is evident in his inability to trust in YHWH. As a result, he conducted foreign policy out of fear, causing him to collude with the Assyrians who, in fact, constituted the greatest threat to his regime. His fearfulness is taken by the prophet as lack of trust in YHWH, a lack that constitutes the great self-destructive failure of the king. The narrative of 2 Kings 16 details the way in which Ahaz feared his lesser enemies (Israel and Syria) and so fell into the hands of his greater enemy.

On the other hand, King Hezekiah is reckoned as a particularly good Torah-keeping king:

> He did what was right in the sight of the LORD just as his ancestor David had done. . . . For he held fast to the LORD; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses. (2 Kings 18:3, 6)

In the midst of the great Assyrian threat evoked by his father, Ahaz, King Hezekiah is counseled by Isaiah to trust in YHWH and not be afraid (19:6–7). As a pious king, Hezekiah trusts in YHWH, prays to YHWH (19:15–19), and is delivered. But of Hezekiah we may observe two things. First, he is decidedly an exception to the long line of fearful faithless kings. And second, even he, in his great fear of Babylon, naively commits himself to the rising power of Babylon, an act that the prophet denounces as an act of self-destructive foolishness (Isaiah 39:5–7). Even this great king is propelled by fear and an inability to trust in the word of the Lord. He finally could not believe the covenantal promise that Torah obedience would lead to public well-being.

The portrayal of these kings and, more broadly, the portrayal found in the words of Isaiah present the city of Jerusalem as an out-of-control political economy that was in deep contradiction to the purposes of YHWH. Thus in Isaiah we get a series of "woe oracles" that are variously introduced in the NRSV by "Ah" (5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22; 10:1; 28:1; 29:1), "Oh" (30:1), and "Alas" (31:1). Jerusalem is on a path of self-destruction. In the time to come, that lethal disorder will be overcome by Torah instruction to which the city and the other nations will gladly submit.

Externally the matter is not different. The economy of Jerusalem was on a war footing. Isaiah addresses the way in which Ahaz fears his local enemies, Israel and Syria (7:1–9). The prophet assured the king that trust in YHWH will cause these threats to dissipate. But the king could not believe such an assurance and proceeded to save himself by surrendering to Assyria. Again Hezekiah is a contrast, for in his trust he watches as the city is unexpectedly rescued from the Assyrian threat. Alongside the prophet, Hezekiah is able to see that the Assyrians (and their king Sennacherib) not only threaten his regime but are mocking YHWH in a way that cannot stand (Isaiah 37:23–24). Hezekiah nonetheless remains on a war footing as he appeals to Babylon against Assyria.

Yet in time to come, Isaiah declares there will be a YHWH-given alternative. As the nations receive Torah instruction along with Jerusalem, it will become clear that the overriding governance of YHWH, surely through a public mechanism in Jerusalem, will adjudicate conflict among the nations. Something like a "world court" for a "world order" of convening nations is envisioned. And when there are peaceable ways of arbitration, the requirement of military posturing is greatly diminished. The outcome is that there can be disarmament. The economy can be otherwise imagined and enacted. There will be no need to maintain a military epidemic that shows up in bloated budgets and in absurd chauvinistic exhibits. No need to "hurt or destroy" (Isaiah 65:25).

Thus the contrast is complete:

- *internal*: from *restless self-securing* to *Torah instruction*;
- *external*: from *war fear and fever* to *disarmament*.

The move into this world of just peace is abrupt. It is not an evolutionary movement but a radical reframing of historical possibility. It is not accomplished by royal good intentions but by the irresistible resolve of YHWH who presides over the nations. All that is asked is that those who hear the poem accept that this is a real opening to a different future that is beyond conventional imagination.

A footnote: We may notice that this same familiar poem is reiterated in Micah 4:1–3, although two verses are added by Micah. First, in 4:4 this rural poet imagines a local agricultural economy to come that likely was beyond the purview of urban Isaiah. Micah entertains a local economy in which rural producers would enjoy the growth of their own crops, a simple economy that would participate in none of the aggressions of industrial agriculture of the kind the king must have sponsored. The verse is an early anticipation of the poignant witness of Wendell Berry.

And then, in 4:5, Micah adds yet another stunning verse. Both prophets have imagined a glad procession of the nations to Jerusalem for Torah instruction that makes a generous economy viable. But Micah asserts that the mark of this procession of nations in the interest of justice and peace is that each nation-group (not unlike a parade

of Olympic athletes) would walk each "in the name of its god." This may be seen as a breathtaking affirmation of religious pluralism in the interest of justice and peace. The procession to Jerusalem for Torah instruction does not require conversion to Yahwism. Yahwism need not hold a monopoly on justice and peace. As a result, many peoples, with many gods, are brought together under the aegis of Torah instruction wherein the Torah is not merely or solely a "religious tract" but a guide for an alternative life in the world. Who knew that Torah instruction was the path to the world's well-being? Well, the prophets have always known that! And those who hear the prophets know that too. Those who do not hear the prophets no doubt will continue the frantic path of self-sufficiency. But since we have these poems from Isaiah and Micah, we know otherwise. We know it is a sure thing, directly from God's own lips. These poems give space for an alternative to our historical fearfulness; it yields energy for readiness and for risk. We may imagine what the poem sounded like in the ears of fearful Ahaz . . . or in the ears of faithful Hezekiah!

Questions for Discussion

1. How is the present moment marked by Torah-shaped or Torah-defying practice?
2. What is significant about the ordering of these texts, moving from divine judgment to divine promise?
3. Do you see evidence of our own world or church being on the path to self-destruction? Could attention to Torah values stop it?

Chapter 6

Isaiah's Second Vision (Isaiah 6:3)

And one called to another and said:
"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD *of hosts;*
the whole earth is full of his glory."

Scripture Passages for Reference

Isaiah 6:1–13
Exodus 2:23–25
1 Kings 8:27
2 Kings 15:1–7
2 Chronicles 26:1–23

The very first word of the book of Isaiah is "vision": "(the) vision of Isaiah" (1:1). The entire book is presented as "vision" wherein the prophet could see, in anticipation, what his contemporaries could not discern. On the one hand, he could "envision" the *complete demise* of the failed city of Jerusalem. On the other hand, however, he could "envision" the *inscrutable gift* of a new Jerusalem beyond the demise (65:17–25). We are not told anything of the way in which the prophet had such a visionary capacity, and there is no need for us to speculate on the matter.

Now, in Isaiah 6, the matter of "prophetic vision" is made much more specific. This narrative account of a "vision" occurs in the

year of the death of the great king Uzziah (also called Azariah) in 742 BCE. The death of the great king signified the end of an era of peace and prosperity (2 Kings 15:1–7; see 2 Chronicles 26:1–23). It may be that the death of the great king opened the way for discernment of alternative reality under the aegis of "the real king." Such a newness at the point of death has an important parallel in the exodus narrative:

> After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. (Exodus 2:23)

It was the death of Pharaoh that created space for the out-loud grief of enslaved Israel, opening the way for emancipation. Now, for the prophet, a very different season in his life is opened at the turn of royal power.

We are told nothing of the specific circumstance of his encounter with the holy God. Rather, we get a simple, straightforward report on a moment when the sheer majesty of God crowds in on his life in deeply transformative ways. The prophet says he "saw the Lord," but we are told nothing of what he saw of the Lord, for according to some traditions to "see God" is to die (Exodus 33:20). We only get a description of all that is around the Lord; decorum is in order. The prophet saw the extravagant robe worn by the royal God. He saw that the throne of God was wondrously surrounded by acolytes, ministers, and attendants, all of them serving God, honoring God, and worshiping God. The language pushes us to the extreme of imagination, for what the prophet sees has no equivalent in ordinary human vision or human discourse. The poetic imagery is an attempt to voice the unvoiceable of the wonder of God's own holiness. The extremity of reality requires the extremity of language, an extremity echoed in the singing of the church:

> Ye watchers and ye holy ones,
> bright seraphs, cherubim, and thrones,
> raise the glad strain, Alleluia!
> Cry out, dominions, princedoms, powers,
> virtues, archangels, angels' choirs:
> Alleluia! Alleluia!
> Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia![1]

The lyric heaps up the praise-filled inventory of the company of heaven that witnesses to God's holiness:

> Dominions, princedoms, powers, virtues, archangels, angel choirs!

None of the terms are exact. All of them together bespeak awe, astonishment, and reverence. These attendants of God are busy with liturgical duties. And then, right in the middle of the vision, we get a voice. The singing of the heavenly choir matches the overwhelming reality of God. The voice of the choir begins with "holy" and ends with "glory." These two terms articulate the unutterable majesty of God that has no counterpoint in the world of creation. The term "holy" bespeaks the radical otherness of God, a marker of God caught by Rudolf Otto and then by Karl Barth with awareness that God is "wholly other" (*ganz Anders*), without parallel or linkage to the created world.[2] The heavenly voices sing "holy" three times in order to ratchet up the superlatives of majesty.[3] The concluding term, "glory," attests to the grandeur of the royal King who has displaced the deceased king in Jerusalem. It is no wonder that the prophet experienced the temple encounter in shame and trembling, for no human construct could possibly contain the holiness of God, an awareness voiced with reference to the Jerusalem temple:

> But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! (1 Kings 8:27; see also 2 Samuel 7:5–7)

The holiness of God is beyond human construction or human imagination, because the holiness of God is always again breaking out beyond the confines of human creed or ideology.

All of this the prophet witnessed. It does not surprise us that such a vision of God's holiness evoked a searing experience for the prophet. The remainder of the text in Isaiah 6 concerns response to the vision evoked by a glimpse of God's holiness. We may identify three moments in that response.

1. A vision of God's holiness evokes in the prophet a deep sense of *his own disqualification* for being in the presence of God. The vision of holiness generates an awareness of his own "uncleanness,"

ritual impurity that makes him unworthy to be in the presence of God. While this awareness may lead to a sense of guilt, his primary reality is that he is *at risk*. The holiness of God is dangerous and the disqualified are under threat because of it. In this context of holiness/uncleanness the prophet draws upon the priestly tradition of holiness that is preoccupied with all the specificities that could make one unclean and impure. Thus the inventory of the book of Leviticus provided clarity and guidance for how the disqualified may be made qualified to experience divine presence. In Christian tradition this same matter is at the center of Peter's vision in Acts 10 that led to the inclusion of Gentiles (an unclean people!) in the company of the faithful. The divine verdict given to Peter is an echo of what happens in our text:

> What God has made *clean* you must not call *profane.* (Acts 10:15)

Isaiah already reported on the capacity of the holy God to make clean what is unclean.

2. The prophet reports that one from among the ministers around the throne came to him to *make him qualified* for the presence of the holy God, to move from *profane* to *clean*. That agent was dispatched from the throne by the holy God. The initiative came from God. The breach between *God's holiness* and *Isaiah's uncleanness* is unbridgeable . . . except from God's side. God finds a way, and God initiates a new possibility for the life of Isaiah. The specificity of "live coals on lips" is a sacramental act whereby the uncleanness of Isaiah is purged away. His sin is blotted out by the initiative of the holy God. The *unclean one* is now *made clean* enough to live for an instant in the presence of the holy God. (This dramatic reach toward the prophet has a parallel in the "touch" of God toward Jeremiah in Jeremiah 1:9). The holy God has a ready capacity to include into the sphere of God's holiness those whom God recruits. Now the prophet is given access for a full exchange with God.

3. This action has happened quickly, instantaneously—first "unclean," second, "made clean." And now this erstwhile unclean, disqualified man is addressed with a *divine summons.* The holy one asks two questions (v. 8). The first question concerns the "I" of God: "Whom shall *I* send?" The second question concerns "us": "Who will go *for us*?" The plural pronoun refers to the whole company of

those surrounding the heavenly throne. This is the assignment of a heavenly task. The heavenly assembly is looking for a human agent who will carry the message of the heavenly court to earthly society.

Remarkably, the erstwhile unclean man now fully qualified does not hesitate or resist. He responds readily and eagerly to the assignment. Because the work to be undertaken by the prophet is from the holiness of God, we may anticipate that the word will not be a comfortable word that will fit the safe ideology of the Jerusalem establishment. In ancient Jerusalem, as with us now, the truth of faith had been trimmed to be comfortable and convenient, easily resonating with the self-assured confidence of the Jerusalem establishment.

The holy word of God now entrusted to the prophet, however, is otherwise. We ourselves may acknowledge that in our frequent appeal to this familiar "call narrative" in Isaiah 6, we characteristically stop reading at verse 8, so happy that the prophet has signed on to his prophetic role. We are, however, obligated to continue our reading past verse 8 and the ready response of the prophet. And when we read on into verses 9–13, we cannot help but notice that the prophet is given, by heavenly initiative, very hard words to speak in Israel. The hard words reflect the reality that Jerusalem is out of sync with the will of the holy God.

Thus, in verses 9–10 the prophet articulates God's hard intention that Israel should be dull, not looking, not listening, and not comprehending, and consequently not healed. Isaiah is dispatched with very tough news to this people that has defied the purpose of YHWH. Its future consists in not being healed! The ante is upped further in verses 11–13 with its answer to the plaintive question "How long?" How long will there be no healing for Israel? The answer is a double "until." The devastation of Jerusalem will continue *until* the land is desolate and *until* its people are sent "far away." The outcome is to be only a "stump," a leftover base apparently without any growth or future. The working of the holy God in this text is twofold. First, the holy God has "cleansed" Isaiah and made him fit for a summons. But second, there is no such generous "cleansing" of the "unclean" people of Israel. Their life that violates God's holiness will only end in devastation because the holiness of God will not be mocked. This dread-filled verdict becomes a leitmotif in the early part of the book of Isaiah. The prophet can and does envision the coming devastation.

He can do so because his access to God's holiness has evidenced to him the costly consequences for all that contradicts that holiness.

This chapter constitutes a "call" to authorize the eighth-century Isaiah and his ministry. Since the latter part of the book of Isaiah, beginning at chapter 40, comes much later historically, it does not surprise us that this later poet (Second Isaiah) may also be called by God to speak. That second call for the second part of the book of Isaiah with a second word from God is found in Isaiah 40. We may reckon 40:1–11 as *a positive prophetic call* as a counterpoint to the *first negative call* of chapter 6. Both "called" prophets can envision two seasons in the life of Israel, first *a season of destruction* (6:1–11) and then *a season of restoration* (40:1–11).

Questions for Discussion

1. How has the truth of faith been trimmed down for us so that it is merely comfortable and convenient?
2. Have you ever experienced feeling disqualified and then qualified? Describe this movement from profane to clean.
3. Why is the divine destruction described in Isaiah 6 so thoroughgoing?