

# Third Sunday in Lent, Old Testament, Year C

## PROMISE TRUMPS SOVEREIGNTY

Isaiah 55:1-9

Third Sunday in Lent

Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

<sup>1</sup>Ho, everyone who thirsts,      come to the waters; and you that have no money,      come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. <sup>2</sup> Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,      and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,      and delight yourselves in rich food. <sup>3</sup> Incline your ear, and come to me;      listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant,      my steadfast, sure love for David. <sup>4</sup> See, I made him a witness to the peoples,      a leader and commander for the peoples. <sup>5</sup> See, you shall call nations that you do not know,      and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,      for he has glorified you.

<sup>6</sup> Seek the Lord while he may be found,      call upon him while he is near; <sup>7</sup> let the wicked forsake their way,      and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,      and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. <sup>8</sup> For my thoughts are not your thoughts,      nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. <sup>9</sup> For as the heavens

are higher than the earth,        so are my ways higher than  
your ways        and my thoughts than your thoughts.

*Author's Note: The text today comes from the end of a section of the Book of Isaiah (Chapters 40-55) that scholars attribute to the hand of someone called Second Isaiah. So exuberant is his proclamation of the promises of Yahweh that John Wycliffe said "he is not only a prophet but a Gospeler." To understand the text, it is important to understand the historical context to which Second Isaiah is writing. To get a handle on that I read John Bright, A History of Israel, second edition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969) pp. 343-403. Although, as Bright notes, "writ[ing] the history of Israel at this period is difficult to the extreme," I'm nevertheless appreciative for that which he has pieced together of it. His history sheds light on Isaiah's theological "universalism," if I might use that word, which consists of two themes: radical monotheism, God's sovereignty over World History (cf. Isa. 44:6), and ethnic inclusivism, God's promise offered to the whole world (Isa. 55:5). There is only one God who is creator and ruler of human history, Yahweh, and, therefore, both his judgment on sin and his promises of salvation pertains not only to the house of Israel, but to all nations. One more observation. When Second Isaiah speaks about God and his Sovereignty over creation and history, he generally calls him Yahweh, which we translate as "the Lord." When Second Isaiah speaks about God and his Promise, he generally calls him the Holy One of Israel. Let Isaiah 54:5 suffice to illustrate: "For your maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called."*

## **DIAGNOSIS: The Awesome Sovereignty of Yahweh**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Doing it Our Way, v. 8: Settling for Exile Instead of Homecoming**

According to John Bright, Second Isaiah writes at a time (550-539 BCE) when the balance of power in the Middle East was shifting. In 539, the Babylonians lost their grip on world power to the Persians who were led by an incredibly benevolent (by ancient standards) overlord, Cyrus. Unlike the Babylonians, Cyrus encouraged local peoples to return to their cultural and religious practices and for this reason he is hailed by Second Isaiah as Yahweh's "anointed" (Isa. 45:1). Indeed, in 538, he issued the Edict of Restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem (p. 361). Second Isaiah sees this as nothing less than God bringing forth a new Exodus, the sovereign Lord bringing Israel home from exile to build the temple and worship Yahweh as king. The problem is, the Jews in exile did not see it that way. Those few who did go home to Jerusalem found life abysmal: they returned to the ruins created by the Babylonians in 586 and a physical suffering and impoverishment that far exceeded anything they experienced in exile. The majority who chose to stay in exile did so because life in Babylon was actually pretty comfortable. As devastating as the deportation of 586 was to their forebears—that was ancient history. In spite of the fact that they were second-class citizens, exile had come to mean assimilation into the ways of the Babylonians that brought some sense of economic opportunity, prosperity and self-satisfaction. As Bright notes, Josephus hit the nail on the head when he says of exiled Israel, they were simply "not willing to leave their possessions" (p. 363).

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Wicked, Unrighteous, v. 7: Presuming Our Ways are God's Ways, v. 8**

But this assimilation was not simply political and economic in nature. It was also religious. As Second Isaiah reminds us, the theological reason for which Israel's forbearers were delivered by the sovereign Lord into exile as punishment still persists.

And that sin—their wickedness and unrighteousness before God—is that they had muddled and mixed the faith of Abraham and the covenant to David with the cultic practices of the world's powers in an attempt to preserve some semblance of their national identity. Indeed, they thought and believed that Babylon's gods (Marduk and his court of deities) were more powerful than Yahweh. And so did Cyrus. As Bright notes, "The worship of Marduk continued, with Cyrus himself publically participating. Indeed, Cyrus, having taken the hand of Marduk, claimed to rule as legitimate king of Babylon by divine [Marduk's] designation" (p. 361). Israel, too, believed that Persia had now superseded Babylon because Cyrus, too, worshiped Marduk. Believing this, Israel was no more willing to leave behind Babylon's cult than they were Babylon's wealth, even if Babylon now went by the new corporate name of Persia, even if Cyrus now gave them leave to do so.

## **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): The Sovereignty of Yahweh and His Wrath**

Of course, both the Exiles and Cyrus could not be more mistaken about who was really in charge of world history. Yahweh, not Marduk, is in charge. Yahweh alone is the creator of heaven and earth and the universal ruler over history. He is the One who presides over the rise and fall of nations according to his inscrutable judgments and who in that capacity delivered Israel

into exile and raised Cyrus to world prominence and power. In stating this, Second Isaiah gives the strongest and clearest expression of radical monotheism in the history of Israel's prophets. Exile was divine judgment on Israel, Persia is divine judgment on Babylon, and, as history will reveal, Greece will be divine judgment on Persia (42:24-25). Therefore, as John Bright notes, Second Isaiah represents a theological shift in Israel theology of God (pp. 355-60). Yahweh is not simply the God who is above all other gods, he is the only God (see 45:5-6). All other so-called gods are nothing (44:9ff): they are mere fabrications of a presumptuous human heart that imagines its own human ways to be God's ways (55:8-9). Such imaginings spell their doom—for some sooner, for others later, but doom nonetheless. For wherever you find such fabrication, such idolatry, there also you will find the wrath of God. That is as true for Israel and Cyrus as it was for Babylon.

## **Prognosis: The Amazing Promise of the Holy One of Israel**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Promise Trumps Sovereignty**

But this new amplified theology of Yahweh's sovereignty over world history is not the BIG news in Second Isaiah's message. The BIG news is his amplified theology of Promise of the Holy One of Israel, what he calls "the everlasting covenant" (55:3). In a nutshell, God's Promise to the world TRUMPS God's Sovereignty over the world. To the "wicked" and the "unrighteous" doomed by the sovereignty of God, which includes Jew and Gentile alike, Second Isaiah announces, "Ho," wake up, God is now promising "mercy" and "pardon" as an alternative (v. 7), offering it to Jew and Gentile alike! The new Exodus is not

a return of Israel to its old, lost political order, but the beginning of a new cosmic order for the whole world. Unlike the old order based on pay-or-die, the new order is based on receive-for-free-and-live (cf. vv. 1-2). Although the first to enter this new order will be Jews, the glory of the Jews is that the Gentiles will join them as equals (cf. v. 5). Unlike the old order that languished under depraved human leadership, this one will be led by God himself. And that is the connecting piece between Second Isaiah's message and the Good News of Jesus Christ. He is God fulfilling the promise, through his suffering death and resurrection, of which Second Isaiah speaks cryptically in the Suffering Servant motif.

#### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Listening to and Delighting in God's Promise (v. 2)**

Of course, as Second Isaiah knows, nothing is more important to God than having his people listen to and delight in his Promise. For that reason, he also amplifies the importance of preaching, the publication of the Promise, as when he says, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news" (Isa. 52:7). Paul, too, learned from Second Isaiah about the importance of preaching, as his commentary asserts: "faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). From a rhetorical point of view, preaching is a matter of pleading, urging, and encouraging the addressee to trust in the Promise. Therefore, words like "come," "listen," "incline your ear" pepper Second Isaiah's exhortations, not only here but throughout chapters 40-55. But both Second Isaiah and Paul also know that from the perspective of the one being addressed true hearing is itself a gift of God. They know that amplified preaching is not simply a matter of turning up of the decibels of their speech or polishing up their rhetorical skills.

Amplified preaching means that the Promise spoken is also accompanied by the “Holy Spirit,” as Paul says, or the “Holy One of Israel” (v. 5), as Second Isaiah says. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that the message strikes the heart and creates delight in what is being said. True hearing is, therefore, a spiritual event. It means listening to and delighting in God’s Promise.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): “You shall call nations you do not know” (v. 5)**

Finally, Second Isaiah tells us that we who have come to believe the Promise will also participate in sharing the Promise. “See, you shall call nations that you do not know and nations that do not know you [now] shall run to you” (v. 5). Indeed, by giving us a share in this ministry God “glorifies” or honors the believer (v. 5). Here Second Isaiah amplifies the breadth of the Promise. It is for everyone. This means that the world is God’s mission field and that, wherever we find ourselves, there is the place where the Promise is to be shared. This universalism takes away any guess work or speculation about who should be included in the Promise. The Promise is for everyone (cf. v. 1). Therefore, we proclaim the good news to everyone with same delight in which we received it, leaving the results to God.