

Today we take a break from the Gospel stories of Jesus' life, and we head back to the Old Testament for a minute to hear some beautiful poetry attributed to the prophet, Isaiah.

Now, we know that none of the biblical writings were written in vacuum, they were all written in a specific social, political, geographical and historical context.

But in the way we usually interact with the Bible, piecemeal, little fragments of it here and there, we don't get that contextual information.

If you just pull out a series of verses and read them in isolation, a lot of their meaning is lost.

So, when I am trying to better understand any piece of scripture, one of the first questions I ask myself is, who was the intended original audience?

Why did the writer think they needed to hear these words?

What were their political, religious and cultural circumstances?

What I think is interesting is that we often get hung up on is *who* wrote the text.

For some reason in modern biblical interpretation, it's really important for us to know who wrote it and we think we can glean a lot of understanding from that information.

The truth is that most of the time, we can't be 100% sure of who wrote it.

Take today's text for example, we think that the prophet Isaiah did write chapters 1-39 of the book, but that the rest of it, chapters 40-66 were written by other people.

Scholars think the section of the book we heard today was written by an anonymous author who was living in exile with the rest of the elite Jewish Israelites in Babylon.

At the time this text was written, sometime around 550-539 BCE, there was a lot of political unrest.

Kingdoms and empires were constantly at war with one another, trying to conquer each other and take over each other's land.

This happened several times to Israel, but the specific conquest that matters for the purposes of our text today is the Babylonian takeover, when the Babylonian army defeated Israel in about 597 BCE, or 2,600 years ago.

One consequence of this takeover was that all the elite, wealthy, rich and important people living in Israel were exiled to Babylon.

They had to leave their homeland and go live in a foreign territory approximately 500 miles away.

This was before the invention of modern transportation so that might as well have been on the other side of the world.

These people were *far* from anything they knew or were familiar with, and *this* is the context in which today's story is written.

The author's audience was the Jews living in exile in Babylon.

The text is clearly telling people to be faithful to God, to trust God, and to use their resources for God's will.

Apparently, those people living in exile weren't being faithful, according to the opinion of this writer.

Babylon had a different regime, a different economy, and imperial order.

The Jewish people were assimilating to that culture, and as a consequence, they were moving away from their commitment to the God of their ancestors, the God of the Jewish people, YAHWEH.

The one true God.

The Babylonians were polytheistic, meaning they worshipped multiple gods, we can suspect that the exiles were beginning to worship those false idols.

While it's easy to judge, we don't want to come down too hard on the exiles.

I imagine that it was no easy balancing act, to participate fully in the dominant economy and stay faithful to a completely separate religious identity.

And not only that, but the center of their entire religious life, their Temple, had just been destroyed by the Babylonians back in their homeland in Jerusalem.

It's not all that surprising that their faith in God was waning.

When they looked around at their situation, it probably seemed like God didn't care much about them and wasn't worth their devotion.

After all, they lost their land, their Temple and their identity, maybe these Babylonians and their religion had something better to offer.

But the writer of this text is having none of that.

He basically says that your current state of misery is no excuse for a lack of faith.

*"Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near..."*

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.*

*For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."*

(Isaiah 55: 6, 8-9)

The author writes from the perspective of God in the first person, saying, you might not understand what I am doing, but you better turn back towards me, and don't try to figure me out because my ways and my thoughts are higher than yours, you'll never understand.

Okay, so did the writer want them to turn back towards God in material or spiritual ways?

After all, the text calls them out for spending money on that which isn't bread and spending their time and energy on things that don't satisfy.

But then he goes on and tells them to incline their ear towards God, listen to God so that they may live, for God wanted to make an everlasting covenant with them.

I'd say that the prophet is calling the exiles to turn back towards God with their behaviors and their resources, in tangible material ways, *and* with their hearts and minds, in spiritual ways.

In fact, those might be inextricably linked.

Ultimately, God longs for relationship with the people.

God wants to spiritually nourish them, come buy wine and milk without price, come delight in rich food, for I will provide for you.

God wants them to return back to the covenant because that's where true, life-giving nourishment is found.

But materially, God also has expectations of them, calling them to distinguish between what they need and what they want, to live with enough but not in excess.

Stop wasting your resources on things which won't bring you ultimate satisfaction.

Be in relationship with me, and I will nourish you like bread nourishes the body and will spiritually quench your thirst, like a glass of ice water on a hot summer day.

Prophets had a gift of knowing what their audiences needed to hear, and telling them likewise.

Sometimes they spoke sternly, bordering on spitefully, and other times they were compassionate and gentle.

In today's text, the writer knows the people are lost, unfulfilled, trying to find meaning and purpose as strangers in a strange land, so he calls them back to their relationship with God.

I am sure this text describes all of our spiritual journeys at some point in our lives, when have alienated ourselves from God.

We worship false idols all the time, money, beauty, youth, material possessions, free time, fear, power, revenge, the list goes on.

Think about all those things that we yearn for, that we desire, that we think will bring us some measure of fulfillment.

Once we enter the job market, we are lead to believe that our worth is equated with our productivity, that a dollar amount can determine our value.

We literally define people's 'net worth,' by how much money and assets they have.

Then, the writer moves on from material possessions to that which we spend our time and energy on, or how we labor.

These aren't archaic ideas.

Many of us still buy into our incessant need to do, to produce, to prove that we are worth something.

We're so different, but we're not so different from those exiles in Babylon.

They had their false idols and we have ours.

We all have false idols because we all have basic needs that we're trying to meet, sometimes in foolish ways.

Regardless of what millennia we are living in, as humans we are all seeking the same basic things.

We want homecoming, familiarity, and belonging when we are lost and far away.

We want a deeper meaning for our lives, believing that we are living for something beyond, something greater than ourselves.

I hope to be a blessing to the world, but I pray that there's a greater plan of which I am only a small part.

Now, it can be really easy to find the simple parallel between the secular western culture and the Babylonian empire, with their false idols and ours.

And then equate the faith of the Jewish people in foreign lands, with us trying to be faithful in these lands, which sometimes feel so foreign from the values we espouse here at church.

We can say that we are in this country but not of it, we can say we are different, set apart, and will inoculate ourselves against the messages we receive 'out there.'

But I invite us to do something different, because I don't think our societal values are that different from the values we uphold here at church.

In our civic life together, I think most of us want for people to be happy, to find belonging, to feel fulfilled and satisfied.

Maybe our job, as the church, while it's a tall order, is to inspire our greater society to ever-higher expressions of justice,

to demand from society the kind of course corrections that will avoid turning us into something that violates our shared values.

No values are imposed on us, either societally or religiously.

The Jews chose to stray from God in Babylon and then chose to come back into the fold.

The people of the United States choose all the time what values we espouse, and lately, with some swiftly-changing social movements, we've shown that we are a different country than we were just 10 or 15 years ago.

The church is always changing too, always evolving and trying to figure out what it means to be in line with God's will for us, in light of our societal context.

This constant impermanence might be disconcerting, but it's also exciting.

This impermanence means there's always potential for great change.

The biblical texts weren't written in a vacuum, and the Jewish people didn't live in one either.

They had their societal pressures that pulled them away from their allegiance to God, and so do we.

However, the good news is that we, as people of faith, can use our individual lives and our collective voice for good.

We are in a privileged position as the dominant religion in this country.

And we can each choose to turn towards God, to be in right relationship with God both materially and spiritually,

and therefore create this great magnetic force to pull our nation towards the values that we all share, including justice, peace, independence, compassion and love.

Amen.