

“God’s Hope for the World”
August 10, 2025
Scripture: Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Luke 12:32-40

In 2017 I visited Israel and had a chance to tour the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. In the museum is an exhibit room that’s circular, with a dome, and climate controlled of course, called the Shrine of the Book, where the Dead Sea Scrolls are kept. The Scrolls date as far back as the middle of the 3rd century BCE, possibly earlier. It’s amazing how well-preserved many of them are. The one in the best shape and most complete is the scroll of Isaiah. One segment of the wall in the exhibit room displays part of the Isaiah scroll unrolled.

The community that produced the scrolls was a monastic Jewish group that lived about fourteen miles outside of Jerusalem in the desert near the Dead Sea. We don’t know much about them, but it’s likely they were disaffected from conventional Jewish society and opposed to the temple authorities. Some scholars think John the Baptist may have had some connection to them, but there’s no mention of them in the gospels or in any other literature from that period. They did believe, based on the writings they left behind, that their society was coming to an end and some messianic event was imminent.

Today’s reading from Isaiah might give us an idea as to why that book was so important to them and so well preserved. From beginning to end the book of Isaiah, which spans about two hundred years, alternates between words of judgment and condemnation and return and restoration for Israel. We didn’t hear much about restoration today, which is too bad because that part of the message is essential if we want insight into God’s character as the prophet understood it. Hearing only judgment is a half-truth that can leave us feeling empty.

But the judgment is important. It’s important to recognize that, for Isaiah, Israel’s fault wasn’t a failure to worship properly. They were saying all the right prayers and making all the right sacrifices. They kept all the right observances and feast days. But the piety they practiced, while it may have been beneficial to the individuals who practiced it, was hollow because it was not accompanied by justice for the poor and vulnerable. This is a concern Isaiah raises over and over and over. When God refers to Judah as “Sodom” and “Gomorrah,” the implication is unmistakable. The fate of Sodom, complete destruction, is what awaits them, unless they change their ways.

Early Christians, like the Qumran community that preserved Isaiah, believed their society was moving in the wrong direction. The influence of Isaiah on the gospels is clear. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus uses Isaiah to launch his ministry in Nazareth. He doesn’t call them to pray more or correct their dogma; he tells them he’s come to preach good news to the poor, the recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Justice for the poor, for the widow and the orphan, the most vulnerable among them, is at the heart of his message. And it’s what would bring them back into alignment with God’s hope for the world.

The other day I listened to a conversation between Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove and Bishop William Barber, II, two of the leaders of the Poor Peoples Campaign, and Professor Ruth

Ben-Ghiat, an historian who specializes in the history of authoritarian societies in the 20th and 21st centuries. The title of their talk was “How to resist in a time of moral collapse.” Dr. Ben-Ghiat describes how authoritarian dictatorships normalize cruelty through a process of “moral deregulation,” such as mistreatment of detained immigrants or tacit approval of political violence. By pitting citizens against immigrants or expelling transgender people from the military while denying them their benefits or reducing access to healthcare and food assistance for the poor, an authoritarian government slowly chips away at the norms of neighborliness and compassion and empathy societies need if they’re to “seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow,” as God commands through Isaiah. So, every generation, ours included, faces the challenge of God’s hope for us being thwarted by people in power.

And you may notice in Isaiah’s understanding God’s call is not an option. If the people of Judah and Jerusalem want to continue living in relationship with God, then they must change their ways. But the implicit message behind that command is: they are capable of change. I’m a firm believer that what God requires of us is not beyond our capacity. The prophets throughout Israel’s history may often sound pessimistic about Israel’s future, but they always offer a path to a future. None of them says Israel is beyond hope.

In our passage from Luke today, Jesus assures his disciples, “It is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” God is not grudging in God’s love for us. God’s love is enthusiastic and full of hope. How we hang onto that hope, how we organize ourselves around it, is left to us. We have choices we must make in the face of those forces around us that want to deprive us of hope. Ruth Ben-Ghiat, in her study of how authoritarian leaders operate, points out that one of the main tools authoritarians use to consolidate power is eliminating hope. When people feel there’s no point in protesting or advocating or even bothering to vote, they further the authoritarian project and, in biblical terms they reject God’s hope for the world.

So, we have this warning from Jesus to be ready, always, for action. By preparing ourselves to meet opportunities to pursue justice and compassion, we’re indicating our trust in God’s hope for us in spite of the circumstances that deny it. This is why the full message of Isaiah is so important. Judgment is never God’s final word for Israel. That’s what the community of Qumran clung to while living under multiple tyrannies; it’s what influenced the early Christians in their struggle for survival; and it’s what can speak to us in a time of moral collapse under the threat of authoritarianism.

God’s hope for the world will endure, no matter how far from that hope our society might stray. But it will endure only through us. We must be the voice of those who are silenced. We must be the strength of those who are powerless: rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. We can realize God’s hope for the world through our actions on behalf of the most vulnerable among us. We can stop just going through the motions of piety and allow our devotion to be revealed through action. “Though our sins are red like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be like wool.” God’s promises to Israel, revealed through Isaiah, are meant for all God’s people in every age. God’s hope for the world is God’s hope for us.

Amen