

The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all

A sermon for the 4th Sunday in Lent

In this season of Lent we are looking at Luther's favorite book in the Old Testament, the book of Isaiah. Why was it his favorite, and what can we expect from it?

First, let us consider how expectations affect us generally. At a university in California researchers conducted a wine tasting, with five red wines, Cabernet Sauvignon, which were different but all in the \$20 price range. However, for the tasting, they covered up the labels and instead listed on each bottle a price ranging from \$5 to \$90. Then they asked the tasters which wines they liked best. And uniformly all of them said the expensive \$90 wine was far superior to the rest! Fascinating and funny. It leads to the question of how expectations affect perception.

In a similar test the researchers took five bottles of Cabernet Sauvignon that were actually at very different price points, that is, a \$10 bottle, a \$20, a \$50, and a \$90 bottle. Again they covered the labels and put a price on each bottle. Only this time, they put a \$90 price on the \$10 bottle, the \$50 price on the \$20 bottle, and so forth. This time the tasters mostly said they liked best the bottle labeled \$90, even thought that one was really the \$10 bottle!

What does this say about us? It says that we let ourselves be governed by our expectations, but we are also built that way, that we have certain ways that we think and we operate.

So we come to the book of Isaiah, and somebody says, "Well, I think it is beautiful." And somebody else says, "Well, I do not think it is so special." First of all, one could say that one should know the Bible because it is important and historic literature, and if you do not know literature, you will be poorly prepared for life in the world today.

A recent survey of high school students showed that when a book mentioned the trials of Job, most students did not know what in the world it was about because they had never heard about Job.

If you do not know your Bible, then you cannot understand Milton, Blake, or Shakespeare, or for that matter Hamlet, Handel, or Bach. How can you understand these? They are all using biblical texts. But on top of that there is the matter of whether these are great literature and important.

It is said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and that what people like is merely a matter of taste and all that. Yet when somebody says Shakespeare is not any good, that does not tell us anything about Shakespeare, but it tells us something about the person who said it.

Many think that Bach's St. Matthew's Passion is one of the greatest pieces of music ever written. If somebody says, well, Bach is not so special, that again says nothing about Bach, but it says a lot about the person saying that because there is something in Bach that is being recognized.

We talk about the classics. We talk about the canon of literature, the canon of music, and, of course, the canon of scripture. There is that which has been recognized by people in general. One can argue about that. What is the canon? How do you get to it? But there are certain things that seem to settle that question. And the reason that this becomes important is not because the literature and beauty that the Bible is involved with, but rather because of our use of the Bible, the devotional use.

The devotional use of the Bible raises the important question of what is happening, what is being done here? It is like the wine tasting. A woman told of the great spiritual blessing she received from the word, "selah," which is found in the Psalms. The word "selah" simply means "repeat this refrain." But she had seen this word in her Bible (They leave it in Hebrew in many cases.) and had simply read into the word deep devotional meaning.

Daily devotional booklets are misleading in a similar way. Often the question for the reader, or readers in a Bible study, is something like: How do you feel about this? What does this verse mean to you? What does that do but lead poor readers astray. We all need to repeat to ourselves often the Bible verse in 2 Corinthians 11:14: "For even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." Nobody seems to think that applies to himself or herself – only to somebody else! That I, being so smart myself, could be misled and perhaps mislead others is not on the horizon.

This brings us to the use of Isaiah and the use of the Bible in the basic sense where we then say there is the specific historical meaning of the original, and then we ask: Is there a universal sense? Or we could even say there is that which happened at the time, but there is also a universal God. And that, of course, has to be unpacked.

Isaiah 28:11: "Nay, but by men of strange lips and with an alien tongue the Lord will speak to this people." This text is used by the Mormons to say that the Book of Mormon was foretold. Where it says "by men of strange lips with an alien tongue," they take that to be a prophesy of the Book of Mormon. In its historical context, that verse refers to the Assyrians, but that raises the question of how it is used. When we have that great passage in Isaiah 40:1: "Comfort, comfort ye my people," that refers, first of all, to the people of Israel, and yet we talk in our terms that we are the people of God. In Galatians 6:16 Paul writes that he writes to the people of God. The church of God, they are the succession, and we are a part of that. So there is the past and the present use.

Then there is the question of the collective and the individual. The place that that will come out mostly in a few weeks [Good Friday] when we come to the suffering servant. But here in Isaiah 42:3: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench." That seems in its context to refer to an individual, but Jewish scholars will say this refers to the Jewish people as a group, a collective.

And then we ask ourselves what it says for us today, we find in this verse a way we can be comforted. The same is true with this Isaiah 46:4: "Even to your old age, I am He, and to gray hairs I will carry you." That sounds very individualistic, but there is also a sense which this could be collective and so on. "I have called you by name, you are mine." That is the original individualistic sense, and yet the Jewish people understand it to refer to them, and then of course what does it say for today?

The one I want to refer to most specifically is Isaiah 43:25: "I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake." That in context refers to the people, the collective. And yet when you go to a parallel in Psalm 103:10: "He does not deal with us according to our sins," and although that is in the first person plural ("us"), it still refers to something particular in the situation and to a wider and more universalistic way of considering these verses. What do we do with this? Well it is again the kind of thing we are going to see as we go for these last weeks of Lent, but basically there is an unfulfilled side to this.

And what is important for us to remember is a kind of thesis: These verses are for you and me and the church because they are fulfilled in the cross. That is our Lutheran way of looking at the Bible and unraveling and sorting out all of the questions that are there.

With that let us look the beauty of these passages in the literary sense. There is a poet from the 17th century named Robert Herrick. You may not know of him, but he wrote what are called “list poems,” as well as many other kinds of poems. One of his list poems begins: “I sing of brooks, of blossoms, birds, and bowers,/Of April, May, Of June, and July flowers.” As you can see, a list poem is a literary device that is just what it says. It is a catalogue, inventory, or list of things. This same literary device is often used by Paul in his letters. He employs lists to illustrate a point he is making, as in Philippians 4:8: “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious...”

This literary device is also found repeatedly in the book of Isaiah. For example, in Isaiah 3 the Lord in judgment will take away bread and water, it says, from “the mighty man and the soldier, the judge and the prophet, the diviner and the elder, the captain of fifty and the man of ranks, the counselor and the skillful magician and the expert in charms” (Isaiah 3:2-3; see also 18-23). Then the beautiful verse that many of us memorized in Confirmation, Isaiah 1:18: “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” These lines are followed by a whole series of astounding metaphors. Note the one in 5:26: “He will raise a signal for a nation afar off, and whistle for it from the ends of the earth; and lo, swiftly, speedily it comes!” That is, of course, referring to whistling for the horse that comes running when it hears the signal.

And this is the Lord who brings judgment by whistling for it, an astounding metaphor for the way that the poet or the author of these materials describes the work of the Lord. But this is why, even though the book of Isaiah is a very attractive book as literature, its importance is really because of the way it describes the work of the Lord. I will mention three ways, among many others.

First of all, there is that great verse already mentioned, 40:1: “**Comfort, comfort** ye my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.” We all know the Advent hymn based on this verse. “‘Comfort, comfort now my people; Tell of peace!’ so says our God.” Yet this hymn does not at all match the grandeur of how Handel presents these verses in his Messiah. If you recall, it starts out “Comfort ye...” and then comes the crashing further music of comfort and strength. So there is that. And the note of comfort is again brought up in 52:9: “for the Lord has **comforted** His people.” That is the first basis for using this book. It is a book of **comfort** not only for those in that time, but it says something about the Lord for all time.

Second, there is the whole note of how **the Lord carries** and bears **us**, for example in Isaiah 40:28-31: “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth...He does not faint or grow weary Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” The Lord carries us. As in Deuteronomy 33:27: “Underneath are the everlasting arms.” To be sure, a different metaphor, but it also reflects the note of being **carried by the Lord**. This is beautifully stated, as we have noted, in Isaiah 46:4: “Even to your old age, I am He, and **to gray hairs I will carry you.**”

Or again, as noted earlier, Isaiah 42:3: “a bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.” Also Isaiah 49:15: “‘Can a woman forget her sucking child that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.’ And parallel to that in Isaiah 66:13: “As one whom his mother comforts so I will comfort you.”

A related image is found in Isaiah 49:16: “Behold, I have graven in you the palms of my hands,” which, of course, is not a good translation because it really means branding. It does not mean engraving in the other kinds of meanings. But there is that note of the **universal care** and the “forever” of what God does that we have in these materials.

You may recognize these themes in the gospel song, “He will bear you up on eagle’s wings,” which is popular today. The refrain goes like this: “And he will raise you up on eagle’s wings/**Bear you** on the breath of dawn/[Make you to shine like the sun]/And **hold you** in the palm of his hand.”

And finally there is this note of forgiveness. It is tantalizing that in 43:25: “I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake,” is parallel to Psalm 103:10-12: “He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.”

What we have then in the book of Isaiah – as we use it personally, as we use it today rather than in the past, as we use it universally and not just in terms of its specific history, which, of course, it has – what we have then is this **treasure** that has been used and has been reinterpreted by the church.

In a few short weeks, on Good Friday, we come back to the book of Isaiah, to those poignant verses in Isaiah 53 which we look at another way because they express what our Lord has done in the cross and resurrection. Isaiah 53:1-6:

“He had no form or comeliness that
we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should
desire him.
He was despised and rejected by
men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted
with grief,
and as one from whom men hide
their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed
him not.
Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our
transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that
made us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray,
we have turned every one to his

own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.”