

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT | DECEMBER 17, 2023

ISAIAH 40:1-11 | PSALM 85:1-2, 8-13 | 2 PETER 3:8-15A | MARK 1:1-8

We're going to continue our series on lesser-known voices from the Christian tradition. But instead of starting with the person, I want to start with the reading this week.

The book of Isaiah is really three books. Each book has a unique historical situation. And it has a call story for what the prophet is commissioned to do in that situation.

The first section is about life before the people went into exile. The situation is a kind of gilded age with massive wealth creation and equally massive inequality. In the call story, God asks, "Whom shall I send?" And the prophet replies, "Here I am, Lord." If you know the hymn, "Here I Am, Lord," that's an artistic rendering of that call story. The prophet is called to proclaim judgement, to warn the people that their failure to love God and care for the poor will have disastrous consequences.

The middle section is about life during exile. The situation is one of despair and disorientation. If you were here last week, you heard this call story. The Lord says, "Cry out!" And the prophet replies, "What shall I cry?" That God "will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms." The prophet is called to proclaim hope, to encourage the people that the covenant with God hasn't ended but is still a reality they can trust in.

And the third section—which we heard from today—is about life once the people returned from exile. The people come back to Jerusalem and find it leveled. So they set out to make it home again. Today's text reads, "They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations." Notice all those verbs. Build up. Raise up. Repair. You can imagine lots of those big infrastructure project signs like they have on 208 announcing that something new is happening.

We don't know for sure, but I imagine what many people had in mind was rebuilding what existed before. Getting things back to normal. Going back to the way things used to be. But we know that the old way of doing things didn't work out so well for everyone. In fact, the first Isaiah told us that it was what got them into this mess in the first place.

And so the call of the prophet in this situation is to remind the people of their calling from God and their responsibilities to one another. They are commissioned "to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn." In a sense, the prophet is to call the people out of their busyness and building and groundbreaking and ask, "Why are we building it like this? Do we need to do it this way? Or is there another, better, more life-giving way for us to live?"

There's a great—but depressing—example of this from church history. A man named Bartolomé de las Casas.¹ Las Casas was a priest from Spain who lived during the time of the Reformation. And while most of his Spanish colleagues were trying to deal with the Reformation back in Europe, Las Casas was in Hispaniola, what we call Haiti and the Dominican Republic today. The pope had "given" this land to the



¹ This is a good summary by Robert Ellsberg: "Las Casas' Discovery: What the 'Protector of the Indians' Found in America," *America Magazine*, November 5, 2012, <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/las-casas-discovery>.

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Spanish so that they could evangelize the indigenous population.² And as part of this project, Las Casas was given an *encomienda*, an allotment of land with indigenous people that he would be responsible for.³

And as time goes by, Las Casas starts to look around and see that something's not right. That the "servants" on his land are actually enslaved people. The Spaniards who were supposed to be evangelizing and teaching people the faith were really just there to make money. And instead of caring for these people, they're working them to death. And so when he's around thirty, he gives up his *encomienda* and frees the enslaved people there. And he says that if a Spaniard comes to me for confession and they haven't done the same—if they haven't given up their land and freed their enslaved people—I won't absolve them of their sins. Because the people who need to be "saved" aren't the indigenous people. It's the Spaniards.

Las Casas spent the rest of his life shuttling back and forth between the Spanish colonies and Europe, writing books, giving testimonies, trying to convey the brutality of what was going on under the banner of Christianity. He expects that when the people back in Europe find out, they're going to be livid. But they don't really care. There's one story in particular that captures what it was like. Las Casas was talking to a king and a bishop about a massacre that he'd seen in which thousands of people were killed. And the bishop looked at him and said, "What is that to me and to the king?" To which Las Casas replied, "What is it to your lordship and to the king that those souls die?... Who is there to whom that *is* something?" In other words, doesn't *anyone* care about this?

The answer is: there's at least one. And this is the role of the prophet. To be the person who raises the foundational questions, who runs the moral audit on what's going on. We often talk about prophets as if they're just there to bother people in position so privilege and authority. And there's some truth to that. But Las Casas reminds us that our prophetic calling begins by our capacity to be bothered by the suffering of others around us. To be the person who cares. To be the person to whom it *is* something.

This is the call that Las Casas lived out in his historical situation. It's the call that Isaiah lived out in his situation two thousand years earlier. And it's also the call that Jesus lived out in his situation. In fact, Jesus used this text from Isaiah to explain his public ministry. Why is Jesus here? To "bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners." In other words, to make life on earth more like it is in heaven.

When we get caught up in our busyness, when we just do what we've always done without thinking, when our explanations of how the world works are meant to excuse ourselves, Jesus invites us to a different way of life. One that seeks the welfare of all. One that remembers those who are easy for us forget. One that is bothered by the despair of the brokenhearted. And above all, one that takes the time to remember what God has done for us and what God empowers us to do for one another.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

² For a contemporary discussion see "Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery," ELCA.org, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.elca.org:443/Our Work/Congregations and Synods/Ethnic Specific and Multicultural Ministries/Indigenous Ministries and Tribal Relations/Repudiation>.

³ This is obviously oversimplified, but I'm just trying to give you the basic arc of his life.