

God's Big Story – The prophets – thinking about God in a new way

13 August 2023

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

What is God like? That's a very big question that people from places all around the world have wondered about since the beginning of time ...

No one has ever seen all of God but people have felt God and seen God at work in their lives ...

BIBLE READINGS

Isaiah 43:1-5

But now, this is what the Lord says –

he who created you, Jacob,

he who formed you, Israel:

'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

When you pass through the waters,

I will be with you;

and when you pass through the rivers,

they will not sweep over you.

When you walk through the fire,

you will not be burned;

the flames will not set you ablaze.

For I am the Lord your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour;

I give Egypt for your ransom,

Cush and Seba in your stead.

Since you are precious and honoured in my sight,

and because I love you,

I will give people in exchange for you,

nations in exchange for your life.

Do not be afraid, for I am with you.

Isaiah 45:1-5, 12-13

'This is what the Lord says to his anointed,

to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of

to subdue nations before him

and to strip kings of their armour,

to open doors before him

so that gates will not be shut:

I will go before you

and will level the mountains;

I will break down gates of bronze

and cut through bars of iron.
I will give you hidden treasures,
riches stored in secret places,
so that you may know that I am the Lord,
the God of Israel, who summons you by name.
For the sake of Jacob my servant,
of Israel my chosen,
I summon you by name
and bestow on you a title of honour,
though you do not acknowledge me.
I am the Lord, and there is no other;
apart from me there is no God. ...

It is I who made the earth
and created humankind on it.
My own hands stretched out the heavens;
I marshalled their starry hosts.
I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness:
I will make all his ways straight.
He will rebuild my city
and set my exiles free,
but not for a price or reward,
says the Lord Almighty.'

Matthew 14:22-33

After feeding the large crowd Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side of the lake, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. 'It's a ghost,' they said, and cried out in fear.

But Jesus immediately said to them: 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.'

'Lord, if it's you,' Peter replied, 'tell me to come to you on the water.'

'Come,' he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came towards Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me!'

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. 'You of little faith,' he said, 'why did you doubt?'

And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

MESSAGE The prophets – thinking about God in a new way

I wonder whether you've ever had to drastically change your thinking about someone. Perhaps that person is now your spouse - or the partner of one of your children? Perhaps the person you've changed your mind about is a sports coach or even a politician. Perhaps they revealed a caring and compassionate side of their character that you hadn't seen before or perhaps they showed a cold ruthlessness that turned you right off.



But what happens if the one you have to change your mind about is none other than God?



I know that for my father-in-law and for many others in similar situations, the horrors of war really challenged his view of God. He'd been brought up with the understanding that God was a god of love and compassion. But when he was exposed to widespread human cruelty and hatred, his faith in a loving God was called into question and never fully recovered.

Today we're going to explore more of God's big story focusing on the message of the prophets and how they transformed Israel's understanding of God.



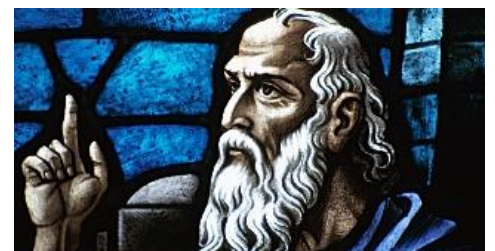
Rather than start with our individual passages from the Bible – as we've done the past two weeks – I'm going to begin with our second approach of considering the historical context first, as otherwise the individual stories don't make a whole lot of sense.

So it's over to the prophets of the Old Testament!

They came to prominence during the time of the kings and acted a bit like modern day whistle-blowers – pointing out the corruption and injustice of Israel's leaders. Hence they well not always well liked.

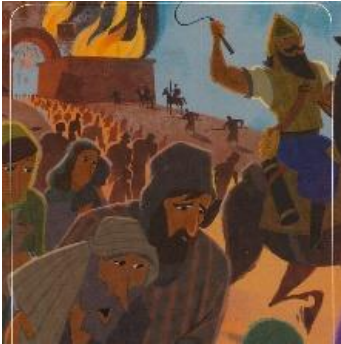
They often critiqued those in power, calling out their unjust practices and unfaithfulness to God. They were especially critical of something called syncretism where the king and corrupt priests encouraged worship of other gods alongside worship of Yahweh.

Long story short, the prophets foretold that if the people – and the leaders - didn't change their ways then Israel would be taken over by neighbouring countries – with Assyria being the biggest threat. The prophets viewed this possibility as God's judgment upon Israel for their unfaithfulness to God.



But the prophets also spoke a message of future hope when God would restore Israel again.

The prophecies of judgment did indeed come to pass as the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BCE and sent into exile, never to return. About 100 years later, the southern kingdom of Judah was also conquered – by the Babylonians – and the king and most of the ruling class were taken into exile in Babylon.

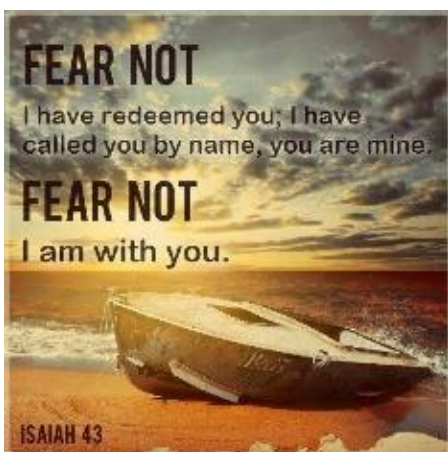


These experiences of military defeat and watching the Jerusalem temple being looted and destroyed - along with being forced into exile in faraway Babylon - were devastating for Israel's faith. It seemed that God had abandoned Israel and broken the promise to always have a son of David on the throne in Jerusalem as we explored last week.

But with no temple to worship God, no land and no king ... where is God? How could God allow these heathen nations to defeat and trample over God's chosen people? There were doubts and questions everywhere!



And so to today's readings from the part of Isaiah that is addressed to the exiles in Babylon.



The first reading is one of comfort: Do not be afraid, for I am with you.

Whether you pass through the waters or rivers or fire, I will be with you to save you says God. You are precious in my sight and I love you.

It's similar to the story in the Gospel reading of Jesus approaching the disciples out on Lake Galilee in the middle of a storm. Don't be afraid says Jesus. I am here to

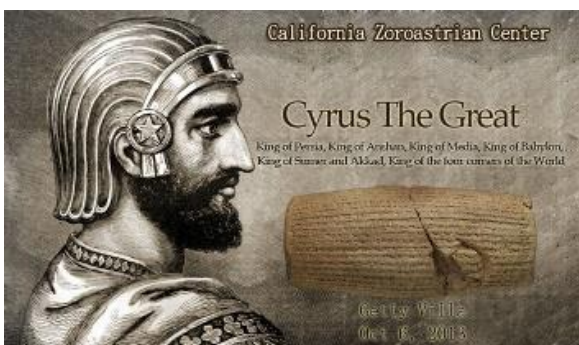
save you, even when you start sinking under the waves, Peter.

When we are in the midst of storms or darkness in our life, it's good to remember these promises that God is always with us, ready to reach out and save us.



The second reading from Isaiah is somewhat more puzzling. It is God speaking again, but this time to

Cyrus, a foreign ruler, the king of Persia, modern day Iran. God will go before Cyrus to subdue nations, even though Cyrus does not acknowledge the God of Israel. It is Cyrus who will set God's people free from exile and who will allow the temple and city of Jerusalem to be rebuilt. In this passage Cyrus is called God's anointed, a title usually reserved for kings of Israel.



One lesson we might learn from this passage is that God

works in mysterious ways and can use foreigners, even foreign kings like Cyrus, to bless God's people. Perhaps you too have sometimes received God's blessing through an unexpected source?

God's help coming through a foreign king was a hard pill for many Israelites to swallow and history suggests that many of God's people chose to remain in Babylon rather than return to the ruined city of Jerusalem to rebuild it.

This choice of Cyrus also points ahead to Jesus, who turned out to be another unexpected Saviour, nothing like the Messiah that many Jews were hoping for and hence a person who divided the nation. But that's another story for another day.

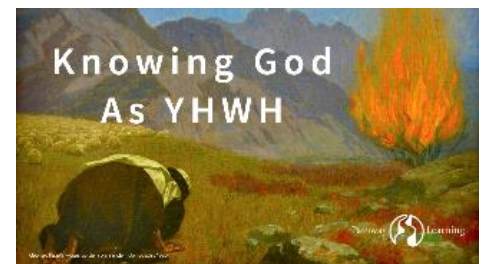
It's time to focus now, though, on what these passages in Isaiah reveal about God and how the experience of exile was crucial in transforming Israel's understanding of God.

The first big question was who is God?

The experience of the Exodus had ingrained the belief that Yahweh is the God of Israel who protects and looks after the nation of Israel.

But what does it mean if first Assyria and then Babylon conquered Israel?

Are their gods more powerful than Yahweh?



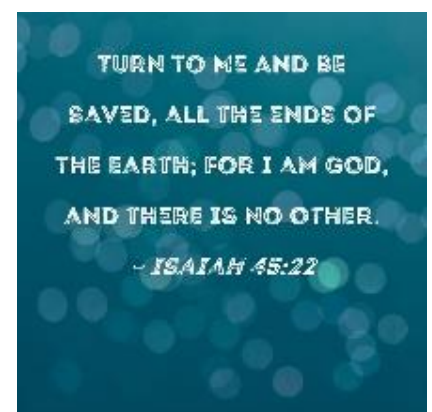
The answer from prophets like Isaiah is that Yahweh, the God of Israel, is none other than the Creator of the whole earth and the heavens, the maker of humanity and the one moving in history through Cyrus.

Although we are used to Genesis being the first book in our Bibles, this book about origins was probably put together during the exile based on the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Its first few chapters on creation seem to be a deliberate counter narrative to the Persian and Babylonian creation myths suggesting instead that it is

Israel's God who alone created everything.

This Creator God is the god of the whole earth and therefore the god of all the nations. This is a rather big claim to make as most gods were considered to be tribal gods or national gods. But no, the prophet here claims something much more, that the God of Israel is also God of Babylon and Persia, the God of Egypt and Sudan and Ethiopia.

But here the prophets walk a fine line. If this God who Israel worships is indeed the Creator god and God over the nations, and Israel is God's chosen people, how is it that Israel finds itself in exile and removed from its promised land?



*Does this God really love Israel?
Is God powerful enough to defeat rival nations?
Is God wise enough to devise a plan to rescue the people?*

The first question is emphatically answered by Isaiah that God does indeed love Israel and is like a mother who can never forget her children.

In answer to the second question, God is also powerful and will overcome Babylon through Cyrus the Persian king. The people just need to trust.

And in answer to the third question, God is wise and does have a plan to restore Israel, as repeated multiple times through these prophetic oracles of Isaiah. It will be like a new or second Exodus. Hence the imagery of Israel passing through the waters unscathed. In words from Isaiah chapter 40, God will make a way through the desert, removing every mountain and lifting up every valley so that the exiles can return to Jerusalem.

Finally Isaiah insists that God is holy and mysterious. The most common title for God in these chapters of Isaiah is the Holy One of Israel.

There were plenty of doubts and lots of questions being asked of God during the time of exile ... just as we may have doubts and questions about God in our day. In the midst of these difficult conversations, the insights of prophets like Isaiah is that God is actually the Creator of the earth and the heavens, the God of the whole earth, and God is loving, powerful and wise and yet mysterious.

All of this of course ties in with our Christian understanding of God.

The hoped for response of Israel is to trust in this God, to worship only this God and to follow the ways of this God as given in the laws of Moses.

As followers of Jesus, we are invited to have a similar outlook and understanding, except that we follow the ways of God as revealed through Jesus rather than follow all the laws of Moses.

Our next song encourages us to remember God's power, justice and love.