

Isaiah Comes Along

Isaiah 2:1-5
Romans 13:11-14

We had to put our beloved dog Keela to sleep in August. For the first time in thirty-two years that brought us down to only one pet, our other sweetheart pit bull, Brianna. A few weeks later I was doing some online banking when Linda returned from her morning workout. She shyly peered around the corner. She wore a nervous smile. She said, “You're going to kill me!”

“Did you get another dog?” I asked. “No, a cat,” she said, and she gestured for me to follow her back out to her car. As we walked she told me she'd found him meowing in some shrubbery outside of Building 5 on the Union Hospital campus. She had looked around but saw nobody searching for him. There were no houses close enough to that spot to think he'd gotten out; it looked like he'd been dumped. He came right up to her. She picked him up—and we have not let go. She drove around the area, looking for Missing Cat fliers on trees and telephone poles, but saw nothing. Later, our son advised us to go on Facebook to see whether anybody was searching for him. It turns out there are at least five lost and found pets in Terre Haute Facebook pages. All of them seemed to have all of the same animals pictured. But this cat appeared on none of them. So we kept him and named him Isiah.

I think you think you know why I, a man of the cloth, chose Isiah. I think you are wrong. I named him after the legendary Isiah Thomas, the great IU basketball player, not the prophet Isaiah. Linda and I were seniors and members of the IU Pep Band in 1981, the year Isiah led us to the NCAA championship. This means we got all-expenses-paid trips to play in the stands at every tournament game. We met Bryant Gumble on the sideline before the semi-final game. I got Dick Engle's autograph and he admitted to me he was pulling for IU, one of the two universities from which he had degrees. We spent two extra nights in Philadelphia because John Hinkley Jr. shot President Reagan just then and the finals got postponed. It was a fine and glorious time for us and it seemed to me naming my cat after Isiah was the least I could do.

Now the *prophet* Isaiah, he was a very different kind of cat. He proclaimed his messages from 742 to 687 B.C. During these years the northern kingdom of Israel got annexed into the Assyrian Empire to the north. The southern kingdom of Judah, in which Isaiah lived, cowered under the shadow of the Assyrians and the Babylonians to the east. Isaiah heard the Lord telling him to tell the people God was controlling all these geopolitical events. God was using these foreigners to punish the Israelites for their failure to obey God's law. In the first two-thirds of the Book of Isaiah, the only chapters that could possibly have come from his own hand, he paints an apocalyptic vision. A great and terrible day of cataclysm will come. The Lord will judge the people and punish them for their sins. They have it coming. They're *earned* it.

But sprinkled throughout these dire warnings are lovely moments of joy and

optimism. Most of these predict an age of peace to follow the apocalypse. They usually reference the coming Messiah, who will lead the people into that peace. Our passage today speaks of peace but not of the Messiah. Our chapter opens with, "In the latter days..." After all the pain and punishment will come a new age. The "mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains." This refers to Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. All the peoples and all the nations will make pilgrimage there, "that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." Remember, obedience to the law is a major theme for Isaiah. Here he dreams of all the nations becoming faithful to the God of Israel.

The ultimate outcome of this coming together will be peace. Weapons of war will get "beaten" into farming tools. He concludes, "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." Would that this prophecy had come true by now! According to a report from the Reuters News Service, Andriy Z. was born in the western Ukrainian city of Lvov. An engineering student, he joined a college field trip to inspect dams in Russia. During the trip he got arrested for possession of marijuana. He spent the next three years in prison in the Russian city of Volgograd. Three months ago, he and the entire population of that prison were put on trucks and taken to an army camp. They were told they were to become soldiers in the Russian Army and given two weeks' training. Then they boarded a train that took them into eastern Ukraine, near Kharkiev. Anrdiy took his time, but the first chance he got, he deserted. He walked with his hands up and, shouting in Ukranian, convinced their soldiers he really was one of them.

His “captors” asked him to stay and join the Ukrainian army. He promised to do so, but asked first to travel cross-country to check on his mother and father. An eighteen-hour train ride later and he found himself back in Lvov. His parents were still living in the same apartment. Two days after their reunion it was hit by one of those missiles the Russian randomly fire. Yuriy and his parents were among the seventeen people killed in the blast. William Tecumseh Sherman was a Union general during the Civil War. His army's “March to the Sea”, across Georgia from Atlanta to the Atlantic, left a trail of biblical devastation in its wake. In later years he wrote, “Yes I knew what my men were doing. They *had* to do it. The worse it got the sooner the enemy would buckle.” Sherman also gave this famous quote in a speech: “I am sick and tired of war. Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, for vengeance, for desolation. War is hell.” *When will we learn not to wage it?!?*

Whether the Assyrians or Babylonians, the Union or the Confederacy, the Russians or the Ukrainians, the wars waged have brought hell to all in their paths. We have adults living with their families in Terre Haute who were born in the Balkan nations that broke away from the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Each of these families has ancestors going back many generations who waged war against each other. I have spoken to them about this. They shrug. As one of them told me, “Here in America, those things don't seem so important any more.” His parents made him leave home to avoid getting drafted into one the armies conducting that nasty Balkan war in the 1990's. Our Afghan friends escaped because of how quickly their own army collapsed

in its brief war with the Taliban.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. This truism gives us a sense of fatalism. If war is so endemic, and if war is so huge, what can we do about it? We can vote for politicians who will not support it—though I do not see any major contemporary American political party genuinely working for peace. We can pray for peace. We can join movements and organizations working for it. And we can try to clean our own houses. We can do what we must to maintain peace in our own hearts. And we can do what we can to foster peace in our neighbors', and our communities', hearts. Though this prescription will no doubt frustrate some among us—and rightly so, I freely admit—it nevertheless appears more practical than trying to overcome the incestuous network of the governmental executive branch and what Dwight Eisenhower so prophetically labeled, in 1959, mind you, corporations profiting from war. He called it the “Military-Industrial Complex”.

In his letter to the Romans the Apostle Paul addressed a Christian community almost as far outside his control as the Military-Industrial Complex is outside ours. He probably wrote from the Greek city of Corinth, at best a week away if the winds blessedly blew his ship in the right direction. More importantly, he wrote to people living in the capital city. Likely they did not have real power, but they saw real power exercised every day and they knew that Paul, a Jew, had no worldly power. He wrote to people who had no earthly reason to listen to him. Smartly, he altered his approach to them accordingly. He addressed them more deferentially than he did the recipients

of his other letters. He understood they needed a reason to pay attention. So he gave them one: “you know what hour it is...For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed...” In other words, Paul honestly believed the age of peace predicted by Isaiah would come *at any minute*. The Day of Judgment was at hand. Get ready.

The tension between predictions of the End Times and the arrival of the End Times has never fully disappeared. Preachers have forever used it to get people to listen to them. So, having utilized this strategy, what did Paul urge his readers to do in order to get ready for the big day? He called on them to put off the works of darkness and to put on the works of light. As we still await the return of Jesus we need to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ”. We need to ask God to help us to live in obedience to that same law Isaiah extolled. We need to, to use the positive alternatives to Paul's words, pursue sobriety, modesty, peacemaking. We need to use the resources of the Holy Spirit to seek the greatest degree of purity possible.

Jesus is the Prince of Peace. He spoke clearly about his desire that his followers promote peace. Peace militarily and personally. Peace internally. Use your anticipation of the coming new age to prepare yourself for it. Make peace with yourself. Make peace with your family. Make peace with your church. We had another spate of mass shootings this week. I am convinced their primary cause is the lack of peace in the hearts of the shooters. Today we begin Advent, the season of expectation for the first—and the second—coming of the Prince of Peace. We could find no better way to prepare for his return than working to make peace.