

Today we start a new sermon series called, “Didn’t see that coming.” Over the next five weeks, we’re going to be exploring a specific section of the book of Isaiah: chapters 40-55.

Now, this is what we call a **BYOB** - bring your own Bible - series. Which means that, yes, we’re going to be listening to what God has to say to us through these passages, but it also means we’re going to be digging deep so we can help you be equipped to study the Bible on your own.

Whenever we do a BYOB series, we talk about the three “worlds of the text.”

There’s **the world behind the text**. What was going on when this was written? What was the culture? The history? What were the first readers going through?

Then there’s **the world of the text**. This is how one passage of the Bible connects with all the others. How the imagery in one passage brings to mind imagery from another.

And then there’s **the world in front of the text**. This is our world. The culture and assumptions and realities that *we* bring to the text. As I talked about a couple of weeks ago when I preached about “the humble pursuit of truth,” it’s just as important to understand **what we’re bringing to the Bible** as it is to know what the Bible is bringing to us.

The three worlds of the text. We’re going to touch on all of them.

Now why are we looking at Isaiah 40-55 specifically?

Well, in scholarly circles, it’s generally agreed that this portion of Isaiah was written for the Israelites who were in a very specific situation: **the Babylonian Exile** in the sixth century B.C.

Essentially, the prophet is speaking truth to the people at a time when they had hit **rock bottom**.

And as we're going to see, even though **our world** is completely different than theirs (the world *in front of* the text), we do have a few things in common.

The people of Israel were facing a **collapse of their normal lives**, hardships they hadn't faced before, and questions about where God was in all of it.

As we're facing **month four of a global pandemic** which has turned everything upside down - which has led our country into a recession, I think these words are going to be timely.

So before we start reading, let me give you **a little bit of background** of this section of Isaiah - the world *behind* the text.

Let's start here: Ever since they first had a king, the nation of Israel always had a bit of **a hard time trusting in God**.

They started out ok. 100 years of growing prosperity under the kings **Saul, David, and Solomon**. For the most part they trusted in God and were blessed as a result.

During Solomon's reign, they built the **temple [Image: Temple]** - this beautiful dwelling place of Yahweh where the people could meet with God.

But then, people got greedy and power hungry and for the next *200* years, the kingdom descended into chaos. It was **divided** - Israel in the north and Judah in the south. From this point on, it was a mess for the people of God. **Wars, conflict, injustice...**

Instead of trusting in God during difficult times, **kings trusted in their military strength**. Israel made **alliances** with the Arameans. Judah made alliances with Egypt. And yet, every year it seemed like their power was slipping further and further away. (This is what happens

when you trust in your own strength and ingenuity!)

Into this setting came the **prophets**. Spokespeople for God who had a pretty singular message: “Knock it off! You’ve got to start trusting God again. You’ve got to start obeying his law! If you keep ignoring Yahweh and pursuing injustice in the land - pursuing your own interests - you’re going to pay the price!”

And that’s exactly what happened. Israel fell first, defeated by the mighty Assyrian Empire. 140 years later, Judah fell, crushed by the Babylonians.

### **[Image: Jerusalem]**

In the 580’s B.C., **Jerusalem was ransacked**, the temple was destroyed, and the Israelite nobility was carried off into exile far from home.

Tim will go into more detail about what the exile was like next week.

But you can imagine **what the people were feeling** in this time. Living in this terrifying new land, watching the idols of the Babylonian gods paraded through the streets knowing *your* temple was in ruins. Confusion, outrage, despair...

Even though the prophets had been clear about what was coming, the people missed it and they wondered: **did God fail us?** Were the gods of Babylon stronger than Yahweh? Had God’s mission to heal the world through Israel come to nothing?

These were the questions rolling through the minds of the people of God when the prophecies of Isaiah 40-55 were written.

That’s the world *behind* the text.

And again, our lives are nothing like the Babylonian exile, but living in **a world as chaotic as ours** is right now, it does raise some similar questions.

So let's see how God spoke through Isaiah when the people had hit rock bottom...

#### CLEAR THE WAY

Go ahead and turn to **Isaiah 40**. And let's see what it is the prophet calls the people to do. [House Bibles - poetry, mark up]

#### **Isaiah 40:1-5**

*"Comfort, comfort my people,"  
says your God.*

*"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.*

*Tell her that her sad days are gone  
and her sins are pardoned.*

*Yes, the LORD has punished her twice over  
for all her sins."*

*Listen! It's the voice of someone shouting,*

*"Clear the way through the wilderness  
for the LORD!*

*Make a straight highway through the wasteland  
for our God!*

*Fill in the valleys,*

*and level the mountains and hills.*

*Straighten the curves,*

*and smooth out the rough places.*

*Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed,*

*and all people will see it together.*

*The LORD has spoken!"*

It's interesting that the first words here are "comfort, comfort," written twice for emphasis. In Hebrew, this word, "comfort," is the kind of comfort you give to someone whose loved one has died. Someone **grieving**.

And, if you look at other biblical passages written during this time (the

world of the text), like the book of **Lamentations**, you see just how deeply the people were despairing at this moment. Just how deeply they were grieving the loss of their nation.

Now, **if I was a prophet** back then, I might have been tempted to start with, “Told you so, ya doofuses! It was your sin that got us here.” But that’s now how Isaiah 40 begins. No. It begins with comfort, and a reassurance - verse 2 - that Israel’s sins are pardoned... her punishment has been enough.

“Ok, but we’re still in exile here. We’re still in Babylon. What could possibly comfort us??

Well, look at verse 5. “The glory of the Lord *will be* revealed, and *all people* will see it.”

**Glory** in the Bible is kind of a shiny heaviness of God’s presence. And one of the consistent promises in scripture is that one day the “glory of the Lord” - God’s presence (and therefore **his rule and reign** as the real king) - would fill the earth.

Isaiah is saying that’s about to happen. Literally in Hebrew he says, “*all flesh*” will see God’s glory. All living things.

In other words, the prophet is saying that, despite evidence to the contrary, **God is still working to fulfill his intentions for creation**. To heal the brokenness of our world, to root out injustice once and for all, to bring humanity back to Eden.

That’s why, in verse 3, a voice in the wilderness is calling the people to “**clear the way!**” Knock down barriers, fill in holes, make a straight path, because God is coming to make all things new. His glory - his presence - *is going to shine*. In the midst of exile,

**God is still working.**

That right there could essentially be the big idea for the entire series.

LOOK! IT'S GOD!

But let's keep reading and go a bit deeper. Skip down to verse 9.

**Isaiah 40:9-11**

*O Zion, messenger of good news,  
shout from the mountaintops!  
Shout it louder, O Jerusalem.  
Shout, and do not be afraid.  
Tell the towns of Judah,  
"Your God is coming!"  
Yes, the Sovereign LORD is coming in power.  
He will rule with a powerful arm.  
See, he brings his reward with him as he comes.  
He will feed his flock like a shepherd.  
He will carry the lambs in his arms,  
holding them close to his heart.  
He will gently lead the mother sheep with their young.*

There are a couple of things I love about this passage.

First, the phrase "your God is coming" is probably better captured by an old fashioned word: **behold**. Literally the Hebrew says, "Behold! God!"

I love this, because it's so simple. Yes, your life is dark. Yes, you're in exile. All you can see are your chains. But look up! Here comes God.

And what do we see? What do we behold? We see **a warrior shepherd**.

Remember, this is Hebrew meditation literature. This is not literal. This is poetry meant to evoke our imagination. But man, this image is so provocative!

Look at verse 10. On one hand, "the Lord is coming in power." In one arm he has a sword or something. His arm *rules*. **He's a mighty warrior**, fighting

against the sin and injustice and evil of our world.

But then look at verse 11. What does he have in his other arm? **He's carrying baby sheep.** He's a shepherd. He's nurturing. He's gentle.

The same God who demolishes evil cares tenderly for the broken and the lost in our world. *That's* the God who is coming to make all things right. A warrior shepherd.

First, Isaiah called the people to get ready - to prepare the way. But now he's saying this: "Look up! Behold!" In the midst of your exile:

**God is still working.**

And you can see the warrior shepherd coming if you know where to look.

FIND NEW STRENGTH

Now, these are encouraging sentiments. They are now and I'm sure they were back then. God is still working. Great.

But, let's be honest. When we look around at **our world today** and see vulnerable people dying from Covid-19, and seething hatred destroying communities, and poverty growing like wildfire (or whatever it is you've been facing!), it can be tempting to wonder if that's really true.

If God is still working, then why are things still such a mess?

The Israelites wondered this too. The exile in Babylon went on for decades. Year after year the Israelites watched as **idols of the Babylonian gods** were worshipped and paraded through the streets.

They seemed to have all the power and Yahweh - the God of Israel - seemed to be absent. "Behold? Here comes God? I don't see anything, and my situation sure doesn't seem to be changing..."

We know how that feels, don't we?

Let's see how Isaiah responds to this line of thinking.

**Isaiah 40:12, 18-19, 26-31**

*Who else has held the oceans in his hand?*

*Who has measured off the heavens with his fingers?*

*Who else knows the weight of the earth*

*or has weighed the mountains and hills on a scale?...*

*To whom can you compare God?*

*What image can you find to resemble him?*

*Can he be compared to an idol formed in a mold,*

*overlaid with gold, and decorated with silver chains?...*

*Look up into the heavens.*

*Who created all the stars?*

*He brings them out like an army, one after another,*

*calling each by its name.*

*Because of his great power and incomparable strength,*

*not a single one is missing.*

*O Jacob, how can you say the LORD does not see your troubles?*

*O Israel, how can you say God ignores your rights?*

*Have you never heard?*

*Have you never understood?*

*The LORD is the everlasting God,*

*the Creator of all the earth.*

*He never grows weak or weary.*

*No one can measure the depths of his understanding.*

*He gives power to the weak*

*and strength to the powerless.*

*Even youths will become weak and tired,*

*and young men will fall in exhaustion.*

*But those who trust in the LORD will find new strength.*

*They will soar high on wings like eagles.*

*They will run and not grow weary.*

*They will walk and not faint.*

In this passage, Isaiah is trying to re-orient the people's perspective. Their understanding of God had gotten far, far too small.

"You think that idol of Marduk is impressive? That wooden statue with some gold hammered on? Some dudes just made that. *Our* God is **the designer of the universe!**

"These Babylonian gods are playing **checkers**. Our God is playing **four dimensional chess**. He's the master of time, he's all-powerful, he doesn't get tired...

"The only reason we're here is because *we* lost sight of who God is. *We* trusted in ourselves. We thought we knew better than Yahweh. If we want to find *new* strength to get us through this, v.31, we need to trust in *him*.

"Because he's never stopped working to fulfill his plan for humanity. Even if we can't see it."

Put simply, Isaiah is saying to the people,

**God is still working.**

**Just not the way we might expect.** v.28 "No one can measure the depths of his understanding."

If we trust in our *own* strength - **if we trust in our own ideas** of what God should or shouldn't be doing right now - we're going to get exhausted.

But if we trust in *him* - if we trust that our warrior shepherd God is on the move - that's when **we will find new strength** - new endurance to see us through.

JESUS

Ok, we've got to trust that God is still working. We've got to clear the way. We've got to look up – to behold the warrior shepherd coming. **That should be our mentality.** But what all did that actually mean for the Israelites in exile?

It's easy to think that the story probably ends with God rescuing the Israelites from Babylon and bringing them back to Jerusalem and **it's a happy ending** and the camera fades as everyone is just laughing and laughing about how crazy all that was.

It's true, Babylon *was* defeated by Persia, and the Persians *did* allow the Israelites to return to their homeland, but **don't think for a moment** that God was working just to bring things back to **the status quo.**

No. He had bigger plans.

God's mission was never to make Israel happy and comfortable. His mission was **to heal the world.** To bring humanity back into his presence.

Which is why, from the very beginning of the Babylonian exile, **God was setting in motion a series of events** which would lead to a kind of global restoration that *nobody* saw coming.

In verse 9, Isaiah calls that coming restoration "good news." And the gospel of Mark picks up on that.

**Mark 1:1-3**

*This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. It began just as the prophet Isaiah had written:*

*"Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
and he will prepare your way.*

*He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,  
'Prepare the way for the LORD's coming!  
Clear the road for him!'"*

Does that sound familiar?

I told you God was playing four-dimensional chess here.

While everyone in Israel was hoping for some kind of military victory - some new king to sit on David's throne - **God the Father was preparing to send his own son** in human form to take *all* of humanity's sin and brokenness and injustice and violence onto himself and to pay the penalty of death so that *everyone* could find true life again.

As Jesus rose from the grave, dismantling the power of death once and for all, *that* is when, as it says in verse 5, "the glory of the Lord was revealed, and all people could see it together."

**The warrior shepherd had arrived**, even though he looked nothing like what the people had imagined.

## CONCLUSION

This is why we called this series "I Didn't See That Coming." Because God's rescue mission for humanity went *way* beyond anything the Israelites could have dreamt up in exile.

But the prophet Isaiah was listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit, and he could see what lay ahead. That's why he called the people to change their mentality. To look up. To prepare the way. To trust.

These prophetic words are not just a historical record, but **a glimpse into the workings of a God beyond comprehension**. Of a God who has never stopped working to heal this world.

As we explore these passages over the next few weeks, I want you to have **hope**, especially if you've felt like God has been absent in your life. Or you are facing pain which doesn't seem to ever go away.

For all of us, in the midst of this dark time, with an uncertain future and many more challenges ahead, I want us to prepare the way for the Lord.

I want us to look up, and take hope that our warrior shepherd is here.

And I want us to find new strength - to soar on wings like eagles - as we trust in a God who is *still* working, even if we don't always understand how.

[PRAY]