

NOTES

Our Journey Back to God

Isaiah's Vision: God's Restoration of the World (Isa 35)Isaiah 35:1-10; Jerry Truex; December 11, 2016

A. Introduction

Today marks the Third Advent Sunday. Advent refers to the coming or arrival of the Lord. The Scripture we read this morning, Isaiah 35:1-10. It is a vision that focuses on two comings: The first is the coming of the Lord to heal and restore us. The second is the people of God coming to the LORD on God Holy Way.

First, I will describe the judgment of God on Edom and the disastrous crisis that the evil people had created for Edom.

Second, I will describe Isaiah vision of hope, healing, and renewal and how to experience a journey back to God.

B. Our Contemporary Context

Before looking the disaster that Isaiah 35 addresses:

- What are some of the disasters we face, personally or as a nation?
- What crises are we waiting to happen?

Here are some thoughts about the crisis we await.¹ It could be a terrorist attack like we experienced in 2001. It could be another economic meltdown like 2008. It could be widespread devastation caused by global warming. It could be nationwide riots in response to Trump's administration, or global riots in protest of the ultrarich plutocrat's monetization. It could be another defeat in our endless and futile wars. The crisis is coming.

When crisis arises, it will be seized upon and exploited by the corporate state, led by a self-promoting, clueless real estate developer, entertainer, and con man. Martial law will ensue and formalize the end of American democracy.

¹ Inspired by Chris Hedges, "Waiting for the Barbarians," Nov. 27, 2016.

When that happens, we will search our conscience and wonder how that could have happened in America. It happened incrementally to our somnambulistic society. We will ask:²

- Why did we allow the corporate state to develop a *secret police*—the NAS and the other 15 intelligence gathering agencies—to spy on all our communication, all the time?
- Why did we allow the corporate state to strip away the rights of poor people, especially people of color, and force them to live in the terror of mini-police states?
- How could we have allowed the corporate state to build the world’s largest system of mass incarceration the world has ever known?
- Did we not see that could be next?
- Why did we agree that those defined as terrorists by the state could not only be deprived of rights, but also assassinated, even American citizens?
- Did we think the corporate state and the Trump administration would restrict itself to persecuting and scapegoating Muslims only?
- Why did we allow, and in some cases encourage, our government to torture “enemies” of the state?
- Why did we remain silent as the state took the right to detain and prosecute people, not for what they had done, but for holding religious or political beliefs contrary to the plutocratic state?

This coming crisis resulted from the failure of our capitalist democracy. The end of democracy was bred by ignorance, indifference, racism, bigotry and the seduction of mass propaganda, “fake news,” intellectually vacuous social media, and toxic twitter heads.³

That is our disastrous situation that looms large on our immediate horizon.

C. Edom is laid to waste (Isa. 34)

There was another disastrous situation 2,500 years ago. Isaiah 34 paints a disastrous portrait of the world and the judgment of God against all wickedness (5):

- The Lord is furious at the nations (2).
- They are doomed and ready for slaughter (2).
- Isaiah envisions massive casualties, corpses stacked high, mountains flowing with blood (3).
- The skies are rolled up like a scroll and everything withers and dies (4)
- Isaiah focuses on the nation of Edom:
 - The streams of Edom become pitch or tar-like

² Again, inspired by Chris Hedges, “Waiting for the Barbarians,” Nov. 27, 2016.

³ See Chris Hedges, “Waiting for the Barbarians,” Nov. 27, 2016.

- The soil, brimstone or sulfur
- The land, like burning asphalt
- Wild animals will take over (13-14) and buzzards will gather (15)

Isaiah 34 sounds like the aftermath of an environmental catastrophe or the aftershock of nuclear war.

The wicked are being judged in chapter 34, but now we hear the fate of the righteous in chapter 36.

D. The Lord's Glory is Coming (Isa 35:1-4)

¹ The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. ³ Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴ Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."

1. What was the problem?

The language of Isaiah 35 is like the language of Second Isaiah, which was written during the Babylonian exile.⁴ That means Isaiah is probably addressing Judeans who were captured during war and marched hundreds of miles away from their homeland to Babylon.

Now they were suffering the humiliation of captivity and the despair of huddled slaves under the whip of despotic rulers. They wanted to return to their homes, which they had reason to suspect were destroyed, but no end was in sight. It was a terrible and painful time.

The Judeans were steeped in despair, in slavery, in the clutches of political oppression, in a hostile land, with the threat of environmental disaster and what sounds like the aftermath of nuclear war announced in chapter 34, it would have taken considerable courage to hope they would one day return to their homeland and find healing and joy.

⁴ Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993) 239.

2. What is announced?

But that is what Isaiah 35 is announcing. In the face of dismal circumstances, Isaiah announces that God's glory and majesty is coming.

3. What are the five imperatives?

Then Isaiah follows with five imperatives (3-4):

- i. Strengthen the weak hands
- ii. Make firm the feeble knees
- iii. Speak to those with fearful hearts; the Hebrew word for "fearful" (מִהָרָה *mahar*) lit. means "to be hurried, be anxious"
- iv. "Be strong or courageous" (חֲזָק; *chazaq*)
- v. Do not fear

E. Salvation is Coming (Isa 35:5-7)

Verse 4 concludes by saying, "He will come and save you." Now, verses 5-7 give us a portrait of salvation. It is an impressionist portrait. An impressionist painting aims at capturing the feeling or the experience of something rather than a precise depiction.

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; ⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

Given the divine judgment and catastrophes mentioned in Isaiah 34, and the desperate situation of the Judean captives in Babylon, this vision of Isaiah must have seemed like a crazy dream.

But Isaiah envisions a future world. It is an alternative reality to the one the Judeans experienced and the what we experience. Isaiah's vision of an alternative reality to our world is expressed in lyrical poetry revolving around two images.

1. Healing Humans

The first image in verse 5 is that of healing the blind, deaf, lame, and mute. These are concrete *and representative* ways of visualizing salvation.

Matthew 15:30 *Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured [ἐθεράπευσεν; restored] them. (NRSV)*

2. Restoring Nature

The second image in verse 6-7 is that of restoring nature. Notice the powerful contrasts:

- The “burning sand will become a pool,”
- The places “where jackals once lay” will become a grassy meadow

F. Come to God! The Way is Prepared (Isa 35:8-10)

⁸ A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. ⁹ No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. ¹⁰ And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. (NRSV)

Verses 8-10 describes the unthinkable: The Judeans return home. They return to the land of Judah, to Jerusalem, and to Mt. Zion, the mountain where the Temple or God's house is rebuilt.

1. Physical way

At the literal level, we can picture thousands of Judeans walking across a desert highway to Jerusalem. We can imagine them walking for many days and, once they arrive, we can see them going up the mountain to worship God in the Temple.

2. Spiritual way

But clearly, Isaiah's vision is to be understood on a spiritual level as well.⁵ Isaiah's vision is not just about returning to physical homes, not just a physical highway, but it is about an inner, spiritual return to the LORD, walking on a spiritual path.

Isa. 2:3. ³ Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." (NRSV)

This highway or Holy Way (v. 10) is describes in terms of both its safety and those who are qualified to use it.

- There are no dangerous predatory animals on the Holy Way
- There are no "fools"; the word for "fools" in Hebrew is אִוִּיל ('eviyl), "someone who despises wisdom, evil minded, someone who is quarrelsome, mocks others."
- There are no "unclean" people; the word for "unclean" is טָמֵא (tame'), someone who is ritually or ethical impure
- Only the redeemed and the ransomed will walk on the Holy Way, and they will be full of joy and gladness

It is not just about coming to Mt. Zion and worshiping God in physical location, but about an inner, spiritual space where we find God and learn the way of God.

It is about you returning to God, journeying back to God

- after living in captivity,
- after living in a dry desert without water,
- after living in an unwelcoming land without family,

Isaiah's vision is about journeying back to LORD after a deep, dark, and desperate separation from God. It is about finding and walking on the Holy Way of God.

G. Conclusion & Reflections

Isaiah 35 presents a vision of two comings.

⁵ Ivan D. Friesen, *Isaiah*, BCBC (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania, 2009) 212.

First, Isaiah describes the coming God. God takes the initiative and not only heals people and restores creation, but also provides a "superhighway" back to God.

We must ask: How has God provided healing and restoration for us? And where is that superhighway? Where is "that way" God has provided each of us?

Second, Isaiah also describes the coming of people to God's house. Our coming to God involves having the courage to hope and the faith to take *one step at a time toward God*.

We must ask: Are we walking toward God or away? What are some specific ways we can strengthen our hands and stand up straight? What step on the "way of the LORD" will I take today?