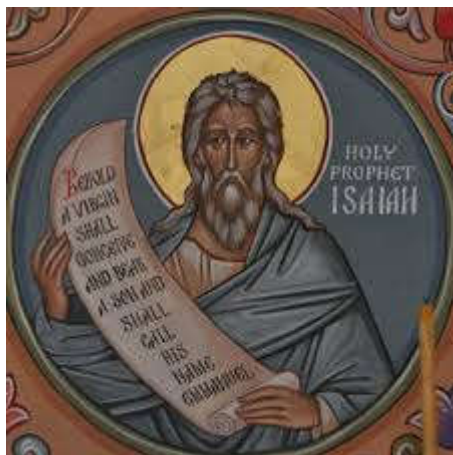


Lectionary Year B: The Prophet Isaiah in the Gospel of Mark



Questions for today

- Why was Isaiah's message so powerful and so fitting for Mark's context and audience?
- How has Mark's understanding of Isaiah shaped his Gospel?

Mark 1.1-3

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;

³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight"

Context and dating Isaiah

1-39 First Isaiah

Mostly Jerusalem
C8th but some parts much later, e.g. chs 24-27; 34-35 and 36-39. Probably spans 4 centuries!

40-55 Second Isaiah

Mostly Babylon
C6th but not necessarily an independent text from 1-39

56-66 Third Isaiah

Mostly Jerusalem at end of C6th, but a composite text - layers of tradition from time of return and restoration

Themes in Isa 40-66

Word of the Lord / divine speech

- Isa 40.8 The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.
- Isa 45.19, 21, 23
- Isa 55.11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Christopher Seitz: “that is exactly what prophecy – true prophecy – is: an accomplishing word, landing again and again to speak a new word to a new generation from the vortex of lived experience with the Holy One of Israel, by God’s servants, the prophets.” (NIB commentary vol. VIII, 1994, Abingdon Press, p.400)

New Exodus

God is doing a new thing!

- Isa 43.16-19 (cf. Isa 42.16; 49.11)
- Isa 40.3 A voice is calling out, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the desert a highway for our God!”
- Isaiah 35 gives some background to the reversal in nature and the highway in the desert.

Warrior-YHWH

Exodus 15 the Song of the Sea: “The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation!”

- The strong arm of the Lord in Isaiah 51.9; 52.10.
 - ‘Lord of Hosts’ in Isa 1-39 against Israel and in 45-66 acting again for Israel
 - Overlap between Exodus imagery and theophany language – images of the divine storm-god warrior
 - Isaiah makes use of creation language to demonstrate God’s ultimate power over the sea as a symbol of chaos and enemies. Isa 50.2; 51.9-11
 - Power over water. Cf. Mark 4 and 6: Jesus’ divinity, authority and ability to save.
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Resource for breakout groups and sermon preparation

1. Lectionary for the first Sunday in Advent: Isaiah 64.1-9, Psalm 80 and Mark 13.24-37

- The plea in Isaiah 64.1, “O that you would tear the heavens and come down!” is asking God to come down directly from heaven to earth. The heavens were often pictured as a tent which God ‘unfurled’. In Psalm 18, when warrior-YHWH comes to rescue the king, he ‘bows’ the heavens to come down. Here the plea is to just rip the material and come down!

(See e.g. Isaiah 40:22, 42:5, 44:24, 45:12, 51:13 and Job 9:8, Psalm 104:2, Zechariah 12:1, Jeremiah 10:12 and 51:15 where the creation of the heavens is pictured as a tent being stretched out across the sky!)

- Have a look at Mark 1.10-11: the heavens are **torn apart** at Jesus’ baptism

Questions for discussion:

- Why do you think Isaiah 64.1-9 has been paired with Mark 13.24-37?
 - What kinds of themes would you pull out if you were preaching?
 - If you have time, have a look at Psalm 80, where you will find pictures of God as shepherd, king, Exodus as planting a vine, and the blessing of God’s face shining (cf. Numbers 6.24-26)
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2. Lectionary for second Sunday in Advent: Isaiah 40.1-11, Psalm 85 and Mark 1.1-8

- Mark begins his Gospel in the most striking way:

“The beginning of the **good news** of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Good news (*euangelion* in Greek) is associated in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) with news of deliverance and salvation, release of captives, scattering of enemies and victory over chaos. Quite a lot of powerful associations for one little word!

- Mark 1.2 is not from Isaiah but adapted from Malachi 3. Have a read of **Mal 3.1-5** and note that the messenger (who seems to be Elijah in Mal 4.5) is preparing the way for the LORD, but bringing judgement and ‘refining’
- Another ‘messenger’ passage to read with this is **Exodus 23.20-22** – does this shed any light on the fact that Mark says ‘I am sending my messenger ahead of **you**’ rather than the direct quotation of Malachi, which would be “I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before **me**”?
- The ‘way’ in Mark appears more frequently in Mk 8.27-10.32 – the way is heading towards Jerusalem. But in Mark, the way leads to the cross. Cf. Isa 50.4-9; 52.13-53.12; 65.13: affliction and even death might be necessary to accomplish God’s commission to Israel to be a light to the nations.

Questions for discussion:

- Why do you think Mark cites both Malachi and Isaiah in his prologue? What is he signalling about Jesus’ coming? (As you read the Gospel of Mark, it is worth holding on to Jesus’ two roles of delivering and judging.)
- Have a look at Isa 40.1-11. How would you weave this together with the Gospel passage in a sermon?
- Does the idea of a two-way process of ‘pathway-making’ resonate with you in terms of discipleship?
- If you have time, have a look at the other NT reading, 2 Peter 3.8-15, and think about how particular motifs and ideas from the Old Testament are used here to paint pictures about the end-time.

3. Lectionary for 5th Sunday after Epiphany: Isa 40.21-31; Psalm 147.1-12; Mark 1.29-39

- Have a look at some of these passages in Isaiah to get a sense of the background to Mark's understanding of Jesus' healing:

Isa 6.10; 29.18f; 30.26; 32.1; 35.5; 42.7; 42.16 (cf. healings in Mark 8 and 10); 53.4; 57.18

- In Isaiah 33.23-24 there is a connection between forgiveness of sins and healing
- Isa 43.25. "I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins." cf. Mark 2.1-12, Jesus forgives the paralysed man's sins.
- Those who rely on their own understanding and wisdom reject YHWH: Isa 6.9f and 29.13-16 cf. Mk 4.12 and 7.6f.

Questions for discussion:

- Have a look at Psalm 147 and look for images of God as healer and creator
- Does the Psalm help in making connections between the Isaiah and Mark texts for preaching?
- What do you think Mark includes so many healing and exorcism miracles? What does he want to communicate about who Jesus is and what he is doing?

Summary of themes in Mark influenced by Isaiah

- The word of the Lord stands forever and will be fulfilled
- Jesus as liberator and judge
- Jesus has authority and power over creation and chaotic forces
- Jesus as shepherd, guide and provider
- Radical inversion of the warrior figure
- Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem, to the cross
- The way of the cross for disciples