

**SERMON – 4/12/22**  
**'Days of Darkness'**

Introduction

We continue our readings from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. The people of Jerusalem are under threat from their northern neighbours in Samaria and Damascus – King Ahaz is quaking and all the people of Judah with him, but the prophet brings them the hopeful message that their enemies will actually be overcome themselves before they take Jerusalem, but although the Assyrians will not overcome Jerusalem this time, the unexpectedness and the speed of their conquest of Samaria and Damascus should be a warning to God's people in Judah.

Last Sunday we were looking at the famous prophecy about the virgin conceiving and bearing a son whose name will be Immanuel, God with us. We saw how that was not only a prophecy of the coming Messiah that we will be celebrating at Christmas, but it was also a message for Isaiah's own time. The message of 'God with us' continues into chapter 8, so listen out for that as it is read. Notice also the themes of the sovereignty of God and of the holiness of God and listen in particular for the different ways in which God communicates His message.

Let's hear the Word of God.

Isaiah 8:1-18

"Here I am with the children the LORD has given me. The LORD Almighty, whose throne is on Mount Zion, has sent us as living messages to the people of Israel." (Isaiah 8:18)

As I sat down to prepare this morning's sermon I really didn't know quite what direction it was going to take. Although it's not the easiest of passages to follow, there are some really significant statements made here and we could have focussed on a number of different themes this morning. But eventually I found a thread running through it that I decided to pick up and follow and so the question I would like to ask today is this: What is it that God is saying to us in our time?

To understand this passage fully, it is perhaps necessary to go back to the story of the call of Isaiah in chapter 6 and to what

happens immediately after the prophet responds: 'Here am I, send me.' Very mysteriously, God says: 'Go, and tell this people, "Be ever hearing but never understanding, be ever seeing but never perceiving."' (Is.6:9) It's the verse that Jesus quotes when He is asked why He speaks in parables and it raises for me the issue that I would like to highlight this morning: How good are we at getting the message?

It's not just preachers who ponder this question. Those of you who are teachers probably ask yourselves sometimes if you are getting through to your students. The same will be true for those in advertising or in sales or in politics. Is the message getting through? Or is the audience just nodding blankly while the penny fails to drop?

The prophet Isaiah was called to a position of great responsibility at a time of real challenge in the life of God's people. In chapter 7 we saw that there was widespread anxiety about the threat of invasion and that Isaiah's role was to speak directly to the king and to bring a word from the Lord into the corridors of power in his day. The trouble was that the king had no interest at all in what God was saying, which made things a little difficult for Isaiah. Despite the prophet's prompting, Ahaz refuses to ask God for a sign and so Isaiah proclaims that God will give him a sign anyway, the sign of the child who is conceived and given the name Immanuel, God with us. Even though Isaiah is bringing the good news that the invasion will come to nothing and their enemies will be destroyed, that is completely lost on the king – he has heard the message but he hasn't understood it, he has seen the sign but he hasn't perceived what it means.

And that is where we have picked up the story this morning in chapter 8. If the king won't listen then Isaiah must find other ways to get the message out there. Firstly, God tells him to make a big banner with big writing on it – I suppose today's equivalent would be to put it on a billboard right in the city centre, or to take a slot on prime-time TV, or to pay for targeted ads on social media. The slogan was to be blunt: Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, literally 'Quick Loot Fast Plunder.' And when people ask him what this strange headline means, Isaiah explains that their enemies were to be quickly overcome by the Assyrians. And

he would keep the slogan in the headlines by giving it to the son his wife conceived as his name – poor child, Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz – Quick Loot Fast Plunder. I hope they found some shortened form of it to call him by the time he got a bit older!

Isaiah also recognises that while some people respond to the spoken word and to carefully crafted sermons and some people are more likely to get it through sound-bites and publicity gimmicks, still others will understand through images. For the people of Jerusalem the question of the city's water supply was a perennial source of concern. Reference has already been made in the previous chapter to the aqueduct that brought water in from outside the city and now here Isaiah speaks about the quiet waters of Shiloah (or Siloam) which was the spring that actually supplied the city with water and compares that trickle with the mighty torrents of the Euphrates. The prophet rebukes the king and the people of Judah for rejecting God and putting their trust instead in foreign kings, for in rejecting the gentle waters of Shiloh they are putting themselves at risk of being inundated by the Euphrates. To use another image they are sowing the wind only to reap the whirlwind. As one commentator puts it, 'to choose the world is to be overwhelmed by the world.' (Motyer)

Gradually some people began to get Isaiah's message but it was painfully slow, and all too soon the prophecy was fulfilled as the Assyrians swept in and the threat to Jerusalem from Samaria and Damascus evaporated. Many people heard but few understood. Many saw but few perceived the truth.

So what is God saying to us in our time? That was a question that was voiced quite frequently in the early days of the pandemic but I can't say that I've heard many people willing to say that they have begun to discern an answer, so if we are not even *hearing* a word from the Lord, how on earth are we going to understand our times? Over the last two or three years we have faced a threat more serious than any other in the lifetime of most of us – our lives as individuals and as a society have been well and truly shaken. The church has not been spared the challenges that have been faced by all manner of organisations, although it has to be said that what we are seeing happening in the Church of Scotland has not been brought on by Covid – it has been coming for two or

maybe even three generations of not hearing and understanding and seeing and perceiving what God is about in our land. But the heat has certainly been turned up recently. The turmoil that we are witnessing on the international stage, in economics and politics, in everything from the health service to business and commerce, suggests that these are days of social revolution. Perhaps when the dust has settled and a new normal has emerged, and when the histories of these days come to be written it may be possible to identify the significance of all that has happened but for now we need to be much more determined than most of us probably are to listen to what the Spirit of God is saying to the churches and to understand what God requires of us in these days.

And perhaps in the midst of this chapter of Isaiah we should take note of two great themes that the prophet trumpets. To the godless nations, Isaiah proclaims that God is sovereign – 'Make your plans but they'll never succeed.' (v.10) – and to the faltering people of God, Isaiah offers a reminder that God is holy – 'I'm the One you must fear because of my awesome holiness.' (v.13-14)

In our time perhaps we also need to stop trying to plan our way out of trouble and simply humble ourselves before the sovereignty of God, bowing as Isaiah once did before the awesome majesty of the holy, holy, holy God and saying 'Here I am, send me.' Or in the words with which I began: "Here I am with the children the LORD has given me. The LORD Almighty, whose throne is on Mount Zion, has sent us as living messages to the people of Israel." We need to be listening for God's Word – not just hearing and ignoring but wrestling and understanding, seeing and perceiving what the Holy Spirit is seeking to do among us in these days – and we need to be willing to be sent as Isaiah was to share the message in whatever way we can, not only in words but in images and actions, as living messages not just to those who consider themselves God's people but to the world around us.

There are immense challenges facing us – huge threats even to our civilisation – but hear this and understand; see and perceive what God is doing; guard and preserve the messages that God has given down through the ages: God, the Sovereign Lord is in

charge, and this Almighty Lord is awesome in holiness, worthy of all honour. Now, we are all sent as living messages to make God known as He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. Through Christ we can say with total confidence: God is with us. Immanuel.