

First Presbyterian Church, Martinsville, VA  
“Isaiah Speaks” Music and Worship Service  
March 27, 2011

### **Theme Interpretation**

The words of the prophet Isaiah are among the most familiar in the Bible. And along with the Book of Psalms, the Bible’s songbook, texts from Isaiah are quite frequently set to music. In the season of Advent, we often sing Isaiah’s words of comfort, hope and redemption, as in *Lo, How a Rose Eer Blooming*, as we await the birth of the Christ child. But we should not view Isaiah as simply a backdrop behind the manger story. The prophet Isaiah lived in the midst of a defining time in Israel’s history, and his words spoke powerfully to the experience of a people in crisis, a people in exile, and a people seeking to walk faithfully with God into a future yet unknown. Isaiah speaks powerfully still today, the beauty and poetry of his words still resonate, and most appropriately today as we hear his words in song.

Open your ears and hearts to receive his words through the ministry of music. As one of my favorite hymns proclaims,

“When in our music God is glorified, and adoration leaves no room for pride,

It is as if the whole creation cried, Alleluia!”

Let us worship God.

### **Sermon**

Let us pray. Creator and ever-creating God, we praise you for the gift of your Word as it is expressed through song. May your Holy Spirit move us to join in lifting our praises to you and leading lives in harmony with your love. In Jesus name, we pray. Amen

Today, the interpretation and proclamation of the Word will be through sermon *and* song. In our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition, the text of scripture is of utmost importance, and we have thus placed heavy emphasis on the spoken word in our worship. But it would be a mistake to put too much confidence in our words, for as Paul says in the letter to the Romans, when we do not know how to pray, even the Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf with “sighs too deep for words.” The beauty and harmony of music serves as a vehicle of the Spirit, giving expression to our deepest longings, and moves us to new dimensions of faith.

The message and witness of Isaiah, likewise, sought to move God's people into new dimensions of faith. The gift Isaiah, and all the prophets, bring is the ability to look at the world around him, and the events unfolding in his day and time, and see God at work - speaking a word of judgment, yes, but also a word of restoration and hope. This is our task as well, to look at the world with eyes of faith and to see God at work in our own day and time.

*Anthem: "A Promise for Strength" (Isaiah 40:31) by David Schowebel*

*They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They that wait upon the Lord shall mount up with wings like eagles. They that wait upon the Lord, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint...They that wait shall be renewed.*

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The whole of the Book of Isaiah reflects upon and addresses the experience of the people of Israel and Judah before, during and after the exile into Babylon. In my experience in the church, I have found the story of the exile to be one of the lesser known events of the Biblical narrative, yet it is central to understanding the Book of Isaiah. Here in its fortieth chapter, the Book of Isaiah speaks to a people experiencing the crisis of exile.

Their cities lay destroyed, a large number of people were taken into captivity in Babylon, and those who remained were left with next to nothing. Essentially, the people were homeless. Very few of us gathered here have experienced what we would usually think of as "homelessness." But as Bill Perkins, director of Friendship House, a homeless ministry in Wilmington, Delaware notes, at some point in our lives, we have all had an experience of feeling homeless. "It might have been the [end] of a marriage or the loss of someone dearer than life; it might have been having one's family uprooted and moved every few years, or being unexpected fired from one's job. For some, it was growing up and leaving the only home they had ever known; for others, it was growing old and letting go of the place that held fifty years of memories...Each has known the feelings of loss, powerlessness, anger and shame." He sees homeless ministry then, not as an "us" helping "them," but a forging of a new shared community. And, "only the compassion and companionship of such a community has the power to cast out shame, restore hope and welcome people into [a] *new* home."

Isaiah speaks a word of promise, a word of hope. In the text and anthem from the beginning of the service, there is a way in the wilderness, God's highway. God is the source of their strength; God *renews* them and delivers them home.

*Anthem: "Behold I Make All Things New" (Isaiah 42, 43) by Allen Pote*

*Listen and hear God's word: "Behold I say unto you: Do not cling to the past or dwell on what has happened. Behold, I make all things new! I will make a way in the wilderness, and rivers will flow in the desert. I will quench the thirst of my chosen people, and they will sing my praise!" Thus says our God.*

*Tell the whole world to sing. Sing and celebrate with praise. For the Holy One has spoken and promised to make all things new!*

*God will lead the blind on roads they have never known, and will guide them on paths they have never traveled. Their road is dark, and rough, but God will give them light to keep them, keep them from falling.*

*Listen and hear God's word: "Behold I say unto you: I will make all things new, and will make a way in the wilderness, and to my people, to my people I will give light, a light in the darkness, and they will sing, will sing my praises."*

*Tell the whole world to sing. Sing and celebrate with praise. For the Holy One has spoken and promised to make all things new! Amen!*

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Amen!

For the returning exiles, all things were indeed to be made new. For them, the crisis of the exile was more than simply displacement, it was a theological crisis. How can we be God's people if we're not in God's promised land, if our temple has been destroyed, has God abandoned us? Isaiah called the people to repentance. They reflected and found they had been less than faithful, they had broken their covenant with God. But though they were unfaithful, God was faithful still. In spite of all their failings, God made all things new! God's faithfulness birthed a new beginning out of a painful ending.

The church today finds itself in crisis...How can we be the church in the midst of the trend of declining attendance and membership, if our structures and models aren't working any more, has God abandoned us? Isaiah says, "Remember not the things of old, behold, I am doing a new thing; do you not perceive it?" God has the power to make us new. But, we are not in a position to perceive God's

new thing springing forth if we cling to what we have always done with the conviction that *we've* got it all figured out. As Paul Tillich writes, "We cannot be born anew if the power of the old is not broken within us."

Behold I Make All Things New! God's new thing springing forth brings new life to enliven our worship, open our minds to think beyond contemporary or traditional, to new ways of expression, and increased lay participation. God's new thing springing forth brings new life to re-invision how to be church, less about place more about people, less about institutions/systems and more about relationships, to give us new energy for evangelism and creativity in our stewardship of resources. God's new thing springing forth brings new life to renew and deepen our engagement with the community, diversity. Amen, so be it, make us new!

We don't do something new because it is cool, or will attract new members, but because God does new things and is continually making us new. As we continue during this season of Lent, we are called to join our journey with that of our Lord Jesus, who suffered the depths of pain to assure us of new and everlasting life. And like he told Nicodemus in our gospel reading last Sunday, we must be born anew from above, let go of the former things and the things of our old life of sin, in order to experience the joy and promise of resurrection life. Trusting in Christ, we too will be raised to new life. Amen. So be it. Make us new!

*Anthem: "Arise, Shine, for Your Light has Come" (Isaiah 60:1, 3, 19) by Allen Pote*

*Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*

*Arise, arise, and shine like the sun, and all nations shall come, and all kings will be drawn to the brightness of your rising.*

*The sun shall no longer be your light, nor the brightness of the moon by night. But the Lord shall be your everlasting light, your God will be your everlasting light...*

*Arise, shine, for your light has come.*

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Arise, shine!