Isaiah Intro #4  Chapters 21-33

In Isaiah chapter 21, in a prophecy against the land of Babylon, we find language that sounds strikingly similar to the rhetoric of the New Testament, written many hundreds of years later. “Fallen, fallen is Babylon!” In fact, the author of the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, quotes this line from Isaiah in his epic vision of the final judgment of the world:

“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great!
   It has become a dwelling place for demons...
For all the nations have drunk the wine of the wrath of her fornication,
   and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her,
   and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxury.”
(Revelation 18)

Both Isaiah and John proclaim the downfall of “Babylon.” Of course, in Isaiah’s time, Babylon was a real city and real empire – a literal world power. Not so in John’s time, in the first century AD. By the time the New Testament books were composed, the literal city of Babylon had become just a memory from the past. But the symbolic image of Babylon was as potent as ever.

For Isaiah, like John many centuries later, the declaration of “Fallen is Babylon!” was more than merely a literal statement about the coming and going of great empires. It was a symbol of a greater reality at work in the world. For these biblical authors, to confidently pronounce the inevitable downfall of a great empire like Babylon (or Egypt or Assyria or Rome or...fill in the blank) was to make a significant theological statement: Regardless of what age we are living in, any world power that works against God’s ultimate vision for this earth is destined to fail. No matter how strong the empire is – no matter how powerful its economy, its politics, its military, its cultural capital – it too stands under the judgment of the one ruler of the universe. In other words, nothing in this world is “too big to fail.”

Just as John condemned the symbolic city of Babylon in spite of the fact that “the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxury,” so too Isaiah makes a point of declaring that the wealth-producing system of his own day was doomed. For Isaiah, that economic system was summed-up in the image of the twin cities of Tyre and Sidon – enormously successful sea ports and commerce centers for the whole Near East.

“Wail, of ships of Tarshish, for your fortress is destroyed.
Be still, O inhabitants of the coast, O merchants of Sidon.
Your revenue was the grain of Shihor, the harvest of the Nile;
you were the merchant of the nations.
When the report comes to Egypt, they will be in anguish
   because of the report about Tyre.”
“The LORD of hosts has planned it, to defile the pride of her glory,
to shame those who are honored on the earth.”

One of Isaiah’s key critiques for the leaders of Judah is their willingness to “sell out” and seek the protection and comfort of world powers – even world powers that have shown themselves to operate against God’s commands for justice and faithfulness. To run toward these world powers for protection in times of turmoil is an understandable temptation. But in Isaiah’s vision, this represents a fatal mistake. “Oh you rebellious children, says the LORD. You who carry out a plan, but not my plan. You who make alliances, but against my will.”
Seeking solace by fitting in to the dominant patterns of the world can provide a temporary sense of well-being. But participating in a system of injustice provides only a moment of comfort, and masks a deeper dysfunction that will ultimately unravel the world. Isaiah indicted the people for this shallowness and short-sightedness:

“In that day the Lord GOD of hosts called to weeping and mourning, to baldness and putting on sackcloth; but instead there was joy and festivity, killing oxen and slaughtering sheep, eating meat and drinking wine.”

[They say in their hearts] “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!”

But no amount of mind and heart-numbing entertainment will change the fundamentals of the situation. Not only does God see the bigger picture, but the earth itself bears witness for those with eyes to see:

“The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated statutes, and broken the everlasting covenant.”

“The earth will disclose the blood shed upon it, and will no longer cover its slain.”

The response that Isaiah urges us toward is a posture of humility, and the realignment of our allegiances. It begins with this confession of the faithful:

“O LORD our God, other lords have ruled over us, but we acknowledge your name alone.”

“In the path of your judgments, O LORD, we wait for you…For when your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.”

Isaiah shakes the people awake, until they can see for themselves that “the dead do not live…we have no victories on the earth.” Once the seriousness of the situation is acknowledged for what it is, the people are in a position to hear a word of hope that stands above the abilities of all the powers of the world: “Your dead shall live! Your corpses shall rise! Oh dwellers of the dust, awake and sing for joy!”

“In the days to come Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots, and fill the whole world with fruit.”

And just in case we forget what that means, Isaiah reminds us again what God’s priorities are:

“On that day, the deaf shall hear...the eyes of the blind shall see...the meek shall obtain fresh joy...and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.”

“For the tyrant shall be no more...those who are alert to do evil shall be cut off: those who cause a person to lose a lawsuit, who set a trap for the peacemaker at the gate, and without grounds deny justice to those in the right.”