

MAKING FRIENDS WITH THE BIBLE #7
THE PROPHET ISAIAH
By David Carlson

There are times in human history when little seems to be happening. In those times, it is tempting to assume that the future will be more of the present and relatively uneventful. In such times, we tend to relax, our worries few.

At other times, the changes in the world come so fast and furious that we feel dizzy and overcome with worry. One day, we see no clouds on the horizon. The next day, the storm hits unexpectedly. The Biblical language for this sudden change of events is “the foundations of the world are shaken.”

We are living in a time of wild and disorienting fluctuations. Last year at this time, who had heard of ISIS or ISIL? A year ago, few imagined that Russia would invade the Ukraine.

The prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem lived in a nervous time such as ours. In Isaiah 6, Isaiah, as a young man, was praying in the Temple in Jerusalem, his mind filled with fear. The passage is introduced with the phrase “In the year that King Uzziah died.” King Uzziah had been a righteous king of Judah, and his death brought more than the usual worries to the people of Judah.

To the north, the Assyrian empire was greedily looking south for nations to conquer. Would anyone be able to stop this mighty empire from taking the kingdoms of Israel and Judah? And then, with the death of the good King Uzziah, the nation of Judah was filled with worry about who would occupy the throne. Would the next king be faithful and competent, able to militarily hold off the Assyrians, or would he be weak and faithless?

It was at that moment, a time of crisis and change, much like our own, that the young man Isaiah was called to be a prophet. The description of his call is one of the most dramatic scenes in the entire Bible. While he was praying in the Temple, with the sound of other worshippers singing and praising God, and with the smell of incense drifting from the priests’ sacrifices, Isaiah suddenly found himself transported into the Heavenly Temple. Instead of the priests, Isaiah now beheld the Lord God on a throne along with Seraphim, and he heard one of the angels call out “*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory.*” (Isaiah 6:3)

Isaiah was gifted with divine insight in that moment. He recognized what he was meant to glean from the vision and what he was to communicate as a prophet to the people of Judah. His response was “*Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!*” (Isaiah 6:5)

Put briefly, the young Isaiah, praying in the Temple at the very time when the nation was worried about who would be the next king, was allowed to see the truth beneath the surface changes of the world. The true King, the One Who governs history, is God.

The rest of Isaiah's long ministry as a prophet is nothing more than his being faithful to this heavenly vision. When the nation of Judah was tempted to join an alliance to fight the Assyrians, Isaiah told the king of Judah to refuse, for God was using Assyria as His "rod of anger." And later, when the Assyrian armies had surrounded Jerusalem and threatened to destroy the city, Isaiah gave the king at the time the opposite advice—don't surrender to the Assyrians, for God is the true King, and Assyria will not take God's city. The people awoke the next day, expecting to find the Assyrian troops breaking through the city walls, only to find that the Assyrian troops had withdrawn.

The crises of our own time challenge our faith, even as Isaiah's faith was challenged centuries before. Current events make it seem as if history is out of control, with the most brutal leaders shaping the future.

But the prophet Isaiah would encourage us to resist this despair. Can we today, as did Isaiah long ago, believe that below the surface of life God is working out His will? Do we believe that God is the true King, the Lord of history, even when the foundations of the world are shaken?

Such faith in God's sovereign rule over human history is not easy, especially in a time when our worries are triggered almost daily by the news of the world. This Lenten season, we have the opportunity to ponder God's control of history and to offer the prayer uttered by the father of the epileptic son (Mark 9:14-24): *"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief."*