Loving God, center us in your Holy Spirit in this moment. Open our hearts once more to receive your grace. Open our ears to hear the words of all prophets, both old and new. And may we be inspired, moved, and encouraged to respond to your call to us anew with courage, trust, and faith. Amen.

Today we continue our exploration of the biblical prophets with the book of Isaiah. Of all the prophetic books, this is the one many of us are probably most familiar with.

Isaiah contains those great passages we often read in Advent about new life springing forth from the stump of Jesse, about preparing the way of the Lord, and about the hopeful news of the light to come. The second half of the book especially articulates the Messianic hope of ancient Israel – the hope that one day their people would be freed from oppressive rule by foreign empires and a new king of their own would reign with peace and justice.

For this reason, Isaiah was a favorite of the New Testament writers as they made sense of Jesus’ life and ministry in the greater context of their faith and history and made the claim that he is the Messiah that was foretold. They quote Isaiah often. And, as all of you music lovers out there know, the baroque composer Handel utilized a lot of texts from Isaiah for his oratorio, The Messiah.

In the fourth chapter of Luke, Jesus himself takes up the prophetic mantle of Isaiah when he goes into the synagogue in Nazareth, unrolls the scroll of Isaiah and reads from chapter 61, “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” And then he proclaims that “this scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing” which causes quite a violent uproar and they drive him out of town.

It should be noted, of course, that Jewish and Christian readers interpret Isaiah in different and varied ways within our respective traditions. And it is especially worth our effort as Christian readers to learn something about the historical context in which this beloved work of prophetic literature came to be and let that original lens help enlighten our reading.

Scholars have long noticed a difference in historical context between different portions of Isaiah. The book we now have is likely a composite work that brought together the prophetic oracles of at least a two or three, or possibly more authors and editors. As scribes copied the scrolls and edited their content some pieces were brought together to form a cohesive message for their current audiences. It wasn’t an uncommon practice. And this process ultimately produced the book of Isaiah as we know it.
The first portion of the book is largely attributed to the Judean prophet Isaiah who lived in the 8th century BC. At that time the once united monarchy of Saul, David, and Solomon had been divided into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Isaiah lived in the south in or near Jerusalem and mentions the Judean kings of his time: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.

At that point in time one of the greatest threats to their collective reign was the powerful Assyrian Empire which would ultimately conquer Israel in the north in 722 and would then move in on Judah in the south in 701. Remarkably, Jerusalem narrowly escaped destruction at that time.

Assyria held power in the region for a little over a century. But when Assyria was conquered by the Babylonian Empire, Jerusalem was invaded in 587, the temple was destroyed, and many of the people of Judah were sent into exile in Babylon.

The Babylonian exile is the backdrop for the second portion of Isaiah. And the last several chapters speak of the rise of the Persian Empire that would ultimately allow the exiles to return home to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

We’ve covered some of this history already, but it bears repeating because this whole historical saga is what gives rise to this prolific collection of prophetic reflection and theology that has come to be such a vital part of our religious tradition.

For centuries the people of this region lived under the often oppressive rule of these superpowers. They had their brief moment of independent rule, but then it was eclipsed by this series of imperial powerplays.

How were they to make sense of it all? And where was God in all of this?

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, states that “the book of Isaiah is a complex, lyrical meditation on the city of Jerusalem that is, in sequence, a catastrophic and then a glorious destiny. With its chosen king and its occupied temple, Jerusalem is accepted in the book as the epicenter of all meaning, the icon of ultimate religious possibility and of all historical prospects. Isaiah traces the history of Israel from its catastrophic demise to its anticipated restoration, all at the behest of YHWH who governs history and who attends to the city with intense expectation.”

Throughout the book of Isaiah there are words of judgment upon Jerusalem, there are words of comfort to Jerusalem, and there are words of hope for Jerusalem.

Like the prophet Amos and others, Isaiah calls out the misdeeds of the people – their lack of care and concern for their neighbors, for the widows and orphans (the most vulnerable in their communities); how they have fallen short of seeking justice and righteousness. Isaiah proclaims God’s judgment upon these failures and warns that they have real consequences. And, whether or not we agree with his theological assertion, Isaiah interprets the threat of imperial conquest and war as an enactment of God’s judgment upon his people.
But all is not lost either. God has not given up on God's people. And Isaiah brings words of comfort, words of restoration, and words of hope to his people as well. And visions of the return of the exiles to Jerusalem (to Zion) becomes one of the central symbols through which this hope is expressed.

We heard some of these words of hope and comfort in today's scripture reading. There will be a highway, a Holy Way, for God's people to travel upon. They will come home singing, “everlasting joy shall be upon their heads” and “sorrowing and sighing shall flee away.”

And where they will travel, the very land that had been made desolate will be renewed and restored. The desert, the wilderness, will blossom and bloom; waters and streams will break forth in the dry desert; no lions or other ravenous beasts will threaten them.

And the people themselves will be transformed. Those who could not before will now see, hear, sing, and leap for joy. And no longer will they go astray, for they are now redeemed.

In short, God will save them, restore them, transform them, and bring them home.

It is a beautiful vision of comfort and hope to those in exile, to those on the verge of despair, to those who may have thought all hope is lost. To those who could not find God in their circumstances, it was a word of comfort and hope that God would come find them and bring them home.

And boy, don't we all need some words of comfort and hope from time to time, especially in these uncertain days.

It sure is a multifaceted call to be a prophet, isn't it? To be brave and bold enough to call out your own people on their shortcomings, to remind them of a better way, to call them back to right and just relationship with God and with one another. To be hopeful and open-hearted enough to bring words of comfort and hope to others. To be imaginative and enough of a creative visionary to offer poetic images that help make that hope concrete and tangible, to give people something to hold onto when times are especially tough.

And it strikes me as I read Isaiah how intertwined these elements are.

Real moments of fulfillment of this hopeful vision depend upon our collective ability to right our past wrongs, to call upon those in power to reprioritize those who have been mistreated, put down, and left behind.

With words of comfort also comes an invitation to trust and to be faithful.

With the hopeful vision of a joyful return home from our experiences of exile, comes the invitation to meet God on the road, to follow the path of the Holy Way – which is not necessarily about lots of rules and formalities, but more about honesty and humility in our relationships with God and with others.
And Isaiah boldly proclaims that God is not done yet. This work isn’t finished. Keep watch. “I am about to do a new thing,” God says through the prophet in chapter 43; “now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”

The original Isaiah (from the 8th century BC) clearly had a deep sense of call to this prophetic ministry. And those who followed him picked up this call and his message in order to echo it and magnify it throughout history.

Isaiah talks about his own dramatic call story in chapter 6. He has a vision of God sitting upon a lofty throne. The very hem of his robe fills the temple. He is tended to by winged seraphs who worship him, saying “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The temple shakes and fills with smoke and Isaiah replies: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

“Then one of the seraphs flew to me,” Isaiah says, “holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’”

We hear in this call story that even Isaiah felt he needed to be redeemed and transformed in order to fulfill his prophetic calling. His unclean lips needed cleaning up in order to speak what needed to be spoken. That hot coal shocked the sin and guilt right out of his system and freed him up to accept God’s call.

This experience of transformation gave him the courage, faith, and boldness to say yes. “Here am I; send me.” I will go to your people, my people, and speak hard truths, ask them to confront their misdeeds, call them to repentance, and ask them to recommit to seeking justice and righteousness. I will go to your people, my people, and speak words of comfort and hope, remind them of your love, let them know that they are not alone, and call them to renewed faith and trust. “Here am I; send me.”

Isaiah’s was a call that invited and inspired others to respond to that same call to prophetic ministry. Isaiah’s contemporaries and followers demonstrated this by preserving and expanding his message to reach their generation. Jesus demonstrated this in his proclamation in the synagogue in Nazareth.

And now it is our turn. God is still asking “whom shall I send?”

How will we respond? How will we say, “here am I, send me?” How will we say yes?

This is a question for us to consider for ourselves as individuals and as a church. For we are also called to take up this prophetic ministry as our own.

And the needs are still the same in many ways, aren’t they? Sometimes we are still called to speak hard truths. We are still called to seek justice and righteousness. We are still called to bring words of comfort and hope. We are still called to help people find a sense of community,
belonging, and purpose. We are still called to proclaim that God's love is here to stay. And not only that but God's love is alive and God is still doing new things in our midst.

And you know, here's the thing... even though it is challenging at times, even though it sometimes takes some extra courage and a willingness to try new things, this call to prophetic ministry, this call to boldly be the church in the world, is something that brings me profound hope when I need it most... especially when life hits a rough patch and when the world seems out of whack on so many levels.

It brings me hope because it reminds me that we are always in this together (even at a physical distance, we are in this together). It brings me hope because it reminds me that God is with us too and God isn’t finished with us yet.

Because God is still doing new things through your very lives and through this very church community, along with others across the globe.

Through you and through communities of faith including our own church, God is bringing hope, comfort, inspiration, support, fellowship, and a place of belonging (a spiritual home) to those who need it.

God is working through us by calling us to serve and care for our neighbors near and far – by offering direct assistance to address immediate needs and by seeking a more just future for all.

God is working through us by calling us to build up, encourage, and help educate the next generation as they take on and deepen this path of faith for themselves.

And God’s love is made known, experienced, and made real and tangible through your good works of faith and ministry. God is still speaking. God is still calling. And God still needs us to say yes.

And so here is the only thing I want to say about our stewardship campaign this year. I plan to continue to invest some of my financial resources (along with my time and energy) in this hopeful vision for our Bay Shore Church community in 2021 because I believe in this vision and I believe in you. And I invite you to prayerfully consider your own investment.

And together, let us heed Isaiah's invitation to watch and see what new things spring up around us and see what God does with us next. Amen.