

Isaiah 2:1-5 Dec.1, 2013

“At risk” and “on the brink of extinction.” That’s how headlines the past couple weeks have read. You’d expect to find the picture of a rare animal. Instead, these articles were talking about Christianity.

Look around our world. How does the future look for Christianity? More specifically, for a Christian church like ours? Plenty of factors seem to line up to indicate: the future looks pretty gloomy. How much longer can we go on like this?

If the prophet Isaiah were here today, sitting here in front, my guess is by now you wouldn’t be able to keep your eyes on me. Because he’d be hopping out of his seat to paint a whole different perspective for us.

Let me explain why I come to that conclusion. It’s based on the verses we have before us.

Isaiah, the Old Testament prophet, is sometimes referred to as “the 5th Evangelist.” Why would he be grouped with Matthew, Mark, Luke & John, whom the Lord used to record the events of Jesus’ life? Because of the amount of gospel content clearly, powerfully, abundantly proclaimed in this Old Testament book. Intimate details about the Savior who was to come and the lengths he would go to in order to save you and me is foretold here.

Now to set the backdrop... We’re jumping in at ch.2 this morning. If you’ve got a Bible open, and you glance back to ch.1, you see first: Isaiah had a wakeup call to deliver to the majority of his people – citizens of Judah. *“...those who forsake the Lord will perish. You will be ashamed because of the sacred oaks in which you have delighted.”* That was describing their worship of false gods. They went wandering, away from the temple and away from trust and worship in the Lord. Isaiah had fiery preaching for those of his own people who had forsaken the Lord: *“The mighty man and his work will burn together, with no one to quench the fire.”* That’s the eternity in store for all who turn away from the Lord with his grace. Isaiah also told what the near future held for the nation of Judah: they would be conquered and taken captive at the hands of the Babylonians. The Lord had warned from their nation’s inception that this would happen, if they - people whom the Lord had called to be his own - sought after false gods.

But Isaiah had Old Testament believers listening to his words as well. And the Lord didn’t forget about them. Try to imagine how they were feeling. Maybe “at risk.” Maybe they even thought: “Are we on the brink of extinction?”

The Lord had this to say to His Old Testament people: **Read vs.1-5.**

2 This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem: 2 In the last days the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. 3 Many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.” The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. 4 He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take

up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. 5 Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD.

Sketch picture, explaining “mountain raising” as we go through ...

So we hear about this mountain being raised above all others. How does that happen? You can pile up a mountain of leaves, or push around a mountain of dirt. But to actually raise a mountain? “Help me out here. What’s Isaiah writing about?”

Our attention is being drawn to Jerusalem. **Sketch: lower hill with temple, representing Jerusalem.**

Now, if I were to look at a map of Israel, I’d see that Jerusalem sits at a height of about 2,500 ft. **Sketch: higher looming mountains to Northeast and Southwest...** Yet Mt. Hermon to the north stands at 9,000+ ft, and Mount Sinai to the south stands somewhere around 7,000 ft. And of course you know about more distant mountains like Mount McKinley and Mount Everest, which dwarf the “hills” standing around Jerusalem’s vicinity. So, Jerusalem? Chief among the mountains? Sure doesn’t look like it. And it’s elevation hasn’t changed 2,700 years later. Jerusalem still today sits at the height it did back in Isaiah’s day.

This description, which Isaiah is inspired to give, is not physical. **Sketch: “raise up” the mountain of the Lord highest, featuring cross and open grave.** God is raising our sights to look beyond our hopeless manmade remedies to get rid of sin and guilt ~ and towards Him. God is dramatically directing our attention to the events that occurred in Jerusalem when our Lord suffered for our sins, died, and rose to life. Those events raised this place’s prominence 2nd to none. Jerusalem is where God brought to its awesome completion what He had planned back before time began, what he had promised for thousands of years! And the news of what our God did in Jerusalem has been talked about ever since.

In fact wherever the good news of Jesus is proclaimed and believed, that is “the mountain of the Lord” described here. This is a description the Lord gives for His Church – this is the gathering of His people. Hebrews 12 (vs.22-24) confirms this. The Lord tells us, as New Testament believers, that we have come to the mountain of the Lord (Mount Zion). You see, this is not the earthly Jerusalem. He calls this group the heavenly Jerusalem, and describes us – and all believers – as: His Church, ones with names written in heaven, with souls made perfect through the blood of Jesus.

Now you can see why Isaiah tells of this mountain being jacked up so high even Mt. Everest is relegated to rest in its shadow. News of what Jesus brought to completion at Jerusalem has continued to flood our world, down through generations up to this day, bringing an ever growing number of people to know the truth that tops all others.

Add to picture, sketch of “stream flowing up mountain.” Explanation... Look at the sight, as Isaiah “fleshes out” the picture: streams are flowing up-mountain. What are the streams made of? People. This is not the majority of people in the world. But there are individuals from all different nations of the world.

So we are brought to what Isaiah means when he refers to the “last days.” It is this whole New Testament period, in which we live. It lasts until all, whom our Lord will call, are brought in to His Church, and Jesus returns to bring an End to this age.

What a beautiful picture God paints! You see yourself in living color here **[referring to sketch]**? You are. So am I. This is not some fantasy picture. This is real people coming to the message of the Savior Jesus who forgives our sins.

Do you see the beauty of that? Get a closer glimpse at the details. See the beauty of:

- a father arriving home, wiped out from his time on the range, in the office, or at the factory ... yet he smiles as he sits next to his wife, gathers his kids, and opens his Bible. This family is strengthened as they are reminded of the love their God has for them. They fold their hands to pray, "Thank you, Lord – you are so good!"
- a middle school student who, presented with evolution's claims about the universe and everything in it, returns to find his or her answers in God's Word. As his class delves deeper into the study of evolution, he is thinking: "I believe God's wisdom over man's theories – I believe that God created humankind and everything that exists ~ thousands, not millions of years ago. He had the power to call everything into existence in just 6 days."
- a high school student, huddled with friends, who has his or her actions guided by the Word of God, rather than the urging of peers. She finds strength in the Lord and in the words, "How can I do such a thing against my loving God?"
- the woman with failing health, who rests her tired head on a pillow, but lifts her confident prayer: "God, you are my strength and my song..."

See the center of all this flood of activity. The thing that makes us the people I just described and moves us these ways is: the Savior who forgives our sins. See the beauty of this place where people stream to hear the assurance of the forgiveness of our sins in Jesus. See how the people have confidence, vibrance, joy. See yourself here.

The only ones who are not there are those who refuse the Lord's grace. Be alert. This world is actively seeking to devour you and your sons and daughters. Just like the Israelites of old.

So here's our encouragement: "walk in the light of the Lord." **[Add light beams emanating from the cross & empty tomb.**

Isaiah describes in vs.3: "He – the Lord – will teach us." We, his people, listen to his Word. We have a living Lord. "The nations" Isaiah describes in vs.4 – the "many people" here – are believers in Jesus: listening to his Word for settling matters.

On a daily basis He speaks his Word to correct us when we sin. We are brought peace as we admit his Word is right, our sins are clear, we are lost without him, we need him every day, we rejoice in his saving work – we trust in him to give us forgiveness & to give us his holiness through faith.

And so... Joy marks this group. Strength & confidence too. We have peace. We aren't expecting perfect peace in this world. That kind of peace will only be ours after at Jesus' return. But we have peace now, even when conflicts in our world rage – even when the conflict of the world is with us, Christians, and our faith.

Our Savior looks at his Church and says, "If they hated me, they will hate you also. But look at what I've done for you. What I've done transcends this world, which will be destroyed. The peace I give you lasts. And with that, you have the strength, which comes from me, to show love in the midst of a world that will always remain at war with Me."

Luther said, "No matter how much the church is sure to be harassed and trampled underfoot by death, sins, Satan, tyranny, and heretics, yet in this trampling underfoot it shall be exalted above all mountains. For no other kingdom is so firmly established, ... endures, overcomes, and triumphs over death, devil, and heresies. No other kingdom can do this." [Luther's works, vol. 16 : Lectures on Isaiah.]

What we see in life might lead us to question: what does our future look like in this world? Isaiah gives us our God's remedy for a pessimistic outlook... See the church as it really is, as the Lord reveals it ... indestructible. And not "barely surviving" – not "on the brink of extinction." See the true Church as it really is: growing, strong, full of life, exerting a joy-filled presence in this world. & that is the way it will remain until the End.

These next weeks we light up more candles. We count down the days till we celebrate the gift of God's Son come to earth, come for human kind, a Savior for you and for me.

Today we've been reminded: we are also in the last days before His return. But it's not a time of gloom – not for us. For in our time – in our midst – God's saving truth is our confidence & joy. We stream to Him, for this one great activity in which we are engaged: hearing, studying, taking his Word to heart. His Word confirms faith. The Word goes out. The time is short – but the Word is powerful – & the outcome we look forward to is wonderful. So, let us walk in the light of the Lord! Amen.